

SLOVENIAN BUBBLE CELEBRITIES.

Establishing and maintaining celebrity status on the internet

Introduction

"Had the best time in #Slovenia tonight raging on stage with two of my favorite DJ's @DJAfrojack & @DavidGuetta," wrote Paris Hilton on Twitter online social network in mid December 2011. Her post was available to be read by more than seven million followers who keep track of what is going on in the public and personal life of the starlet, as media like to refer to her. Her visit to Slovenia, however, was not recorded only in short posts online, but was picked up by the media. Journalists would track any move she made and wrote that her appearance was "far from being staged promotionally" as she would take her time to remain beside DJ Afrojack and "dance, animate the audience, play about with her sunglasses, and still she found the time to redo her lipstick."¹ Paris Hilton was also included in reviews of society reporting for 2011, an example stating that in mid December "all eyes were on the infamous hotel heiress."²

Who then is Paris Hilton to be catching the public's gaze both at the global and local levels, and why are there several million people who know about her? The great-granddaughter of Conrad Hilton, founder of the famous hotel chain, became world famous in 2003 when a clip of her having sex with the current partner leaked online and spread rapidly across the Internet, and was later released on a DVD having the ambiguous title *One Night in Paris*.³ She is also famous for her occasional appearances in films, such as the horror film *The House of Wax*, and the romantic comedy *The Hot Chick* and *The Hot Chick*, for which she was awarded two golden raspberries, i.e. parody awards for worst appearances in film. On top of that she has presented her singing abilities in the public and released a music

1 Kopina 2011.

2 T. H. 2012.

3 The amateur video clip that was recorded already in 2001, was analysed by Thomas Fahy in a chapter of *Pop-Porn*. He explains that the video has gained extreme popularity as viewers tend to feel certain pleasure due to the fact that the rich heiress strips off in front of them, thus being subject to public humiliation because anyone can see the intimacy of her life. A person hitherto famous and out of reach becomes fragile and vulnerable, no longer glamorous (Fahy 2007). However, paradoxical as it seems, it is this humiliating clip that has made Paris Hilton a global celebrity, and she made good use of the fame gained. She thus managed to turn the negative social and economical capital that she had accumulated into her own good, transforming it into cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1986, where the author defines various types of capital). Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott expand on this in *The Porning of America*, saying that the online clip actually consolidated the image of a porn star, which Paris Hilton had been establishing earlier on with her public appearances, always showing herself as a superficial, self-centred and material person (Sarracino and Scott 2008: 110).

album, appeared in reality shows and took up the central role in the TV series *The Simple Life*.⁴

As a matter of fact, Paris Hilton is mostly known for her well-knownness. This is approximately how the status of celebrities⁵ was lucidly defined by the American historian Daniel J. Boorstin.⁶ Indeed, his explanation is completely tautological, but it is actually the most precise of all. According to him, the whole social world is subdued to the principles of looking for and recognising something in nothing, with our acts having become tautology – “needless repetition of the same in different words and images.” He also emphasises how we have become real masters of ascribing meaning to substantially “empty” people with no surplus value, and to trivial events generated by such people to hold on to the celebrity sphere.⁷

Boorstin’s findings from early 1960s can easily be mirrored to the present time and transferred into the local environment. In Slovenia, there are also people comparable to Paris Hilton, who at the local level are mostly known for their well-knownness. In the article I shall present four such individuals – *bubble celebrities* – whose careers as well as the formation and affirmation of their stardom I have been following. The first bubble celebrity whose path as a celebrity I shall describe is Fredi Miler. The musician from the Koroška region, noted for his moustache and the monobrow, rose to fame in 2004 with the video clip *Vedno si sanjala njega*, in which he appears wearing unusual clothes, including a vest in fluorescent yellow. The second celebrity to be presented is Dr. Artur Štern, a former lecturer at the Biotechnical Faculty of the University of Ljubljana and co-founder of Bion Institute, who abandoned his scientific (and partly artistic) career to dedicate his life to media appearances and the formation of a celebrity “character” oscillating between a drunkard and a genius. The third celebrity is Urška Hočvar Čepin whose fame is based on her looks and appearances in reality shows rather than her music career. The fourth example of a bubble celebrity is Damjan Murko, the self-proclaimed “Slovenian nightingale” who has been shaping masterly his public image for a decade, although people often fail to understand what keeps him in the media sphere.

