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Myth about Immortality in the Contemporary Pop Culture. A Case Study about Toše Proeski

This paper explores the intersection of death and ideology in the sphere of popular culture, as exemplified by the afterlife destiny of Toše Proeski, a Macedonian pop singer whose huge popularity continued even after his death.

His sudden, untimely death in his twenties had exploded as huge news, preoccupying all sorts of media. What I am interested in in this paper

is what has happened afterwards. In which way his popularity and his afterlife continue? Can we identify some kind of pop hero cult here, and is it possible to recognize common elements, or even a pattern according to which (newborn) stars develop an afterlife destiny? Can we use this opportunity to discuss immortality myths? Do pop stars get monuments or are these reserved just for national heroes?

Key words: pop star, death, hero, afterlife cult, immortality myth

Several years ago, the sudden death of a young pop singer, purported to have ‘a great voice’, ‘enormous charisma’, the ‘face of an angel’ and an the image of a good, warm and lovable person Todor Proeski widely known as Toše, shook many people living in the Balkans (mostly former in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria). However, in his homeland - Macedonia, only a few days after his death, the media began reporting that the Macedonian Church is discussing the possibility to proclaim Toše Proeski a saint. When he died, suddenly, in a car accident, traveling to a concert, Toše was only twenty six years old. This young man, with an image of a very generous person and devoted Christian, was famous not only as a musician, but also for his humanitarian work (in 2003 he was the regional UNICEF ambassador and the winner of the Mother Theresa Humanitarian Award for humanitarian concerts held during 2003, after returning from New York where he received training from professional singer and the teacher of Luciano Pavarotti, maestro William Riley) seemed at that moment appropriate for entering the saint canon of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. However, in spite of the enthusiasm with which this idea was initiated by the fans and the believers, and discussed in the media,¹ this initiative not been met with success by the time this article was finished, at least not in the form in which it was first initiated. However, one of the

¹ <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Tema-Dana/16894/Tose-Proeski-mozda-bude-proglasen-svecem>

quick responses concerning the canonization of Toše Proeski was the answer of bishop Petar who said that “the Church has its own rules which are important when a person is proclaimed to be a saint. Usually initiative is not given immediately after someone’s death. It is necessary to have some time distance, to give concrete suggestions, to collect information about somebody’s work, and only after that comes the process of decision if somebody can become saint or not.”² According to this response, we may conclude that it is still early for the Macedonian Orthodox Church to give the final decision. However, not much time has passed, only a year, when another initiative was fostered by the Mother Theresa organization for giving Toše an aureole of the saint, in the House of the sisters of Mother Theresa, this time in Vatican. Namely, on the grounds of many humanitarian actions in which Toše Proeski took part, helping people regardless of faith and nation, the suggestion has been given in front of the pope in August 2012, and it might happen that the Pope Benedictus XVI and the Orthodox Church start together the process of beatification.³

What I am interested to show in this paper is what is the destiny of a pop star such as Toše in his afterlife and is he, despite of the absence of canonization, anyway some kind of a saint (the description that I gave about him in the beginning of the text, which is based on the impressions in the media, points to the conclusion that he is definitely idealized). Starting from the position that death, especially of public persons, represents an important domain for the production of dominant narratives, and that monuments of famous poets, politicians and scientists have a crucial role in the creation of collective memory and formation of cultural history and thus identity construction, what I am interested in is the way in which, and if at all, popular culture with its protagonists is also part of this process. Is it possible to claim that this process of “immortalization” is “spontaneous”, and is there (and if there is, to which extent) freedom in the creation of the afterlife cult (of any kind, not necessarily related to the church), who is the creator of such a cult, and for whom is it important.

