

Comparative Study of Magazine Romantic Fiction, True Life Stories and Celebrity Stories: Utopia, Closure and Reader's Participation

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Short Bibliographical Note.

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Abstract

British women's weeklies can be classified into three groups: those which concentrate on Romantic Fictional Stories such as *The People's Friend*, those which offer a significant number of True Life Stories, such as *Take a Break*, and those which contain mainly Celebrity Stories such as *Hello!*

This article starts by classifying the best-selling British women's magazines in terms of content, readership and genres used. This will establish a tendency towards a generational divide in magazine readership: older readers make up almost the entire readership of romantic-realist stories, while middle-aged readers tend to prefer True Life Tales, also known as TOT (Triumph Over Tragedy) stories (Ferguson, 1983). Celebrity Magazines have the youngest readership of all.

The article aims to explore two aspects, which have been linked, to modern and post-modern features: the kind and degree of participation of readers in relation to each type of format and the relation between text and 'utopia'.

For this purpose, three stories will be analysed: a Romantic Story, a True Life Story and a Celebrity Story, which are representative of (most of) the main genres contained in each type of magazine. The article will rely on some ideas of authors such as Eco (1979), Hebdige (1989) as well as some findings from my own fieldwork.

Comparative Study of Magazine Romantic Fiction, True Life Stories and Celebrity Stories: Utopia, Closure and Reader's Participation.

In Britain there are three types of women's weeklies: '*Old Weeklies*', '*New Weeklies*' and '*Celebrity Weeklies*'. The main difference between them is the age of their target audience. Whilst '*Old Weeklies*' mainly target women over 55; '*New Weeklies*' are targeted at middle-aged women with '*Celebrity Weeklies*' having the youngest audience of the three.

Thirty years ago only '*Old Weeklies*' such as *My Weekly* existed; their winning formula relied a great deal on Romantic Fiction. In 1987 the German Publishers Gruner and Jahr launched the magazines *Bella* and *Best* into the British market. They used a new formula, tested in the USA and Germany: the True Life Story, in which ordinary people tell their own stories. The best-known formula for these stories is the TOA, Triumph Over Adversity. (Ramet, 1996: 6) The immediate success of these new weeklies soon affected the contents of some *Old Weeklies* such as *Woman's Own* and *Woman's Realm* which abandoned a great deal of Magazine Romantic Fiction in favour of True Life Stories. In March 1990, the best selling *Take a Break* was launched with a formula combining True Life Stories and competitions. Other titles such as *That's Life* and *Chat* followed *Take a Break* in the exploitation of the same formula.

The launch of *Hello!* Magazine by the Spanish publisher ¡Hola! in 1988 meant another transformation of the market. *Hello!* featuring the lives of the rich and famous through rose tinted spectacles, has been the source of inspiration for *OK* and *Now*. (Howard, 2001: 69) These are targeted at a younger audience than '*New Weeklies*'. Moreover, young and teen magazines such as *Heat*, which was the success story of 2000, *B* and *More* are increasingly adopting Celebrity Narratives.

We start from the assumption that magazines help women to make sense of their experience. The fact that there are types of Weekly Magazine for several generations of British women leads us to look at the three types of weeklies as sociological layers of meaning that may tell us something about the reader's values and the way these three generations of women perceive 'reality'.

We are going to comparatively analyse Romantic Magazine Stories, True Life Tales and Celebrity Narratives, and for these we will take into account the texts themselves and readers' interpretations. This analysis will look for some features, which some authors have related to modern and post-modern values. First of all, we will look for the element of utopia

held in the message of the stories, for which some ideas of Hebdige (1989) will be followed. At the same time the degree of closeness (or openness) in the text will be looked at, an issue, which has been addressed by Umberto Eco (1989).

Hebdige (1989: 196) considers that the rejection of utopia is one of the characteristics of the post-modern condition. The modern man had dared to think that reason would free men from all their prejudices; that reason would remove men from the darkness of irrationality. After two World Wars and other disasters of the 20th century, it can be argued that the post-modern man looks at human nature with more suspicion and modesty, and therefore, rejects the notion of utopia and sets himself more humble challenges.