The basic activity of all four bubble celebrities is to maintain and “boost” their images. They thus keep appearing in TV shows, attending obscure events and publishing their (auto)biographies, in which they lay bare the intimate details of their lives. The article shall present their efforts in this regard and explain how the emergence and affirmation of celebrity statuses are affected by online social networks (such as Facebook), and in relation to this, what is the role of websites that enable people to share video clips, e.g. YouTube. I argue that the Internet

4 Paris Hilton described her career in detail in her self-promotional (auto)biography entitled *Confession of an Heiress*, which was published in 2004. However, a much more detailed overview of her private life and public appearances was written by Sandra Gurvis (2011).

5 The word derives from Latin, its original meaning being that of fame (*celebritas*) or being either famous, celebrated, renowned or crowded, busy, populous (*celeber*).

6 Boorstin 1992: 57.

7 Boorstin 1992: 60.

is an extremely efficient platform for creating celebrities who can then keep (re) creating events to maintain their presence in the media sphere and increase their popularity. My argument follows Schickel's⁸ assumption on the tight connection between stardom and communication technologies. He claims that in the 20th century it really was the media that created celebrities. I have noticed, however, that the Internet has taken their creation even further, thus enabling the formation of bubble celebrities who barely need the media anymore as they take complete care of (self) promotion by themselves.⁹

Methodological problems in watching celebrities

The major materials that I explored before conducting the ethnographic research were (auto)biographies published by the celebrities mentioned in early stages of their careers. Fredi Miler described the path from a manual worker to a famous and recognisable person in a book entitled *Fredi Miler – štorija* (*Fredi Miler – The Story*), which was adapted and written down by Iztok Vrhovec (2005). Artur Štern also presented his academic, artistic and celebrity career in written form, yet somewhat less directly, based on fictional characters, e.g. in novels *Skrb za gene* (*Worry about Genes*), *Šarlatanska vednost* (*Charlatan's Knowledge*) (2001a) and *Jeba z lipicanci* (*Disturbing Lipica Horses*; 2001b),¹⁰ in a column collection *Ne predaleč od epicentra* (*Not Too Far From the Epicentre*; 2008) and in the book *Metabioigra* (*Metabiogame*; 1998). In 2009, Urška Hočevar Čepin also published her (auto)biography *Prekletstvo v zlati kletki* (*The Curse in a Golden Cage*), which was written and adapted by Nana Nataša Zeneli. The book describes her "sensational story", as is explained in the subtitle, the focus being on her failed marriage to a businessman. Damjan Murko presented the intimate details of his life in the book *Srečen, ker sem moški* (*Happy To Be a Man*), which was published in 2009, his story having been written down by Marjanca Scheicher.¹¹

⁸ Schickel 2000.

⁹ In the afterword to the 2000 edition of the book that was originally published in 1985, which is before the creation of the World Wide Web, Schickel updates his findings, saying that it was Internet that became the central driving force to form celebrities, as it provides everyman with the illusion that they can contribute notably to the (re)formation of the social world (Schickel 2000: 300). That is to say, anybody can be a celebrity on the Internet – or at least have the feeling to be in the centre of a social network made by themselves (see Podjed 2010; cf. also Dalsgaard 2008, exploring the egocentric design of online networks that automatically place users in the centre of activity).

¹⁰ These texts were also published in the collection of five novels entitled *Šepet razglašenih* (*The Whisper of the Untuned* 2007).

¹¹ Marjanca Scheicher is also the author of two partly fictional novels that examine the Slovenian show business, which are entitled *Kešpička* (*Gold Digger*; Scheicher 2010, 2011a). She also wrote the biography of the "greatest Slovenian porn star" La Toya (Scheicher 2011b). This celebrity was not included in the article based on my assessment that she fails to correspond completely to Boorstin's tautological definition of celebrities being known for their well-knownness. La Toya mainly became famous due to her work in the pornography industry, which provides her knownness with a somewhat more substantial basis. True, she appeared in the same reality shows as other bubble celebrities (e.g. *The Farm*). Also, she was married (unofficially) for a brief period of time to Artur Štern, whom I present later in the article.

On top of that I have been gathering the data on Slovenian bubble celebrities online. I checked their presentation pages, as well as followed their online blogs and posts on Facebook.¹² I analysed their profiles (short presentations, photographs, etc.) on the network, trying to figure out how they presented themselves online and how they pictured their everyday life.¹³

I concluded my research by semi structured interviews with the celebrities. I visited Fredi Miler at his home in Mežica, talked to Artur Štern in a local bar in Miklavž na Dravskem polju, met Damjan Murko in the restaurant of a prestigious hotel in Maribor, whereas Urška Hočevar Čepin answered my questions by e-mail. Each interview served as a short participant observation of a kind and it was only when meeting these people in person that their complex image emerged, whereas previously I had only known about them through books, media and the Internet. While meeting them I was striving to see through "stardust" to find the "authentic", "pristine" and "unfeigned" persons as they appear in their private lives. This was far from easy because bubble celebrities, as we shall see, cannot afford to rest. They have to consolidate their created identity ("mask") even during seemingly relaxed discussions.