But let me start from the beginning of this story, of Toše Proeski’s sad end. The famous young singer died in a car accident on a Croatian highway on October 16th 2007. During the next day his corpse was transported by a Macedonian army helicopter. Grieving citizens gathered at the Skopje airport and at the main city square, to give their last respects to the famous singer. Toše Proeski received from the state of Macedonia the title of its honorable citizen.⁴ On the day after his death, on 17th October 2007, a public funeral organized by the State was performed in his birthplace and hometown Kruševo, with all the characteristics of one such ceremony including the presence of the Macedonian Army – the honor guard, military orchestra and honorary rifle salute. The whole ceremony was broadcasted by Macedonian television, witnessing the presence of many people including state officials (President Branko Crvenkovski, Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski), foreign ambassadors, other diplomats, as well as other musicians from all over the region. The religious service was held by Archbishop Stephen of Ohrid⁵. The day of the funeral was pronounced a national grieving day. The media and internet blogs, as well as web pages were overwhelmed by messages of grievance for Toše’s too early departure. Many memorial web sites are still active, such as *In*

² <http://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/tose-proeski-ce-biti-proglasen-svetim/362217.aspx>

³ <http://tosep.blogspot.com/2012/08/papa-ce-odluciti-kao-sto-je-vec-pisao.html>

⁴ <http://www.worldbuildingsdirectory.com/project.cfm?id=3498>, 11.11.2012.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/To%C5%A1e_Proeski, 11.11.2012.

*memoriam fun club Toše*⁶, with the following motto “We couldn’t keep you from death, but we’ll keep you from oblivion” (last change that I have noticed is November 2012), or *Forever Toše Proeski* with the motto “In order to keep the memory of him, and to keep him forever in our hearts”⁷. I have also discovered an interesting webpage titled *Respectance (share your memories)*. It is a free portal where people can give respect to those they lost, in the first place people they love, regardless of their fame, confirming the old belief that in death, we are all the same and equal. On this portal, Toše with his own tribute page, is in company with Curt Kobain, Michael Jackson, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Steve Jobs, Whitney Huston, Amy Winehouse and many others, less renowned, but still loved and missed people. So in the virtual sphere, the memory of Toše is still vividly preserved – through the messages of love, of missing, referring to how great a person he was, and through the sharing of his songs. These messages are sometimes very simple and laconic such as “come back”, sometimes they are more elaborate - “Angel, I’ve learnt how to love, how to see good in people, and learnt how to live good. All Macedonia loves you and has shown that to you on the day when we gathered to cry together and to grieve for too early lost lucky star. I will keep forever in my heart this big man. R &P.”⁸

This message is interesting because it resembles traditional lamentation in the way of addressing the dead and the belief that he can receive the message in the world beyond.

But let us concentrate for the moment on the website *Respectance* (www.respectance.org) to get the wider picture of the context in which the memories of Toše Proeski are kept. This website represents a type of memorial⁹ virtual space, where the hypertext creates some kind of contemporary virtual cemetery. First of all, like any graveyard, it is open to everyone – those who are famous together with those who are grieved only by their closest kin and friends, which is obvious from the mottos on the title page:

“Everyone has memories to share.” “Keep them alive forever.”

Basically, entering this site, we enter a huge place through which we may walk - virtually, like in a graveyard. This comparison seems to me important since graveyards represent a public space where people not only mourn and say good bye to their dead but also express their emotions (here I refer to tradition of lamentation extremely important in the Balkan history all up to modern times, and still alive in a rural areas). So, this kind of website, exceeding the physical space of the graveyard, connects people who grieve and people who are mourned in a new way. It also collects the data about someone’s life, so the visitors or the users of the site might (do not have to do it necessarily) fulfill the following data adding this to the obligatory date and place of birth and death: career, childhood, education, family, passions, traveling. It is interesting that anyone can give contribution to this site, making own tributes that other people may join, so here in a way we can see that this site functions also like an obituary in a sense that it may be personalized by anyone, with another hypertextual possibility – being

⁶ <http://www.tose.blogger.index.hr/default.aspx>, 11.11. 2012.

⁷ <http://zauvijekproeski.blogger.ba/>, 11.11. 2012.

