In the opening scenes of Douglas Sirk's 1955 melodrama All That Heaven Allows (Hunter & Sirk, 1955), the precocious, college-aged daughter of the movie’s heroine describes the ancient Egyptian custom of “walling up the widow alive in the funeral chambers of her dead husband along with his other possessions, the theory being that she was a possession, too.” When she adds that “it doesn’t happen any more,” her widowed mother, played by Jane Wyman, asks wryly, “Doesn’t it?”

As the film depicts, metaphorical walls still circumscribe the cultural and economic spaces inhabited by widows. This occurs in particularly telling ways for those whose late husbands, and/or the manner in which they died, are public and iconic. According to Bird (1992), supermarket tabloids sanitized the image of the late President John F. Kennedy after revelations of his marital infidelity, preferring to render him as the “heroic lover” while intimating that his widow, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, had driven him to it by being an insecure, overly demanding, pill-popping “bitch” (p. 187). A review in The New York Times reproduced popular myth when it suggested that artist–musician Yoko Ono, widow of murdered ex-Beatle John Lennon, had “brainwashed” him into marrying her, thereby “destroying the most popular music group of the century” (Witchell, 1994, p. AE 1). Similarly, conspiracy theorist fans of Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain allege that his death, judged to be a suicide, was actually orchestrated by his widow, actor–musician Courtney Love (Wallace & Halperin, 2004). The “Jersey Girls,” Kristen Breitweiser’s Family Steering Committee of September 11 widows, rallied to pressure the stone-walling George W. Bush administration to authorize a thorough, independent probe of the attacks (see Breitweiser, 2006). Their consequent political conversion was lambasted by the conservative punditry, most infamously by Ann Coulter (2006), who accused them of “enjoying their husbands’ deaths too much” and implied that said husbands would have divorced “these harpies” had they lived (pp. 103, 112).

Less widely circulated but no less meaningful is the case of Russian figure skater Ekaterina “Katia” Gordeeva who, with partner and eventual husband Sergei Grinkov, dominated pairs competition throughout the mid-1980s to mid-1990s, winning Olympic Gold medals in both 1988 and 1994. Then, late in 1995, while the couple
practiced a routine for the professional touring company Stars on Ice, Grinkov suffered a deadly coronary, later found to be the result of a previously undetected congenital abnormality. At the time, he was 28 and she only 24. So defined was Gordeeva by her role as the distaff half of a skating team whose personal journey was largely inseparable from its professional one, that her future options narrowed even as scrutiny over the conduct of her widowhood by the duo’s fans intensified.

What makes Gordeeva’s case especially intriguing is not only her youth at the time of these events but the pair’s evolution athletically, artistically, and personally in light of the Soviet system, transitional glasnost, postcommunism, and, finally, an eventual decision to relocate to the United States. How fans negotiated their and, especially, her gendered meanings in the context of these happenstances and the aftermath of Grinkov’s death, and in terms of the romantic culture of pairs figure skating, is also crucial to consider. Finally, the fact that Gordeeva’s memoir (Gordeeva & Swift, 1996, 1997) and its television adaptation (Gentile & Dustin, 1998) might have served as vessels for fans’ associative meanings should not be overlooked. In this essay, the case is examined from a cultural studies perspective in order to identify markers of patriarchal hegemony that may accompany public widowhood, the recirculation of certain political, romantic, religious, and lifestyle scripts in Western culture, and how meanings associated with skating culture, skating fans, and a figure skating duo coalesced, forming a condition within which opportunistic validation of such scripts might be achieved.

Widowhood, figure skating, and gendered meaning

Although the female black widow spider only rarely devours the male after mating, she nevertheless provides the foundational metaphor for texts and discourses involving femmes fatales who murder their rich husbands, as in the 1987 film aptly named Black Widow (Mark & Rafelson, 1987). On the other hand, scholarly treatments of widows and widowhood range from historical accounts of war widows, to analyses of textual representations, to studies in sociology or social work of economic and other prospects for widows, to anthropological investigations of relevant cultural practices, such as the Hindu ritual of widow burning (see, e.g., Lee, 2006; Panek, 2007; Weinberger-Thomas, Mehlman, & White, 2000).