My presentation of the four celebrities is not based only on their "view of themselves", which they provided in interviews, (auto)biographies and web profiles, as I shall also partly describe the interaction and context with regard to the discussion. This enables us to learn a bit more about their public-private image, about how they integrate in the local environment and what their self is like as a combination of their individual and social self.¹⁴

Theories of celebrity self-performance

As the starting point to analyse the public and private image of Slovenian celebrities I have been using Boorstin's work *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, which was first released in 1961, but still remains very much relevant. The author managed to explain, two decades before Baudrillard,¹⁵ how important fictional and inflated images, and copies, which are appreciated more than originals, are to the contemporary society. His work focuses in detail on *pseudo-events*, i.e. the seeming, artificially created events that "from their very nature tend to be more interesting and more attractive than spontaneous events"¹⁶ and defines their eight common features. As compared to unstaged events, the pseudo-events are: 1) more dramatic; 2) quicker to spread and become noticeable; 3) repeatable; 4) dependent on financial input; 5) easier to understand and accept; 6) more socially

12 The Twitter network, which has gained strong popularity in some parts of the world, is not used by Slovenian bubble celebrities to the same extent as it is by Paris Hilton and other famous people of the same kind.

13 Cf. Goffman 1990.

14 Cf. Mead 1997 and his concepts of "I" and "Me".

15 Baudrillard 1999.

16 Boorstin 1992: 37.

acceptable; 7) necessary to know if we wish to remain “informed”; 8) multiplying exponentially. As shall be shown, these features are easy to recognise – maybe in an even more apparent form – when analysing self promotional videos and photographs that spread (or are spread) either across online social networks and portals such as YouTube or across mass media.

An important contribution to theories on stardom and fame was also made by Chris Rojek, explaining that celebrities are a cultural construct that is used by contemporary societies to replace the disappearing authority of kings and gods.¹⁷ Similarly to Weber who wrote of three types of authority (traditional, rational-legal, charismatic),¹⁸ Rojek explains that there are three forms of the celebrity status: ascribed, achieved and attributed. The ascribed celebrity status is related to inheritance, thus being the privilege of the likes of noble descendants. The second category comprises the people who acquire their celebrity status based on their exceptional achievements, such as famous film stars, athletes and musicians. The most interesting for this discussion, however, is the third category of celebrities, which includes those to whom status is attributed although they display no special talents or skills.¹⁹ Such people who are acknowledged the celebrity status while failing to create anything substantial, and who mainly establish and maintain their fame based on pseudo-events, are referred to by Rojek as *celetoids*. However, I consider the phrase bubble celebrities an equally adequate translation as it describes individuals who possess no special talents and cannot pride in achievements, yet they remain present in media and recognisable in public. Turner²⁰ further explains that such celebrities might enjoy “a hyper-visibility” but also an especially short and unpredictable lifespan, as they can flare up and burn out in just a few months or even weeks.

Apart from many authors who explore famous people or celebrities,²¹ an analysis of establishing and maintaining fame has to consider theories on the spread of information across online networks, which I presented in more detail in my article on individuals who have gained fame more or less accidentally thanks to clips posted online.²² There is a major difference between people who have gained fame unexpectedly, and bubble celebrities as the topic of my current research, particularly in the ability of the latter to create pseudo-events by themselves, for which they often make use of online technologies. For example, they accumulate a lot of so-called *friends* whom they keep bombarding with news of themselves and sending previously prepared i.e. contrived clips. Having the position of *hubs*, i.e. people who in comparison to other “nodes” in the network possess an extreme number of connections, they can keep informing a wide range of people about their private and public events from their everyday life, as well as their feelings, thoughts and future feats. In short, the topology of online networks, where

17 Rojek 2001: 13.

18 Weber 1968.

19 Rojek 2001: 17–18.

20 Turner 2004: 22.

21 E.g. Dyer 2007; Jaffe 2005; Holmes and Redmond 2006.

22 Podjed 2009.

a handful have acquired an extremely large amount of connections,²³ enables this group to maintain their privileged and particularly visible position, not only online but also in the physical world, at the same time constantly expanding their area of influence.