⁸ <http://www.respectance.com/todortoseproeski/memorial/show/4qb117cpbba9k>

⁹ At this place I refer to definition of memorial given by James Young who emphasizes that memorial is anything that keeps memory of somebody – memorial places, memorial books etc (Young 2006: 201).

open not only to connect to the other texts, it stays open to inscriptions either inside already created “tributes”, or creation of the new one. This is a very interesting situation, completely in accordance with the spreading of the importance of IT culture in our lives and it will be interesting to see how much “virtual graveyards” will be present in the future.

But let us go to the physical reality and see the afterlife destiny of Toše in Macedonia. As it has already been mentioned in the beginning of this text, the issue of beatification of Toše Proeski has officially been raised in the Vatican, but since the procedure is long, the definite decision still has not been made. Until this process is over, the afterlife cult of Toše Proeski will continue its existence within the popular cult of the saint, at the graveyard in his birthplace Kruševo, where his tomb has been turned into the kind of memorial, resembling a pagan altar. The absence of timely reaction of the institutional response opened up the space for family, friends and fans of the famous singer to create the cult of the saint that has seemed appropriate for them. Apart from the abundance of flowers, hearts (of stone) and numbers of personal messages, there is also a huge picture of Toše Proeski, a small figure with a guitar and a church in the dimension of the grave monument (on a path next to his grave), with the photograph of the singer above the entrance (being shaped in the way that resembles a saint).



<http://members.virtualltourist.com/m/p/m/1d45a7/#review=page3>



So, here we may recognize all the elements important for the construction of the (Christian) saint, above all the creation of the link between humanity and God. Since the Latter Middle ages this link used to be established through the image of a saint (either because of his great deeds, or due to the closeness to God) in the earlier (Christian and pagan) periods the sanctity was usually ascribed to the objects or places - to the graves, the church edifices or other kinds of relics and holy objects (Mulder-Bakker 2002: 9-11). What we have here is a mixture of all of these things. Toše Proeski's grave represents a holy pilgrimage place that he deserved as an extremely religious person (closeness to God), who did a lot of humanitarian work (exemplariness) and this was, due to his popularity as a musician, renowned and recognized in the mass media. The huge popularity achieved during his lifetime continued in his unofficial cult that combines the elements of Christian saint, pagan tradition and the sphere of popular culture where he belonged during his life. Here we may recognize the duplication of the concept that has been recognized by Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker regarding the similarity between saints and pop stars, who both create the image of the idol through the „quality of exemplariness“, (Mulder-Bakker 2002: 10) each in their own sphere, or as in the case of Toše, in both domains at the same time. However, it would be wrong to claim that both roles have contributed the same to his popularity – first of all he was a popular musician, so everything else was inscribed inside this framework – his image of a good person and a generous Christian. That is why it is possible to claim that his cult of the saint has to do more with his popularity in the music industry than in the sphere of humanitarian work within the church shelter. The music industry provided Toše with the status of a star and all his deeds under the magnifying lens are put in this context.

Interesting parallel concerning Toše's death cult that refers exclusively to the “spontaneous” initiative (and not the one moved by the Church) that I have to mention is the Michael Jackson monument in Munich on Promenadeplatz, which was originally constructed for the Medieval composer Orlando de Lassus. Chosen because of the proximity to the hotel (Bayerischer Hof) in which the pop star once stayed, the monument that was not originally devoted to Michael Jackson has been turned into a

place of pilgrimage devoted to Michael Jackson and in a similar way as Toše's grave, became a frequently visited altar with many flowers, pictures, messages, hearts and candles.¹⁰ The parallel that we have here is grounded in the unofficial initiative of the fans, which is their reaction to the absence of the adequate institutional reaction. However, as in the case of the monument to Michael Jackson in Munich, there is the initiative pushed by devoted fan Sandra Mazur, to erect a life-sized bronze statue. Although the cost of one such monument is 70 000 euros, Sandra Mazur claims that a much bigger problem than the money are the city officials who are supposed to allow its building.¹¹