Academic considerations of public widows are relatively few. Solowiej and Brunell (2003) explored cases of women who stepped in to succeed their late spouses in the U.S. Congress. Pinsdorf (2002) studied widows such as Yoko Ono in their role as “image makers” for their late husbands, arguing that Ono’s particular task was to salvage her own image as well as advance Lennon’s. My previous cultural study of Ono’s meaning for Beatles cyberfans grounds the analysis to be undertaken here (see Scodari, 2007). Following Sandvoss’s (2005) conceptualization of “neutrosemy,” the study argues that fans across a range of media, genres, and texts tend to adopt subjectivities in relation to their object(s) of devotion that reflect more about their own proclivities than about the texts in question. These proclivities direct not only
the interpretation but also the selective invocation of particular texts among a multitudinous array, thus questioning the importance of texts as instigators in the process of signification. Neutrosemic objects of analysis such as “the Beatles,” “figure skating,” or, for that matter, “Gordeeva and Grinkov” do not present clear boundaries within which meaning can be derived but, instead, encompass a multiplicity of texts over an extended period, including those of fans’ own creation. This opens them up to function as repositories for fans’ predispositions and needs. Consequently, I found that Beatles fans picked and chose among voluminous textual matter to justify resenting Yoko Ono for seeming to interfere in the parasocial or parasexual relationship between them and Lennon, a tendency that was also observed in an even earlier investigation of female fans of various science fiction television series who viewed female heroes as hangers-on, competitors, and/or interlopers on masculine terrain (see Scodari, 2003). Similarly, the present essay investigates whether and how conservative fans transferred their espousal of traditional gender roles, piety, childbearing, heterosexual monogamy, and American exceptionalism onto pairs figure skating, Gordeeva and Grinkov’s story, and Gordeeva’s widowhood.

Prior works dealing with gender and the culture of figure skating also inform the investigation. The 1994 incident in which male confederates of American figure skater Tonya Harding assaulted her primary American rival, Nancy Kerrigan, prior to the Olympic Winter Games in Lillehammer, Norway, became a watershed moment in the history of competitive figure skating and its cultural analysis. The following year, two books appeared, each responding to this event in whole or in part. Ryan’s (1995) *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes: The Making and Breaking of Elite Gymnasts and Figure Skaters*, investigates injuries, body image, eating disorders, and other pressures, concluding that the “consumption and disposal” of these girls amounts to “child exploitation” (p. 243). The second, a collection edited by Baughman (1995) entitled *Women on Ice: Feminist Essays on the Tonya Harding/Nancy Kerrigan Spectacle*, offers pieces dealing with class/gender constructions (see, e.g., Flitterman-Lewis, 1995; Stoloff, 1995), the workings of TV news narrative (Swenson, 1995), and “overdetermined femininity” (Feder, 1995), among others. Most provocative is the contribution by Feder, in which she likens the layback spin, a move associated with what is still called the “ladies” event, to a pose often seen in pornography: “Back arched, eyes closed, mouth slightly open, arms extended as for an embrace—in photographs it looks like nothing so much as popular conceptions of female sexual arousal” (p. 30).

Later articles elaborate some of these same issues. Fabos (1999) analyzed representations of class and gender in the Harding/Kerrigan affair, arguing that commentators played up Kerrigan’s work ethic, intact family, and lithe body type in opposition to Harding’s, whereas McGarry (2005) looked at “socially appropriate” femininity, race, and class in Canadian women’s figure skating, claiming, among other things, that the Canadian skating establishment thought it critical that budding female skaters “pass as ladies,” especially in contrast to its perception of American women skaters, with Harding the prevailing stereotype.
Feder’s (1995) controversial comparison between the “overdetermined femininity” of women figure skaters and the images of women in pornography is among the issues debated in Kestnbaum’s (2003) volume, *Culture on Ice: Figure Skating and Cultural Meaning*. Kestnbaum, who had contributed to the Baughman collection (Kestnbaum, 1995), quotes members of the skating community who were put off by Feder’s claims and argues that she neglects the skaters’ “other forms of competence” and intrinsic appreciation of the “aesthetic qualities of their sport” (Kestnbaum, 2003, p. 145). Also included is an analysis of fans, consideration of skating as a signifying system, an exploration of gendered meanings, and especially of the instability of masculinity in the sport, and a chapter exploring the aura of “compulsory mating” inherent in pairs competition. The present essay advances the conversation about gender, pairs skating, and its fans in the context of this and other scholarship.

