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RESEARCHING “THE STARS” – THE HOROSCOPE PAGE IN BRITISH AND BULGARIAN WOMEN’S MAGAZINES

This paper is based on McQuail's definition of “genre” as a type of media product with a set of distinctive features “recognized more or less equally by its producers and consumers. It outlines some of the “basic themes”, the “predictable stock of images” and the “expected structure” found in a corpus of horoscopes published in Bulgarian and British women's magazines [1].

Keywords: media genre, horoscope pages, women's magazines.

1. The growing salience of the horoscopes in the Bulgarian media

The genre of the horoscope appearing in the media seems worth researching for a number of reasons. The first reason is the growing salience of astrology and its practices within the context of the Bulgarian culture. A quick search in the Bulgarian National Library catalogue reveals that 615 materials on astrology and 244 on horoscopes are available to the users at the moment of writing [2, 3]. The public interest in abnormal and supernatural phenomena in this country seems considerable, as well as the demand for alternative ways of approaching and accounting for one's individuality or inclinations. One of the online bookstores in Bulgaria [4] offers a total of 1880 items of esoteric literature, while another specializing in selling esoteric books mentions more than ten publishing houses in Bulgaria which publish this type of literature [5].

The Bulgarian mass media are also fast to respond to this demand. There are a number of specialized newspapers and magazines (e.g. Phenomen, Psycho+, Oracle, Horoscope that address issues of astrology, numerology, palmistry, and occults. There are also yearly books offering day-by-day predictions for each sign from the zodiac. In addition, the majority of the general interest magazines and daily newspapers never fail to include a horoscope page. Within the last few years there has been a growing tendency of printed media going online, which in turn widens and changes the profile of potential horoscope readers (e.g. Trud, 24 chasa, Sega, etc.).

The electronic media also have their share in popularizing those issues and especially the horoscope. The majority of privately owned radio-stations and TV channels broadcast daily or weekly horoscopes for their audiences. (e.g. bTV, NOVA, TV 7, etc.).

2. The horoscope pages worldwide

Horoscopes are popular not only in Bulgaria. One of the most popular search engines Google yields about 140 000 000 results at the hit of the key word “horoscope” and the majority of them link to sites offering tailored predictions about the future. What is more, mobile producers and operators offer “horoscope applications” or horoscope services for their customers, e.g. horoscope apps for i-phones, smart phones, etc. Variations of horoscope applications are also available in most of the popular social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

3. Brief literature overview

The main research questions worth considering are: why the horoscope is so much “loved” by the contemporary media both in Bulgaria and worldwide, what meanings are assigned to this genre, if and how its content and structure depend on the author or on the media policy or the culture within it is being produced.

There is some research that throws light on the nature of horoscopes [6, 7], on the horoscope production practices and their consumption [8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15]. However, the nature of these resources (astrologers’ websites, students’ research projects, media publications, etc.) does not always presuppose thorough academic analysis of the horoscope as a genre. Hence further insights are needed to establish a clear picture of the elements that constitute this particular media genre.

Various aspects of media genres have been extensively discussed both by linguists and cultural studies scholars [16, 17,18,19,20,21,1, 22, 23, 24, 25]. Some of these are discussed in more detail with regard to the stars pages in women’s magazines later in this article.

Women’s magazines in their own right have also been subject of extensive academic analyses [26,27,28,29]. However, the horoscope seems to have escaped researchers’ attention. That fact has reinforced my decision to start this academic research. Added to these are my personal interest in astrology and the complicated methods it makes use of to forecast individuals’ future as well as my habit to have a glimpse at the horoscope page or site on a daily basis.