Before I continue with the afterlife destiny of Toše Proeski, it is necessary to discuss the word that I have used in the quotation marks in the beginning of the previous paragraph, and that is "spontaneous", with the purpose to emphasize the problem of the nature of the spontaneity that appears here. As Miroslava Lukić Krstanović emphasizes quoting Jacques Attali, "the music lost its autonomy at the same moment when it became a serial product. Its authentic political dimension melted with the political economy, being subordinated and imposing itself to trade interests and consumers" (Lukić Krstanović 2012, 72; Attali 1983, 150-151). In that sense, we may conclude, that any product of the music industry, including the huge popularity of the pop stars is a part of political economy, which due to its subordination may produce responses that are spontaneous only to a certain extent, and this, in my view, does not end with the death of a pop star. The only meaning in which the epithet spontaneous may be used is the opposition to the official, state response to death of Toše Proeski.

However, the state response to Toše Proeski's death has also been given. Namely in August 2012 Toše Proeski received a huge bronze statue on the Bridge of Art as one of the twenty nine distinguished Macedonian artists - writers, poets, composers. This is a part of a huge national project titled "Macedonia 2014" that includes colossal monuments of Alexander the Great (with a title the Statue of the Horseman¹²) and Philip of Macedonia. This grandiose and expensive project, which connects the Macedonian nation and the State with the ancient Macedonians is undoubtedly the program of the dominant political parties (in this case this is obvious especially because of the fact that citizens actually do not support the project, above all because of its huge costs)¹³, related to the fact that Macedonia is quite a young state. Namely the monuments with their belonging to the public sphere represent one of the ways in which collective memory and national identity are shaped. The term *collective memory* was coined for the first time by Hugo von Hofmanstahl, but only twenty years later Maurice Halbwachs explained it. He refuted the thesis of Freud and Bergson that the memory is individual phenomenon (Brkljačić i Prlenda 2006: 9) and in relation to this, he concluded that the *collective memory* is homogenized by the dominant narratives and power mechanisms (Stevanović 2009: 102; Kirin 2008: 26). So, all the monuments realized and planned within the framework of the project *Skopje 2014* represent people,

¹⁰ The theme of Michael Jackson memorials and his afterlife cult is interesting one and so rich that it might be an issue of a separate paper.

¹¹ <http://www.thelocal.de/society/20100409-26447.html>

¹² The title represents an effort to diminish provocation that this project constantly rises in Greece.

¹³ The pole done by *Rating agency* revealed that 81% of people would like to reduce the money that is spent on these monuments. <http://wild-rooster.com/macedonia-honours-tose-proeski-and-mother-teresa/> 21.11.2012.

chosen as distinguished ones and important in creation of the Macedonian historical and cultural past, and thus the national identity. Toše Proeski was obviously recognized by the state authorities as one such person. Michael Jackson, in spite of his huge popularity could not receive the same treatment, because there was no political or cultural interest in Germany that could have offered him such a place. Although the monuments to pop stars are not rare¹⁴, what is interesting here is that the monument of Toše represents a unique case of a pop star that has received such a remarkable place in the national pantheon. During the last year there, has also been a tendency in the United Kingdom to include popular music in the national ideology, which is not unusual regarding the fact that this country is actually the “cradle” of pop music. This was evident in the openings of the Olympic Games 2012. More recent news, from December 2012 is that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones are suggested among ten celebrities to appear on the 10 pound banknote¹⁵. The decision has to be made by the Central Bank of the United Kingdom. Time will reveal if this is a new trend of popular culture entering national culture, or if these are just isolated cases.

However, Toše Proeski has not only received a bronze statue in the center of Skopje. Also the national museum, A Memorial House Todor Poreski has been opened in 2011 in Kruševo, in area of Gumenja. This museum, built by Syndicate Studio has won the People’s Choice Award at the prestigious World Architecture Festival (WAF) in Barcelona. This award that says a lot about the architectural achievement and the appearance of the building corresponds obviously to the huge efforts from all sides, in this case in the first place of the official authorities¹⁶ to provide different ways of keeping the memory of the famous singer, and – to support the endurance of his cult. But except for the reason of choosing Todor Proeski as one of the important cultural contributors to the Macedonian nation, his memorial house has undoubtedly another importance (closely related to the first one) and that is the enriching of the touristic offer. A year after the opening of the Museum, a monograph about Toše Proeski Memorial House has been published. This publication has been promoted by the minister of culture Elizabeta Kančeska-Milevska, which is another argument that proves that afterlife of Toše Proeski cult has been cherished under the open patronage of the state.