**Slippery ground: Gordeeva remembers**

A look at Ekatarina Gordeeva’s memoir, *My Sergei: A Love Story* (Gordeeva & Swift, 1996, 1997) and its video adaptation (Gentile & Dustin, 1998), not only helps chronicle her history with Grinkov and its immediate aftermath but also to explore how these actors, apparently unsophisticated in their calculation of the cross-cultural, political dynamics within which they operated, were fodder for opportunistic identification. Engagement with these texts occurs with the understanding that they are secondary to the neutrosemic framework for fan negotiation that “shifts the focal point of communication from the text to the self” (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 834). In fact, when it comes to Gordeeva and Grinkov, there are dozens of Web sites, photos, articles, performances, interviews, and other matter emergent over more than two decades that could be addressed. Nonetheless, exposing avenues for contradictory reading and by which such texts can become convenient receptacles for fans’ essential, self-revelatory values is instructive.

The hardcover version of Gordeeva’s *My Sergei*, authored with the assistance of E. M. Swift, was published in 1996. The paperback, referenced in this essay, appeared in 1997 with the addition of an epilogue. Both versions feature many personal and professional photos. The major U.S. television network CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) aired the television adaptation in 1998, and a home video was in limited release more or less simultaneously, including by mail order advertised during the program.

In analyzing Canadian women’s figure skating, McGarry (2005) observes that “visual spectacles . . . have historically served as important contexts within which notions of national identity and gender intersect” (para. 1). Gordeeva’s story, told in light of profound changes that occurred in her homeland and the world, is ideally positioned to be identified, by those so disposed, as a parable of American exceptionalism through its implication of gender, national culture, political economy, religion, and social mores. According to scholars such as Ross (1991), American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States is unique among nations and a shining beacon to the world, has, among others, a religious component, in which the
United States is viewed as blessed from on high and as an arbiter of Judeo-Christian values, an economic element, which today privileges neo-liberalism, and a social dimension, which considers such aspects as gender, race, ethnicity, and social structure.

Issues of celebrity also emerge in concert with gender as Gordeeva’s story unfolds. McRobbie’s (2000) analysis of Jackie, a British teen girl magazine, is decades old, but the codes of “romantic individualism” it yielded still resonate with conservative, “fairy tale” notions of gender and coupling. In addition to romance, personal/domestic life, and fashion and beauty, McRobbie included a code of pop music, which today converts to a code of popular celebrity. Recent literature on fans and the cult of celebrity, much of it prompted by the outpouring that accompanied Princess Diana’s death, is reviewed and applied in the fan portion of this analysis.

Indeed, an awareness of celebrity permeates the early chapters of Gordeeva’s memoir, when she writes as though Grinkov had been a pop idol she could only dream of having for herself, thereby interpellating those with similar dreams. Although Gordeeva’s life as a world-class pairs skater is also a major topic of the work, pairs skating is so intertwined with romance generally, and in this case with Gordeeva’s personal story, that readers predisposed to championing traditional gender roles are well able to play down the public sphere aspect.

In the book’s preface, Gordeeva sets a context for reading that aligns perfectly with patriarchal understandings of gender roles and coupling:

I always felt Sergei was on a higher level than me, that he was stronger and smarter and more stable than me, and that he would always protect me. Now that he’s gone, I feel vulnerable, unsafe in ways I never felt before . . . . It’s like I was living a fairy tale before, and now I’ve been abandoned in a wild forest. That is what life was like with Sergei: a fairy tale. (p. 5)

Next, she expresses with regret that while Grinkov was “a man first and then a skater,” she was “a skater first, then a woman, then a mother” (p. 5). It’s noteworthy that Gordeeva’s parenthood is prioritized while Grinkov’s is not.

The first two chapters cover Gordeeva’s childhood in Soviet Russia before meeting Grinkov. She reveals that her mother had worked for Tass, the Soviet News Agency, and writes appreciatively of the Soviet system of nurturing young athletes and of watching parades of soldiers marching to Red Square from her family’s Moscow apartment. These reminiscences could be viewed by some as tacit approval of the political culture within which she was raised. However, by the third chapter, which describes Grinkov’s childhood, deficiencies in this culture enter the narrative. In discussing the divorce of Grinkov’s older sister, Gordeeva admits:

Divorce was very common in Russia in the 1980s, and one of the reasons was the lack of apartments. It wasn’t possible just to buy an apartment. You had to go to government officials, tell them you were married and living with your
parents, that your husband was also living with his parents. . . . Then you had to wait until the government gave you one. (p. 37)

A condition in which a husband is kept from establishing dominion over the nuclear family would strike those committed to patriarchal traditions as part and parcel of American exceptionalism to be affirmation of the impoverishment of the Soviet way of life.