When deliberating online networks in relation to stardom, the metaphor of *rhizome* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might also be used.²⁴ They use the term to describe a network with a constantly growing structure, which therefore cannot be presented using a static model. Slovenian bubble celebrities, as shall be seen, also connect into such a rhisomatic structure. They are constantly on the lookout to try to outdo each other and prove to be better, different, real celebrities, whereas their roles are actually intertwined inseparably at the same level. This is because they appear in the same TV and reality shows, and maintain friendships over online networks and in the physical environment.

The fading star of Fredi Miler

Fredi Miler was the first Slovenian bubble celebrity who became famous thanks to a clip that spread over the Internet. Until 2004 he was mainly a manual worker. He used to work in a mine and a sawmill, paint houses, fit plasterboards, work in plastering and similar manual works, but also sing in an ensemble. In collaboration with the once very famous Slovenian musician Marijan Smode he recorded the song *Vedno si sanjala njega*, for which he also made a video that was played on a Slovenian commercial TV station.²⁵ The clip shows Miler playing pinball in a pub, wearing a white shirt, and over it a green-yellow vest with a psychedelic pattern. The combination of the lyrics, with the chorus “vedno si sanjala njega” (“you’ve always been dreaming him”) sang with a typically acute *é* in “njega” (“him”), and of the singer’s appearance was so strange that “two metalheads” says Miler, posted the clip online. “They somehow thought it a prank, saying that I had this vest and white socks and slippers and the shirt untucked and the monobrow,” he revealed self-critically what made the clip so interesting to have gained tens of thousands of online views in a matter of weeks. Miler was warned about the spread of the clip by his son, but he still failed to realise what was going on – one of the reasons being his poor knowledge of Internet’s operation. It was only when a widely read free newspaper published an article about Fredi Miler being sought that he realised about the sudden shift in his life.

His first performance as a celebrity was in the vicinity of Novo mesto, a city in Southeast Slovenia, where he played for “*fifty grand*”, a few times the sum he had been used to receiving in his ensemble. When he arrived at the concert venue it still wasn’t quite clear to him what was going on until the organiser explained:

23 See e.g. Barabási 2003; Watts 2004.

24 Guattari 1990, 2004.

25 When Fredi Miler became famous and recognisable, a dispute emerged between him and Smode regarding the authorship of the song *Vedno si sanjala njega*.

“Fred, you are now the greatest star in Slovenia!” At the concert he was received by an audience shouting and raising hands, and wanting him to repeat the song *Vedno si sanjala njega* at least five times. He explained he had other songs in his repertoire, yet they insisted that he sing the Internet hit.

In the first six months following the turning point, Miler performed more than sixty charity concerts, mainly in discotheques,²⁶ and also appeared at a big concert in the Slovenian capital, organised by the newspaper that “discovered” Miler. This was followed by a number of years of his appearances on various TV shows, magazine covers, reality shows, etc.

Gradually his recognisability faded, which was mostly due to the fact that he took his celebrity status too “seriously”, thus failing to ensure in due course new pseudo-events that would be uncommon enough to attract public attention. He thus remains recognisable, but cannot live off fame exclusively. The status of bubble celebrity even causes him quite some trouble. When going shopping or to a bank with his wife, he rather waits in the car than accompany her as he finds it annoying to listen to busybodies posing provocative questions. He is hurt when people make fun of him, but he has been noticing that people tend to accept him more and more because in the recent years they realised what he “really was like”. He attended the celebrity format of the *Farm* reality show to demonstrate to people who he really was and what he could do. As it would seem, Fredi Miler wishes to get rid of the “virtual image” from the clip for *Vedno si sanjala njega*, but the media keep returning to the topic, journalists asking him to put on the vest again and do some break dancing moves.²⁷ He usually refuses such proposals explaining that he has been having health problems. Since he worked in a mine, he has been having trouble with his hand and finds it difficult even holding a microphone, let alone perform manual work. He finds it embarrassing to register with the Employment service of Slovenia, he explains, as he is “kind of a celebrity”, so everybody says to him, “Oh, what are you doing here? Surely you perform and earn I don’t know how much!”

From a parody and comical character, Fredi Miler turned into a tragic personality. The fame that he acquired with the web clip practically overnight was especially exploited by other people who transformed it into economic capital, whereas his social and financial position has deteriorated rather than improved in a bit less than a decade of bubble celebrity status. The only capital he managed to enhance are friendships on Facebook and other social networks, but being a former bubble celebrity it is not easy for him to capitalise that.

It is interesting how tightly related Miler’s career is to the rise of online networks that were blooming right in the time when *Vedno si sanjala njega* became a

²⁶ Miler is now aware that this was often only professed charity nature and the organisers were taking advantage of his gullibility.