In relation to the participation of readers in texts Umberto Eco (1979: 8-56) distinguishes between Closed Texts and Open Texts. He considers that a Closed Text tells the reader what to think and feel – and, therefore, if readers are not obedient, aberrant interpretations are bound to happen. Therefore, the ‘legitimate’ limits to interpretation are closer.

On the other hand, Open Texts offer a choice of different possible non-aberrant interpretations. In selecting one of the plausible interpretations offered by a text, readers would be participating in the stories. According to Eco, Closed texts with minimum participation are considered to be classic texts. This is often referred to as early modern. On the other hand, Open Texts, which offer more participation are suggested to be modern.

Eco even suggests the possibility that a text offers an even greater degree of participation to the reader. In relation to music, to a work called *Scambi* by Passeur, Eco also considers the possibility of the listener having to do some organising and structuring of the musical discourse. The listener therefore collaborates in making the composition.

The significance of the closure proposed in each story as the solving of the conflict will be looked at. A very definitive closure may be talking about a ‘reality’ perceived as static in which the solution given to a great conflict, for romances how to find love, is meant to be effective and durable. Stories with less definitive closures may be talking of a ‘reality’ perceived as more dynamic and complex, in which lots of conflicts may arise and in which the proposed solutions are not always that effective.

For the purpose of exploring the kind of participation that the three generations of female readers have in their preferred texts, as well as the notion of utopia and closure proposed by

these narrative formats the article will combine findings from textual analysis and ethnographic fieldwork. Taking an example of a Magazine Romantic Fictional Story, a True Life Story and a Celebrity Narrative as indicatives of the formats studied; at the same time the account readers' interpretations of these types of format need to be taken into account. The article relies on the fifteen in-depth interviews and five discussion groups that were undertaken with readers of these three types of story between January and June of 2002.

Romance- 'Yesterday Once More'

Romantic Fiction of Magazines such as *The People's Friend* and *My Weekly* consist in short stories or sagas with continuation from week to week. 'Yesterday Once More' is a short story spread over two pages, which features an illustration of a blonde woman with a dog who, on an idyllic seaside setting, overlooks a picturesque village. A brief description of the plot follows:

Molly is a self-sacrificing woman devoted to her crippled mother who wishes for a relationship with a man. An old childhood sweetheart returns to the village and they bump into each other whilst walking their dogs at the beach. They start meeting every day for this purpose and fall in love. However, when he proposes, Molly declines his offer. She is an unselfish daughter who would not leave her mother in a home. But Molly's mother doesn't allow her to spoil her one 'chance of happiness'. She has already plotted a solution with her son in law to be: she will move to the second floor on his house, once the happy couple are married. The story ends with the promise of a happy ever after.

The story recreates life in a small town and uses topics such as the 'village grapevine', as well as a number of locations: the beach, 'the old bakery', 'Broad Street', the 'local chemist'. This seems to enact the romantic idea of a small village where life is simple and people are good (although nosy). In a similar fashion, informers like Sheila S. could see that the settings of stories were stylised:

"Normally it is about Scotland, but not necessarily, they tend to be Highlands and Islands, they tend to be people's romantic notion of what the Highlands and Islands would be" (Sheila S., Lecturer, 45-55)

However, readers also considered that stories were realistic and always found ways in which they could identify with the characters and situations enacted by the narrative. In the following extract the informer Sheila S. explains how she recognises certain characters in her current favourite magazine story at the moment of the interview:

“I worked in a rural area up north, so it kind of equates to that. (...) Like just now [in the story that I am reading] ... the berry picking. I know of people coming south from Dundee to pick the berries and I’ve known a lot of families whose parents and grandparents picked the berries and there is a family tradition about it.” Sheila S. , Lecturer, 45-55

This way of finding stories stylised and realistic at the same time agrees with Cawelti’s description of formulaic literature. According to Cawelti (1976: 5-6), this type of format enacts an idealised world that still has a powerful connection to reality. This combined with the construction of ‘plausible characters’ allows readers to escape into the fictional world through their identification with the main characters, whose idealistic nature makes resistance to identification difficult. The fact that readers find it easy to identify with characters is illustrated by the following extract:

‘I like them [heroines], but I suppose I like them because they are pretty ordinary like ourselves, they are not out the top class bracket, they are not terribly rich. They are ordinary people like what we are ourselves, so you can identify with the situation better’. Sheila, +65, Housewife.