Toše Proeski is not the only pop star who received a memorial museum. The most popular Memorial House and the museum for a singer, built in the place where the star spent his childhood (in Tupelo, Mississippi) is the Memorial foundation of Elvis Presley (which includes the house where the star spent his childhood, the museum, a church and a memorial chapel)¹⁷. So in both cases the sacral aspect of the dead pop-hero

¹⁴ Usually these monuments are built in the homeland of the pop star (without the intention to inscribe in it the national capital), but there are also many exceptions to this rule. One interesting exception is the monument of Bob Marley, constructed in the Banatski Sokolac (Serbia), made by Croatian arthist Davor Dukić in the year of 2008. In Banat there is also the monument to Johnny Weissmuller or Bruce Li in Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina. <http://www.vesti.rs/Vesti/Banatski-Sokolac-dobio-spomenik-Bob-Marlija.html>, 31.12.2012. Such type of monuments should be problematized in some other research.

¹⁵ <http://www.rttnews.com/2029465/beatles-and-rolling-stones-could-end-up-on-british-pound-notes.aspx>, 2.1.2013.

¹⁶ <http://www.worldbuildingsdirectory.com/project.cfm?id=3498>, 31. 12.2012.

¹⁷ <http://themississippilink.com/tag/elvis-presley-memorial-foundation/>, 30. 12. 2012.

cult is related to the church. Another parallel that might be drawn in the destiny of the two pop heroes is the legend that they are actually both still alive. The stories appear in different variants, but basically the common thread is that the stars decided to withdraw from the public life and to live anonymously and secretly. The story about Toše sheds a not very nice light on the singer, and is produced mainly by journalist Zoran Božinovski from Macedonia stating that the singer decided to set up his death (with the help of the Vatican) because of the huge taxes that he did not pay.¹⁸ This pattern about the myth of a faked death is possible to trace also in relation to some other worldwide famous pop stars, like Jim Morrison, Michael Jackson, Kurt Cobain. These myths are always produced with manipulating facts based on many details and statements about some hidden irregularities as a proof of a faked death. In the case of Jim Morrison the story began even before his death, because he was talking about faking his death. In addition to this, no member of his family or the band was seen at the funeral.¹⁹ The main argument for the staged death of Elvis Presley is that his middle name is misspelled on his grave monument²⁰, although there is evidence that he himself changed the way of writing his middle name during his life. As for Michael Jackson and Toše Proeski the main argument is the claim that there are no witnesses who saw their dead bodies – the family of Michael Jackson refused to have an open casket for the memorial service, and nobody in Macedonia saw the dead body of Toše. In both cases the procedure around the dead body was unusual,²¹ claim the producers of these myths. The correspondence in the way in which these stories are constructed is striking and it points to regard and interpret these myths as a unique phenomenon.

We may start this interpretation from the position that all these deaths that we are regarding are deaths of pop heroes and that the hero is regarded as immortal. The word itself originates from the ancient Greek language and in one of its meanings it was used to denote a young warrior who gave his life in some war exploit, at the peak of his youth, beauty and strength, choosing to die young instead of having boring and a long life (Vernant 1991: 55). Like the ancient heroes, the pop heroes also die young (except for Michael Jackson who was not so young any more, but he had an obsession about his youth and he tried to keep young appearance; there is a story that he slept in hyperbaric room to stay young). Anyhow, what Jean Pierre Vernant states about the Greek epic heroes is the following – they die young, at the peak of their glory, obtaining immortality through their death. What we may undoubtedly claim about the pop heroes is that they, like their ancient warrior counterparts, are all male and they gain immortality through their huge, undiminished glory that is immortal, as in the cases of Elvis the Immortal King, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon or Jim Morrison. However, the myth about their immortality obviously in some cases alters and transforms into the myth that actually those heroes have never died. The pattern that we see here is in fact not unusual – if we start from the position of Roland Barthes that the myth is a story that is inscribed into history and defined by it (Bart 1970: 230), we may recognize that all crucial elements of these myths are characteristic for the context of popular culture