²⁷ In former Yugoslavia, Fredi Miler was among the most successful dancers of *electric boogie*, which resembles the better known *break dance*. This is why journalists would ask him to *break* a little, i.e. to dance.

viral hit.²⁸ It was online networks – and naturally, their key players – and video posting portals that first created the celebrity and then drained him. Boorstin explains that “The very agency which first makes the celebrity in the long run inevitably destroys him. He will be destroyed, as he was made, by publicity. The newspapers make him and they un-make him – not by murder, but by suffocation or starvation.”²⁹ In the case of Fredi Miler, newspapers can be substituted by or upgraded to online networks, but the “starvation” principle is similar in both cases. If you fail to create new pseudo-events and to attract enough attention in the network, the bubble celebrity status might evaporate quickly and the only thing that remains of the former glory is the shell of fame.

The merging faces of Artur Štern

In late 1990s when Artur Štern was researching and lecturing at the university, he was pulled from the academic world in a swirl of fame. He started writing magazine columns and appearing on TV quizzes and reality shows. In 2007 he was also collecting petition signatures as he intended to run for President of Slovenia,³⁰ but mostly he attended various events, making sure to remain in the centre of attention. Apart from printed and electronic media, he was implementing self-performance over the Internet. For some time he was making regular updates to his webpage and writing several *blogs*. Moreover, a number of clips appeared on YouTube featuring him naked to the waist as he was showing amateur journalists around his estate, explaining about his marriage to the porn actress La Toya or being dead drunk while singing the song *Mrtva reka* (*The Dead River*), which was once performed by Marijan Smode. Štern updates regularly his Facebook profile where he presents himself as “presidiot, drunkard, faker, porn-fucker, metabiologist, polyhistor, writer (16 + 6 books), lecturer, master of martial arts, Dr Sc Biol, M Sc Med, DVM, EPU Graduate... in short – an idler”.

In January 2012, I visited Štern in a rural settlement close to Maribor, the second largest Slovenian city. I arrived to the house where he lived with his fifth “wife”,³¹ and entered the ground floor where he had arranged his residence. His outward appearance was pretty miserable as his eye was covered in a big bruise, and he was wearing patched trousers and worn-out boots. He put a leather jacket over his

28 On the so-called viral video clips, see e.g. Burgess (2008). On the development of online social networks, see Boyd and Ellison (2008). On the development of YouTube portal and its sociocultural consequences, see Lovink and Niederer (2008), Burgess and Green (2009), and Snickars and Vonderau (2009). Cf. also Podjed (2010), expanding on the importance of Facebook at local and global levels, and Podjed (2011), where it is explained how amateur video clips posted on YouTube affect our everyday life.

29 Boorstin 1992: 63.

30 The pseudo-event, with which Štern tried to ascend to the presidential position, was the topic of the documentary film *The Naked Truth* recorded by the director Vojko Anzeljc. The film was shown in theatres in 2008.

31 Štern’s previous marriages, for which it remains unclear whether they were real, were mainly public-oriented pseudo-events. As regards media attention, the marriage with his third “wife”, the porn star La Toya, was particularly prominent.

T-shirt with a large logo of a comic book hero and we headed to the local bar La Boheme. It became clear of what vital importance fame, although only seeming, is to him as on the way to the bar he stopped at the roadside news-stand to check whether a tabloid had run a story on him. They had not so he called the journalist with whom he had “arranged the publication” in rage and disappointment.

While drinking a *corretto* coffee, into which he poured a decilitre of brandy, he managed an unusual discussion in which he – although still very much intoxicated from the previous day – talked very lucidly of the topics that interested him in his academic explorations. For a while he spoke sensibly of altruism, which had been the central topic of his doctoral dissertation, but then his line of thought broke, he gave a weird grimace and began to utter profanities aloud. Artur, the intellectual, was replaced in front of my eyes by Artur, the eccentric. As the debate progressed, we then mostly spoke of the creation of his public “character” and how it was transferred into his private life. I suspected that the source of such acting inspiration might have been his father, a former theatre actor, to whom Artur referred to as “the handsomest, the best” which is why many women had been in love with him, and many managers jealous. “You know what, though,” he threw in, “he was a bit conceited, just like me.” He then provided a story of his growing up between Ljubljana, where his parents lived, and a smaller town where he would often stay with his grandparents, and described his media presence, which began in late 1980s when he first appeared on the television. Several parts of the strenuous and ambivalent discussion were never completed as Štern had a fight with the waitress and we had to abandon the place early.