In fact the main characters of Magazine Romantic Stories were described both as characters you could identify with, and likeable. The data collected from the analysis of stories and interviews with readers suggested that part of the stories’ ‘stylisation’ meant that they create a fictional world which excluded certain aspects of reality that readers did not want to read about, such as nasty events or sex. Readers found it very important that stories were morally ‘clean’ and ‘safe’, and many readers chose Magazine Romantic Fiction to be bedside stories. The safeness and cleanness of stories were pre-requisites for readers to trust the magazine. The following extracts illustrate this point:

“P: No, they are simple stories, and they are clean stories. I like that. (...) No sexy things, you know, just ordinary life.” Pat, 82, Housewife.

“I like it, nothing really terrible happens, nobody’s being raped. Nobody feels embarrassed, although young people don’t feel embarrassed about anything these days. For old people like me, it’s like you are watching television and you think , Oh, not again , because terrible, terrible things happen”. Cathy + 65, Housewife.

At the same time readers needed to have a certainty about how it is going to end: the heroin was going to find love. Coming back to ‘Yesterday Once More’ we can argue that it fulfils the promise of the basic storyline ‘girl meets boy’: they meet, fall in love, he proposes, they overcome some difficulties and they get married. Finally, this is the story of Molly’s life, which now has gained closure, forever. The importance of happy endings by readers in this

type of fiction was confirmed during the fieldwork. It could be considered a pre-requisite for their involvement.

The story finishes with the engagement, the ‘happy ever after is an assumption’. An assumption resting on the certainty of a marriage for love as the passport to happiness, the certainty about the ‘fact’ that self-sacrifice is the price women have to pay for happiness and fulfilment. This seems to suggest that readers participate of what has been called ‘patriarchal ideology’.

The type of ‘fictional contract’ between readers and narrator seems to be one in which readers are lead by the narrator. Therefore, according to Eco’s theory, it would be a closed text. However, it is worth noting that readers follow the text obediently because they trust that certain conditions will be met. Following the story-telling readers can escape into the safe identities of characters of the moral quality of Molly (who would sacrifice her ‘happiness’ for her mother’s well-being) and the fairly stylised world of the small seaside village. Under these conditions readers do not have any motive to doubt the narrative strategy and adventure other interpretations.

The fictional contract between readers and this sort of story seems to be pre-arranged. Magazine editors seem to have the role of ensuring that the stories have some qualities and exclude others. In return, readers followed narrators obediently. The ‘tacit agreement’ agreement that stories need to be ‘safe’ and ‘clean’ is illustrated by the following extract. It belongs to the interview with Jo-Ann, an amateur writer who had attended a workshop whose members targeted *The People’s Friend*.

‘In The People’s Friend other standards apply. For example when I was writing, we would get feedback from a professional or semi-professional writer and I was scolded because the heroine had had a hangover. I didn’t write it like that, I just made her say ‘Oh, I had too many lemonades last night’. She [the professional writer] said that the story was very good but that we could not have heroines with hangovers because it was not moralistic’ (Jo-Ann, 32, Computer Technician and Amateur Writer)

Another symptom of the text being closed was that readers of Romantic Fiction never discussed stories or their interpretation with friends. And this, despite the fact that readers often participated in a circuit of friends or acquaintances which passed magazines around. Not even with those readers of their social network did they exchange opinions about the stories.

As a conclusion, it can be argued that readers of Old Weeklies like to read about stories that can be trusted to be safe, clean and happy in order to abandon themselves being fully identified with the heroine and follow the plot obediently. Cases like '*Yesterday Once More*' present stories with no gaps, and a clear closure which offers a romantic, utopian and final solution to women's needs. All these characteristics can be called early-modern.