4. The horoscope as a genre

4.1. The horoscope in astrology

In astrology the term “horoscope” is one of the main concepts and it refers to the schematic map (the Chart) of the planets’ position at a specific moment in time (usually but not necessarily the moment of a person’s birth). Each Chart is unique, as is its interpretation by the astrologer. In other words, the practice of casting, reading and interpreting a horoscope is an act of communication between a restricted number of participants. However, this purely astrological approach to the horoscope is not a central issue in this study. Rather, I intend to focus on the media

aspects of the horoscope since some of them seem to be central even for astrologers themselves. Annabel Burton (a recognised professional astrologer) for example directly addresses the media on her web page with what sounds as a well-formulated business proposition: “Benefits of this Popular Content - It is well known in publishing, no matter if you believe or you do not, Astrology & Horoscopes are what your readers, listeners & viewers want. By adding our Horoscope content you will provide a reason for people to read your publication or come to your site on a regular basis.” [10]

4.2. The horoscope as media genre

Media Studies sees “the horoscope” as one of the many types of media text and discourse genres. There is as yet no agreement among sociologists, linguists, Culture and Media Studies researchers with regard to a unified definition of such complex concepts as “text” and “discourse” [16, 30, 19, 20, 1]. As a matter of fact, the two terms can be virtually interchangeable within certain contexts. Still, for the sake of clarity, I use “text” and “discourse” to refer to different aspects of the horoscope as a media product. Given that the examples I will discuss in the following chapters appeared in magazines and newspapers (some of which online), I can claim that “the horoscope” in this case is a media text, which in Garret and Bell’s terms is “the outward manifestation of a communicative event” [16, p. 3], and in which “different semiotic threads relate to each other in different ways” [20, p. 48]. In other words, the horoscope is the final media product offered to the audience. It may comprise textual, linguistic and non-linguistic devices, which put together, shape it as a specific and easily recognizable genre.

Equally, “the horoscope” is an example of media discourse and as such is informative of “the ways in which the texts are produced by media workers in media institutions and of the ways in which the texts are received by audiences” [19, p. 16].

This approach to the horoscope accounts for the technological and the ideological means the media make use of in order to address, as well as to cultivate certain needs in their audiences. Moreover, it allows the audiences’ participation in the process of negotiating the meaning of the text produced by the media to be taken into consideration. The continuous negotiation of meaning is particularly the case with the horoscope. Its fairly vague and general formulation requires from the reader to relate the text to the specific circumstances of her personal background and experience.

Regardless of which aspect (text or discourse) we choose to approach the horoscope, the fact that it is easy to distinguish from other texts and discourses within the particular medium, allows for its categorization as a genre.

Like any other concept in Media and Cultural Studies “genre” as a term yields a variety of definitions and interpretations. [30, 1, 31, 19]. However, most researchers seem to agree that a “genre” is a type of media product with a set of

distinctive features “recognized more or less equally by its producers (the media) and its consumers (media audiences). It has been established over time and observes familiar conventions; it follows an expected structure of narrative or sequence of action and draws on predictable stock of images and has a repertoire of various basic themes” [1, p. 263].

My preliminary research of the sample of horoscopes in women’s magazines, which is subject to in-depth analysis later on in this paper, reveals that the horoscope pages do share recognizable elements, mainly in terms of layout and text organization. Clearly, ‘the horoscope’ in women’s magazines could be claimed to constitute a media discourse genre in its own right. As such it is not fixed and timeless, so it may vary across cultures or across media and be indicative of the ideological differences in its production.

4.3. The horoscope as a popular culture practice

It has already been pointed out that the horoscope is being popularized by the mass media to a great extent. Some surveys carried out independently of one another within different cultures yield similar results: a comparatively large number of informants, regardless of their age or sex, regularly consult the horoscope page and / or the psychic predictions in the press [32, p. 126]. Others quote the horoscope as one of the main reasons to read the newspaper at all [33, p. 46]. These make the application of a different approach to studying the horoscope relevant here: one from the standpoint of Popular Culture Studies.

Originally, the horoscope in its purely astrological sense used to be characterized by its uniqueness. It was meant to address the individual and shed light on his/ her personality and future. The horoscope as a mass media discourse genre can no longer claim such uniqueness. On the one hand, it aims to address bigger and diverse audiences, e.g. readers of a particular magazine or a website; or female audiences sharing the same sign. On the other hand, it seems to have acquired new functions: giving advice and entertaining instead of predicting and informing about the future. The new transformed nature of the horoscope combines in it itself features of a mass media genre and a popular culture phenomenon. Being a media text, it could also reflect current social trends and processes in the culture of its production and consumption and highlight some of the basic values shared by the members of that culture.