Štern’s public appearance has merged almost completely with his individual self. As it would seem, his desire for recognisability and fame made him realise that it was his personal image that was most attractive to the masses³² – more attractive than his past scientific and artistic activity. He thus has to maintain and reaffirm his drunken bohemian character constantly if he is to be invited to new TV shows, reality shows, events... This means that with Štern, the dividing line between the “front stage” and the “back stage” (see Goffman 1990) has disappeared. His identities have merged into one, which he “uses” both in public and personal domains.

The inflating bubble of Urška Hočevar Čepin

Urška Hočevar Čepin disclosed herself to the public in detail in the 2009 book *Prekletstvo v zlati kletki* (*The Curse in a Golden Cage*), in which she described the rise and fall of her love story with the wealthy owner of a car dealership, who among other things helped fulfil two major wishes of hers. Namely, she was given as an engagement present the keys to “her dream car, a BMW M3 sports cabriolet in golden yellow with leather seats in kiwi green”³³ and her partner also financed her

³² Cf. Turner 2004: 3.

³³ Zeneli 2009: 32.

the cosmetic procedure of breast augmentation. She also explains in the book how her husband “had always dreamt of glamour and the image of celebrities,” which is why he would “construct her according to his wishes” to be able to exhibit himself with her in the media.³⁴ This statement serves as a very adequate description of the superficiality of bubble celebrities, which often mostly depends on outward appearance. “Live image has shaded the boring reality,” explains Boorstin³⁵ and such images, according to Baudrillard,³⁶ are the only reality there is. In his opinion we live in a simulation rather than reality, surrounded by simulacra that no longer refer to the actuality. The image of Urška Hočevar Čepin is also created, apparent, fictional, changing, variable. And it is her “plastic”, “pliable”, “adaptable” appearance that emphasises the essence of her being.³⁷ Mike Featherstone claims that in consumer cultures we actually keep (re)shaping our appearances according to own or others’ wishes. “Such understandings emphasise the visual, pointing toward a world of gazes and mirrors and spectacles where the eye is the central sense and the body is major focus.”³⁸

In the case of Urška Hočevar Čepin the making of outward appearance, which is created either by resorting to cosmetic surgery or by her specific clothing and make-up, is a certain pseudo-event, resonating in public. Thus the bubble celebrity as such was made an event, “a human pseudo-event” of a kind as Boorstin would call it. Nevertheless, she claims that her fame and recognisability are not built on “some so-called affairs, fake stories, clown poses” and adds that she “doesn’t have to call the media or even bribe them, as a certain sphere of media people do”. This might even be true as rather than creating events, her recognisability has been built on her specific outward appearance, which enables her to host events and TV shows as well as appear in reality shows. In 2010 she was even engaged by the Government Communication Office of the Republic of Slovenia to record a promotional video for the campaign supporting the referendum on pension reform. In a series of parody statements she presented her view of the changes to the pension system, which should make people think that the quasi-expert statements of “an unschooled blonde are plain wrong”. The video aroused a heated response and was thus removed by the Government Communication Office, the Government at the time distancing itself from it, but it was kept available on YouTube, where it recorded more than a hundred thousand views.

However, the recognisability of Hočevar Čepin is not related only to YouTube, but also to Facebook, where her central profile (she has several – and obviously there are some fake examples) has acquired five thousand “friends”, thus reaching the maximum number allowed by the online network. On the so-called *wall*, where Facebook users post their messages, she informs her friends on a regular basis about her appearances, and also presents intimate details from her life. For example, she leaves a message for her mum on mother’s day, posts a photograph

34 Zeneli 2009: 109.

35 Boorstin 1992: 13.

36 Baudrillard 1999.

37 Cf. Lord cited in Rogers 1999: 113.

38 Cited in Rogers 1999: 113.

of her sister, explains how she feels on the divorce anniversary, and especially keeps posting photographs on which she is mainly the central player. Often inviting the gaze to her deep cleavage, her photographs usually attract dozens of comments – both positive and negative – and record more than a hundred *likes*.³⁹ Each online appearance is therefore a minor pseudo-event, which affirms and maintains the status of bubble celebrity for Urška Hočevar Čepin. Although she denies to be concerned about not being famous and recognisable anymore, and to be pondering things in advance, as everything she does, “happens incidentally, spontaneously” there is still certain intention and system, although at a more unconscious level, to be perceived in her online activity and affirmation of her image and status by means of online “friends”.