¹⁸ <http://www.svet.rs/najnovije-vesti/zoran-bozinovski-tvrdi-vatikan-je-sklonio-toseta>, 31. 12. 2012.

¹⁹ <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=595106>, 2.1.2013.

²⁰ <http://www.webspawn.com/users/elviselvis/>, 2.1.2013. It is Aaron on the grave monument, instead of Aron.

²¹ <http://michaeljacksonnotdead.wordpress.com/>, 2.1.2013. <http://www.svet.rs/najnovije-vesti/zoran-bozinovski-tvrdi-vatikan-je-sklonio-toseta>, 31. 12. 2012.

which is a very important sphere of contemporary everyday life. Furthermore, the reason that appears as a motive of faking death is involvement in some huge money transactions (fraud in the case of Toše, or catching the criminals in the case of Elvis Presley), so we recognize the context of neoliberal capitalism in which money dominates. Another motive that appears in this myth about fake death is escaping the pressure of publicity which is an inseparable part of the pop star destiny. Is it possible to claim that that these myths are actually just myths about immortality developed to the extremity? How long will the cult and the myth about Toše Proeski live – as a Church saint, or as a pagan one, it is yet to be seen. Obviously huge energy of his fans originating from popular culture keeps it alive. Apart from the alive practice of leaving their posts on the web pages and visiting the grave or his Memorial house, also an interesting race is organized every year on the day of the death of Toše Proeski. Namely, on that day sixteen Marathon racers run from Nova Gradiška (a destination of Toše's never performed concert) to Skopje. On that day, all over the cities of the former Yugoslavia a church service is held to preserve the memory of deceased star.²² So, the cult of Toše undoubtedly lives in popular culture among his fans. Also, Toše Proeski is celebrated as a great Macedonian and in this way his cult is also important in the official political sphere and Macedonian collective memory. Obviously, one does not exclude the other.

The main idea of this article was to deal with the issue of afterlife cult of Toše Proeski. As every other expedition into the unknown, this research has opened some other interesting questions such as for example the issue of common characteristics of the afterlife cult of pop heroes, or specific type of immortality myths. These are the issues that I have only tackled, suggesting the possible direction of understanding and interpretation, hoping to devote myself to them more profoundly in some further research.

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²² <http://www.pulsonline.rs/puls-poznatih/17275/pet-godina-kako-andjeo-nije-sa-nama>, 2.1.2013.

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Лада Стевановић

Мит о бесмртности у савременој популарној култури. Студија случаја о Тошету Проеском

У раду се испитује преплитање смрти и идеологије у сфери популарне културе и то на примеру посмртне судбине Тошета Проеског, македонског поп певача чија огромна популарност не јењава ни након његове смрти. Вест о изненадној смрти двадесетогодишње поп звезде експлодирала је у јавности, заузимајући ударни простор свих врста медија. Ауторка се фокусира на све оно што је уследило након овог трагичног догађаја и „медијске узбуне“ која је њиме била изазвана и покушава да одговори на низ питања. На који начин су обликовани његова посмртна популарност и идеје о његовој посмртној егзистенцији? Можемо ли у овом случају да идентификујемо неку врсту култа популарног хероја и да ли је могуће препознати заједничке елементе или чак обрасце на основу којих се одвија посмртна судбина (новорођених) звезда? Да ли је у оваквим случајевима реч о својеврсним митовима о бесмртности? И, да ли се поп звездама подижу споменици или су они резервисани само за националне хероје?

Кључне речи: поп звезда, смрт, херој, култ загробног живота, мит о бесмртности