True Life Story: 'When the fiancé met the mistress'

Now we will pay attention to True Life Stories, and will take the story entitled '*When the fiancée met the mistress*' as an illustration of the arguments displayed. This article is also spread over two pages with a central picture of 'the fiancé' and 'the mistress' together, as well as pictures 'of the fiancée' with Douglas, the man who completes the triangle. The first thing that draws our attention is that the scenery represented in the picture, is not that stylised. Heroines are 'normal' women, not especially good looking. And locations are city places such as pubs and discos.

Nicola, 'the fiancée', tells the principal story in the first grammatical person. There is also a rectangle with a short version of the story told by 'the mistress'. Douglas

Is said to have been contacted but to have 'rejected to comment'. A brief description of the plot follows:

Nicola is on her way to a club with her best pal when she sets eyes on the taxi driver. She asks him to meet after he's finished his shift; he declines but asks for her number. He calls later that week; they fall in love; move in together; and buy a house. At some point Douglas proposes and she agrees. But soon he starts arriving late from work and Nicola discovers that Douglas is seeing someone else. She breaks up with him. After a while, she is about to take him back when the telephone rings. It's Helen, Douglas's mistress who shouts at Nicola to leave her man alone. The insults fly between the two women and an infuriated Nicola throws Douglas out of her house. The following day, Helen rings again, this time to apologise. They both realise that Douglas had been cheating on the two of them. From this point they develop a friendship.

This story also springs from the basic line girl meets boy, but it sports two twists: firstly, Prince Charming he is not; secondly, contrary to all expectations, the mistress is a nice girl. In a way, this story abandons the 'ideology' of romantic love in favour of the idea that women's friendship is important and possible. This a very empowering message for women that "*New Weeklies*" try to get across (Oates, 1999).

At the same time, True Life Stories acknowledge the uncertainty of life: Who could have told that Mr Right was a cheat? Who was going to think that the mistress of the fiancée would become a good friend? And it is a positive message that encourages making the best out of a bad situation. Readers took a similar approach when interpreting True Life Stories in general. The message that readers said to extract from this type of story usually was “life goes on”. Readers often talked about stories that were less optimistic than this one, and concluded that in the end, “you have to learn to live with the advantages or disadvantages that you find yourself having. And at the same time you must remember that there are people worse off than you”.

Back to the more optimistic story that occupies us, *‘When the fiancé met the mistress*, we can say that it has closure although it does not have the same intensity of that of *‘Yesterday once more’*. Nicola has escaped ‘a cheat’ and has a new ‘mate’ but the happy ever after is not that clear. Nicola still lacks the partner and the father figure for her children that she wished for. This is not the story of her life, as the romance was Molly’s story, it is one of the stories of her life.

True Life Stories do not share the escapism and the utopia of the romance. True Life Narratives acknowledge that life is complicated and encourage women to fight against adversity. Romances seem to suggest that there is only one way of gaining happiness. First you become a self-sacrificing woman, and then you will be paid back by finding love.

On the contrary, in True Life Stories self-sacrifice is not always effective and there is not only one path to happiness. True Life Stories acknowledge that love, like life, does not always work out as planned. These texts seem to reject the utopia of romantic love and content themselves with more humble aims in life such as friendship.

In terms of Readers’ Participation, the fact that these stories are factual and the main characters are meant to be normal people of flesh and blood makes True Life Stories less idealised than Magazine Romantic Stories. Therefore, readers are in a way, allowed to make their own idea about the principal and teller of the story. In fact, many readers questioned the motivation of the narrator for giving the stories. The following extract illustrates this idea:

“I wonder about the motives of the people giving the interviews, I don’t think it is the money, because I think they are not paid very much. Sometimes it might be that they have a grudge on the other person that they want to shame them. Or it could be that they are maybe trying

to set up a campaign and get public support, and maybe change the law” Susan , 35-45, Nursery Head Teacher.

In terms of readers’ participation, the fact that these stories consider the perspective of more than one character in the story allows more room for interpretation. In this way readers often said that although they normally agreed with the views of the main teller, they would often like to know more about the perspectives of the other characters. Many readers expressed a preference for a type of story in which a reader tells of a problem and other readers suggest possible solutions or just give opinions.