The master of pseudo-events, Damjan Murko

I have been arranging an interview with Murko for several months. After several telephone calls and requests, Murko finally agreed to the discussion. As the place of meeting he had chosen the prestigious restaurant of a hotel in Maribor, where he arrived some minutes late, like a celebrity, ordered a coffee and made a joke of the waiter whom he considered to have too serious an expression on his face. At the very beginning he revealed his strategy of appearing in the media and in public, therefore the discussion mostly focused on his skill of creating pseudo-events, which he produces with the help of online networks and video posting portals.⁴⁰

An example of such clips, which has recorded more than 400 thousand views on YouTube since 2007, displays him standing in the middle of the empty stadium in Ljubljana wearing sunglasses and singing the Slovenian anthem. From a music-expert point of view, his singing is quite inaccurate, yet he gives the impression of being very much satisfied with his performance – to the extent, even, that he eventually spreads his arms to greet an imaginary audience. As he explains, he made a special effort to sing the song slightly out of tune. It was clear to him that was the way to provoke the audience, rather than singing the song perfectly. “True, my priority is music,” he commented on that, “but I express myself through gossip because this is my provocative way of appearing in public.” This was also his intention when he asked the singer Saška Lendero to write him the song *Srečen, ker sem moški* (*Happy To Be a Man*), which, as he claims in the eponymous biography, became “a pan-Slovenian hit” and his “trademark”. In the book, he additionally boosted certain events from his private life, thus making the readers have doubts about what was true and what was not. “This is a game and I like this game,” was his answer to the question about why he was creating seeming events and bending reality.

³⁹ *Liking* is a system showing that a Facebook user likes a certain statement, photograph or video clip. It is presented by a thumbs-up image.

⁴⁰ Damjan Murko has also posted on the Internet a series of several-minute clips, in which he explains on behalf of the so-called Star Academy how to create pseudo-events and become a celebrity.

A similar pseudo-event, posted as a clip on YouTube in 2009 and resonating on Facebook, even making it to television news reports, was a fight between Damjan Murko and the members of the music band Rogoški slavčki. The clip shows a member of the band attacking Murko, his blows being intercepted by bodyguards present at the location. Murko then steps on a chair and screams with a shrill voice at the cameraman: "What's up with you? Stop filming! Out, I said out!" He also addresses the attacker, saying, "Who are you anyway? You're a nobody!" The viewer realizes quickly that the event was staged and directed, but it has still (or maybe just because of that) attracted dozens of thousands of views and kept resonating in online networks and media for months.

It is interesting though, that Murko has refused to participate in reality shows that were aired on a commercial TV station. His "official" explanation to the media was that he didn't want to be seen as a farmer, completely untidy and sweaty, and he was also afraid of cows.⁴¹ Actually, he mostly rejected the invitation because he would have to be constantly "exposed" to the public. He would thus have to show his individual self at least partly, and this would make his "mask fall off".

During the conversation, Damijan Murko kept making it clear that everything he does and publishes has to be considered with reservation. What we see, is primarily a mask and an artificially created character whom he is redefining over and over again. "When I come home and the doors to my house close," he explains, "there is again another Damjan Murko." In a completely Goffman's manner he then explained that he called his private world "the life behind the curtain". Outside of his home, however, he always wears a mask and plays the role he has been creating for more than a decade.

Conclusion

There is much difference in the stories of four bubble celebrities presented in the article. For Fredi Miler it was more of a coincidence to have rise to fame based on the video that spread over the Internet, and he never completely reconciled himself to his own unexpected fame and recognisability. Artur Štern had spent several years developing the character of a bohemian drunkard until he finally got lost in it. The recognisability of Urška Hočevar Čepin is largely based on her spectacular outward experience, which however is not static but keeps modifying constantly. Despite having an amoeboid appearance, however, each new "version" confirms that she can create pseudo-events by her very appearance, thus affirming her public image. The case of Damjan Murko might be the most obvious example of how an individual can exploit modern information and communication means to create a celebrity status that is not even apparent, but only pre-prepared and staged, in short, "instant". In "the society of the spectacle"⁴² and the

⁴¹ Simšič and Scheicher 2009.

⁴² Debord 1999.

world of “simulacra”,⁴³ it is obviously no longer required to possess either heroic deeds or a special talent to achieve the celebrity status. Usually it suffices for the person to be able to create events and launch them in public at an appropriate moment in time.

All the four bubble celebrities, however, share an important common feature: all have made use of the new information and communication technology to boost their own statuses. They have even acquired a double role in online networks. On the one hand they are creating pseudo-events, on the other hand they are passing them on to make their more passive *followers* or *friends* notice them, and thus affirm their social role. Having established many connections on online networks, bubble celebrities have thus taken up the position of *hubs* and intermediaries of information on the way to observers (Figure 6). Bubble celebrities are therefore both the subjects and objects of celebrity engagement. It is in their self-referentiality and self-affirmation of their own statuses that the activity and passivity are intertwined. If we consider the actor-network theory, as argued by Bruno Latour and other authors,⁴⁴ bubble celebrities are the players that weave the network, with the pseudo-events they create being the “yarn” of which it is made.