5. The corpus

My corpus comprises a total of 421 horoscopes: 171 from British and 250 from Bulgarian sources. 72 are published online, 337 – only in paper editions, 24 appear both on paper and online. The examples cover approximately the same period of time: July – September for years 2000 and 2011. This has been done to reduce the amount of

the external factors affecting the final research outcomes and to trace any change of recurrent patterns (visuals, topics, vocabulary use, etc.) the two sets of horoscopes yield across time. Other selection criteria applied to the media are:

- country of origin: Bulgaria and Britain;
- similar readership profile & circulation in both cultures;
- formal correspondence: equal number of weekly and monthly editions in both cultures; equal number of paper and online editions of magazines;
- available mission statements and slogans as an alternative source of information about magazines' policies and target audiences;
- similar content in both sets;
- price, when official information about distribution and circulation is not publicly available ;
- availability on the market, when magazines published in 2000 were not in circulation in 2011;
- availability online.

6. The research methods

The two main research methods employed in this study are Content and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) [18, 34]. The former is used to identify the significance each publication assigns to the horoscope. The latter, CDA, allows exploring “the linguistic features and organization of concrete instances of discourse” [34, p. 449]: e.g. recurrent patterns in vocabulary use, typical grammar structures, cohesion and text structure. It also allows looking at the horoscope as discourse that is produced, circulated, distributed and consumed in society, i.e. analysing it within a broader framework of a particular context. This aspect of CDA is particularly important as this study aims to compare horoscopes produced and consumed in two different cultures. Finally, CDA helps analyse discourse-as-social-practice and account for some ideological processes taking place during the production and consumption of this mass media genre. Thus values represented in the horoscopes can be elicited and the methods employed for their further projection to implied audiences discussed.

7. The outcomes

The detailed analysis of both sets of my corpus revealed the following constitutive features of the horoscope as a media genre:

- Horoscopes constitute a regular rubric in all the magazines from the sample. They are usually signposted in the content page under headings such as “in every issue”, “regulars”, etc. and occupy the last pages of the medium.
- The layout may vary across magazines and years of publication but the rubric is made distinctive and is easy to recognize. Among the most widely employed visual means are: use of different typeface, font and color for headings,

subheadings and advertised telephone lines; use of graphic images of the horoscope signs, photos, grids for each separate entry, etc.

– Size may vary as well, the most common number of words being 50–150 words.

– Linguistic means range from astrological jargon, abstract vocabulary, personality adjectives to concrete nouns and action verbs usually depending on the personal style of the horoscope writer and the policy of the magazine.

– Among the most common grammatical items found in both cultures are present and future forms of the verbs, if-clauses, passive voice, modal verbs, and imperative verb forms.

– The most commonly discussed topics are: love, relationships, friendship, marriage, family, health, work; luck, self-control, self-reflection, self-development), spending money, going out, parties and clubbing, fine food and drinks, change and SEX. The specific choice seems to depend to the target audiences age and socio-economic group.

– Some of the qualities represented and promoted are: taking the initiative in any sphere of life, self-reliance; keeping fit; taking care of appearance; straightforwardness; imagination; honesty.

– Functions the horoscopes aim to fulfill are: flattering the reader, giving advice, warning, reproaching, as well as giving some predictions about possible future events.

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**ИЗУЧЕНИЕ «ЗВЕЗД»:
ГОРОСКОПЫ В ЖЕНСКИХ БРИТАНСКИХ
И БОЛГАРСКИХ ЖУРНАЛАХ**

В данной статье принимается трактовка «жанра», предложенная Д. Мак-Квэйлом, согласно которой жанр является разновидностью медиа-продукта с набором отличительных черт, «более или менее одинаково осознаваемых как продуцентами, так и реципиентами». Излагаются некоторые «основные темы», «предсказуемый набор образов» и «ожидаемая структура», типичные для корпусов гороскопов, опубликованных в болгарских и английских журналах для женщин.

Ключевые слова: *медиа-жанр, раздел «гороскоп», журнал для женщин.*