“Some magazines do the one where it is also a reader who writes the story and then it’s about four or five opinions [by other readers] of the story, that’s quite good”. Stacey, 23, University Student.

The format of New Weeklies seems to enact the image of a community of readers who exchange experiences and opinions, and therefore we can consider True Life Stories as an open text. In relation to Romantic Fiction, readers’ hypothetical disapproval of the heroine would probably mean that they would stop reading. On the contrary, with True Life Stories, disapproving of or distrusting the teller is a possibility. In those cases where readers do not agree with the teller of the story they tend to discuss it with other readers. Stacey illustrates this point:

“I think if you come across something you totally disagree with you might bring it up to see what her idea was and, whether your idea was normal and you would compare that with.” Stacey, 23, University Student.

To recap, we can say that True Life Stories have a different vision of love as the only way to achieve utopian happiness. They do not really dismiss conjugal love, as unimportant, and they do not reject the possibility of happiness. But they problematize conjugal love as a site for eternal happiness, and they set alternative and more modest ways of being happy. This modesty can be associated- in Hebdige (1979) terms- to post-modernism.

However, as regards readers’ participation in the text, it can be said that True Life Stories are open, and therefore, according to Eco, modern texts: They allow a certain degree of openness as readers can doubt the motives of the teller and heroine of the story, and this does not mean that they dislike the tale. Discussing heroines with friends and family can be seen as one of the appeals of the magazine. Therefore, we can conclude that True Life Stories have both post-modern and modern overtones.

Celebrity Narratives: Victoria Beckman

Finally emphasis will be placed on Celebrity Narratives and will pay attention to the case of some narratives agglutinated by the media character of Victoria Beckham, who was the centre of much of the discussion among British readers during the fieldwork.

In this instance three features that appeared in the same issue of *Now* magazine in October 2000 will be considered. First of all, there is an article about the book of Andrew Morton entitled '*Posh is so insecure about David*' on the celebrity couple. It discloses some of the couple's inner feelings. Victoria is portrayed as an insecure woman who needs constant reassurance from her devoted husband. Morton also shows his indignation at the way in which the Beckhams reacted to this book, "in a fiercer way than Buckingham Palace had done in the case of Diana".

Secondly, Victoria Beckham appears in another two articles, in one as a fashion icon from the pop world, together with her Spice colleague Emma Button in the ceremony of the Vogue Fashion Awards 2000. The last article analysed, entitled '*Posh stops for nosh after Beverly Hills shop with mum*' displays an evident tongue-in-cheek attitude. Victoria appears as a 'normal person' shopping with her mum and son, and eating fast food. Victoria is portrayed as having difficulties with Brooklyn's pushchair on the escalator of the shopping centre, just as any other mortal would. In one of the photographs she is answering a telephone call on her mobile and the journalist wonders if it was "David 'checking on her'".

Victoria's narratives as they appear in magazines can be considered an open fragmentary text where story and plot have to be structured by each reader –just like the musical work *Scambi* described by Eco, in which listeners collaborate in the making of the text. Week after week, readers learn new -or not so new- information about the characters of celebrity magazines. And each week readers build up the stories of these characters within a loose plot, full of gaps.

This is why Celebrity Stories invite discussion. Is the message of Victoria's celebrity tale that any Essex girl can meet her Prince Charming, have a Beckingham Palace and achieve celebrity status? Is it that only "idiots" get to the top these days? This story is not only full of gaps it is also full of uncertainties.

Victoria and David's love story follows a similar pattern to the romance we have analysed. They met, fell in love, engaged, had a son and married. But first of all the story has not ended and the happy ever after is not guaranteed. Moreover, the fact that Victoria is insecure,

self-obsessed, and bulimic, produces a dramatic tension that makes the reader wonder what will happen next: will David grow tired and put his foot down?

Celebrity Stories openly invite the audience to engage their own expertise in how inner feelings lead to actions in life. They are also real-life texts; they are not finished yet, so readers can even bet on what will happen. The following extract from a conversation between a married couple illustrates this point:

Peter: "They are still both very, very young so I can see trouble looming in the future. (...) Their lives together have always been in the spotlight so I would imagine that in the future, when this limelight fades they might crave it again and they might crave it with other people, so, we'll wait and see, that's my prediction (they laugh).