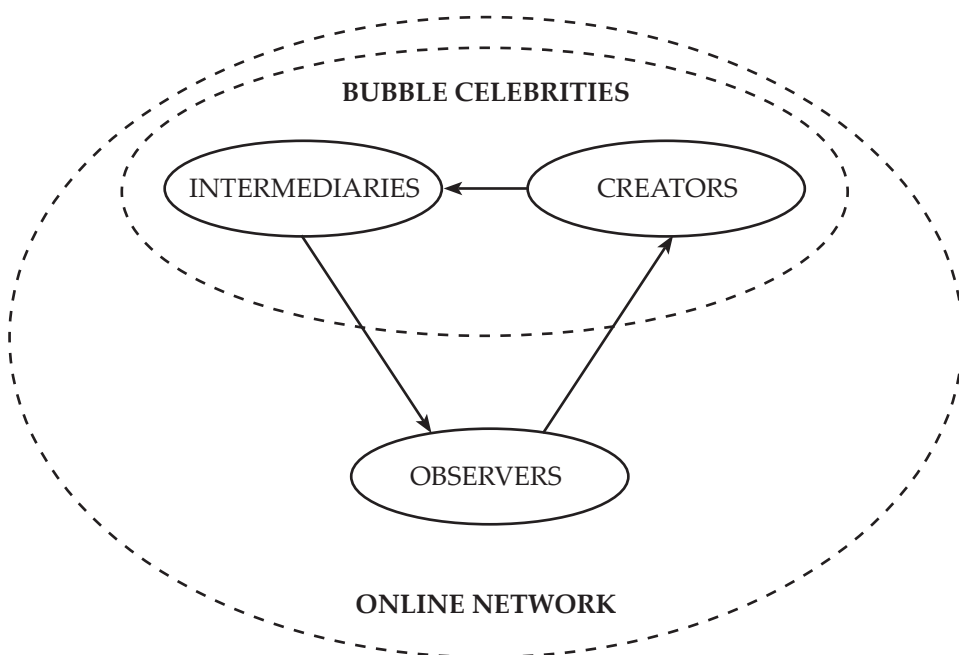


Fig. 6: A representation of the double role of bubble celebrities in an online network.

43 Baudrillard 1999.

44 Latour 2005. See e.g. Law and Hassard 2007.

It is also noteworthy that bubble celebrities connect with each other into a kind of a rhisomatic structure.⁴⁵ That is to say, they keep appearing in the same magazines and reality shows, getting married among themselves and getting divorced, planting gossip on each other to try to slander each other, while at the same time preserving the mutual level of mediocrity. In cases of all the bubble celebrities presented, however, it can be noticed that it is among their ways of self-defining to establish differences between themselves and other celebrities with whom they supposedly have nothing in common. As usually they do not have a basis of sufficient solidity and grip to define them, they base their identity on *différance*, i.e. simultaneous differentiation and deferral of meanings as described by Derrida.⁴⁶ He explains that the signifier does not have its own strictly defined signified, as the latter is rather defined by contextual differences in a network of meanings.

Being a bubble celebrity, therefore, means to stand out in the mediocrity, but at the same time remain part of the network that defines such an individual, supports and feeds them with attention, and maintains their special status. That is why online networks are particularly important in the creation and affirmation of the (seeming) fame as they enable certain people to ensure their self-promotion effectively, even if that is the only thing they do day after day. Boorstin's claim that bubble celebrities are only known for their well-knownness is therefore not completely true. Their fame is based on them artfully making use of online social capital and of the networks that have been created with new technologies. And this certainly is a special skill or even talent.

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⁴⁵ Cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1990, 2004.

⁴⁶ Derrida 1998.

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Fig. 3. Artur Štern became a master in staging the character of a bohemian intellectual combined with a village eccentric (photo: Dan Podjed, Miklavž na Dravskem polju, 2011).



Fig. 4. Urška Hočevnar Čepin first ensured her self-promotion with an (auto)biography, and then with constant media appearances and participation on online social networks (source: Facebook, 2014).



Fig. 5. The self-proclaimed “Nightingale of Slovenia” Damjan Murko is a master of self-promotion who has been succeeding for a decade to conceal his privacy from the public (photo: Tobias Žižek, 2011).