Gillian: No! I don't think so. They seem to be together and to have put a wall behind it, which will keep them together. (...) It seems all they want to do is have a family, and keep it like that". Peter and Gillian, 25-35. Beauty Consultant, and Electrician.

In relation to the Beckhams' narrative, readers even those who showed a more cynical approach, felt inspired by David and Victoria's display of 'real love' but also made predictions about their future. Informants always showed that they were aware of the fragility of celebrity couples, and many readers - especially those in long-term relationships - complained about the high rate of broken couples among the famous.

At the same time, unlike readers of the romance, readers Celebrity Stories found it very easy to talk about Celebrity Stories and to use them as prompts to engage in moral talk. One of the main topics of discussion enacted by these talks during the fieldwork was the strong condemnation of people who, like Tom Cruise or Kate Winslet, were perceived as walking out on a family where children are involved.

Alison: "Oh! You lost it big thing I would say (as if speaking to Tom Cruise). I don't like the Cruz-Cruise thing.

Susanne: Any man who had done that to his wife... they had adopted children, they'd made the marriage and then any lousy girl comes along... I don't like Penelope.

All: I don't like her [Penelope] (all speak at the same time)

Alison: poor children

Alison: I never used to like Nicole, and then since Tom split up with her...

Susanne: I loved her in Moulin Rouge". Group of University Students.

This happens in a country with the highest rate of divorce in Europe in 2002 (Jill Kirby, 2002), which suggests that this is an issue of national concern being debated or reviewed in society at the moment. And celebrity discourse, among other media discourses, would serve as a way of channelling people's moral preoccupations and producing a debate.

Victoria's story has some similarities with the romance: firstly, its glamour makes it as escapist as a romance. Secondly, like many romances, it can be considered a saga (although with a loose plot). However Victoria's story does not draw on the ideology of romance. It does not because of its context, and because it is an open alive text: Celebrity Narratives show that celebrities' happiness is, at the least, ephemeral. Today Victoria and David can represent the happy couple; yesterday it was Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman and readers were well aware of this.

We could say that Celebrity Stories focus on the love stories of their celebrity characters for their escapist end entertainment value but take care in not drawing on the ideology of romance. Therefore their rejection of utopia, engagement with their audience and entertainment-escapist spirit makes it sport some post-modern values. It is worth noticing this post-modern text can be seen as the synthesis of the escapism of the early -modern romance and the knowledge that there is no safe path to happiness, not even money, glamour and love.

In conclusion, the romances published in the *Old Weeklies* targeted at readers over 55 seem to include some early-modern tones. The romantic ideology of some cultural formats has been argued by authors like Aurora Roura (1993: 104) to be linked with the first moments of Modernism. Accordingly, the closure of the story sets an all happy future for our heroine and speaks about a reality perceived as simple: self-sacrifice will take you to love, fulfilment and happiness.... End of Story. At the same time, the fictional contract between readers and narrator seems to be pre-arranged so that readers follow obediently the narrator, a type of relationship that was described by Eco as a symptom of early-modern texts.

True Life Stories balance their post-modern rejection of utopia, with the fact that the texts have closure (although not as intense as romances' closures). Besides, True Life Stories can be considered open modern texts, as they allow a number of non-aberrant interpretations to be made. Moreover, True Life Stories create the idea of a community of readers in which a dialogue between them is always taking place. Therefore, these aspects of the format can be considered modern.

Finally, with regards to the magazine formula that is proving most successful with younger readers, the openness of Celebrity Stories to be co-written with readers is very special and empowering to the reader. To label this kind of openness as modern or post-modern is a difficult task that I leave for future discussion.

At the same time, Celebrity Stories have post-modern overtones, which rest precisely in their synthesis of the early-modern and modern: that is, Celebrity Articles use the romantic utopia for escapist-entertainment value and present ideal images of good-looking and rich couples like the Beckhams. But on the other hand, the break-ups of previously considered 'solid golden couples' constantly reminds that 'all that glitters is not gold'. In this way the idea of utopia can be both rejected and accepted by readers.

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