The chapter also recounts that Gordeeva admired Grinkov from afar before being assigned as his partner when she was just 11, and that she “always felt very safe in Sergei’s arms” despite the dangerous throws and lifts they practiced (p. 40). She goes on to depict their first big success, winning the 1984 Junior World Championships in Colorado Springs, Colorado, when Grinkov was 17 and she 13. This was their first visit to the United States, and she recalls partaking of commodities not available in Russia. She once again uses the term “fairy tale” to characterize the experience (p. 48), thereby implicitly linking her early impressions of the United States to the “fairy tale” of her romance with Grinkov. At this juncture, however, romance was not yet in bloom. At the Championship banquet for the skaters, she remembers Grinkov spending his time with “the girl ice dancers, all of whom wore beautiful dresses,” and that he paid little attention to her “off the ice,” as she was “very young, both in years and experience” (p. 50). She notes that she became aware of finding him attractive later that winter and bemoans the fact that at the time she had no close girlfriends with whom she could navigate such new feelings. Gordeeva thereby paints a gloomy image of the culture of sport in which she was ensconced—one in which feminine pleasures and camaraderie were scarce. This can be interpreted as pro- or antipatriarchal, anti-Soviet, or ideologically neutral, depending on one’s penchant.

Due to the team’s ability to travel, however, consumption was not a scarce pleasure. In addition to chronicling their unhappy assignment to an abusive coach, the fourth chapter recalls the duo’s journeys to Western Europe, including the shopping opportunities they presented:

Every day we got 20 dollars in living money, and I used it to buy jeans that actually fit me. . . . I could see clearly that life was nicer in every way in the West than it was at home. The streets were cleaner, the food was better, the service was quicker and more friendly. . . . I always brought gum and nice fruits home with me. During the winter it was impossible to get oranges and apples in Moscow. (p. 65)

Here again, the West can be envisioned as a promised land in which the fruits of the duo’s considerable labors could be more easily grasped.

Chapter 5 covers the team’s new lease on life after winning the 1986 World Championships and acquiring a new coach and the “little attentions” Grinkov began to offer (p. 79). Gordeeva informs the reader that she never had “any great designs to capture his affections” (p. 81), claiming a traditionally feminine, passive role in the courtship. Chapter 6 recalls 1988, a year of intense training for the Olympic Winter
Games in Calgary, Canada, a skating mishap and injury that befell Gordeeva, the unreciprocated attentions of a male suitor, and pangs of jealousy felt by Grinkov, some of which might be seen to foreground Gordeeva as an idol in her own right. The Calgary Olympics are chronicled in the seventh chapter, and Gordeeva recalls her dejection at being left behind after the pair’s Gold Medal win as Grinkov went out on the town with his older friends. This theme continues in chapter 8, in which Gordeeva observes:

I was still much younger than everyone else, and when Sergei went out at night with the older skaters . . . he didn’t bring me. They always would go to a bar, and if I were along they’d have problems getting in. It was upsetting, and it made me jealous, but I always understood it. (p. 114)

Despite this, the pair drew closer. Soon, Gordeeva was invited to a banquet hosted by Mikhail Gorbachev, architect of Soviet glasnost, in honor of U.S. President Ronald Reagan, pivotal in cultivating a conception of American exceptionalism embraced by conservatives and believed by them to have been instrumental in ending the Cold War (see Forsythe, 1995, p. 124). Although Gordeeva portrays this event matter-of-factly, and even remembers being “bored” by it (Gordeeva & Swift, 1997, p. 117), conservative readers could regard its mere mention as a hat tip.

Love blossoms in the ninth chapter. The couple’s first kiss prompted a self-effacing response in which Gordeeva asked Grinkov why he chose her despite that she was young and did not have a “beautiful body” (Gordeeva & Swift, 1997, p. 129). He, of course, assured her that this was not the case. Gordeeva describes the consummation of their relationship thusly:

It was very important to Sergei that he not scare me. I had no experience at all with men . . . . He could have said a couple of impatient words, and it would have broken my heart . . . . He made me feel, suddenly, that I was much older now, that I was a woman. (pp. 130–131)

Although the encounter and others that surely followed were premarital and, consequently, in violation of traditional values, the reader also understands that Gordeeva had given herself to her future husband “unspoiled.” The next chapter recounts the pair’s preparation for and victory at the 1990 World Championships and the death of Grinkov’s father of a heart attack.

Whether pairs and ice dance teams are assumed to be romantically linked is discussed in Kestnbaum’s (2003) *Culture on Ice*. Oleg Protopopov of Belousova and Protopopov, the married Russian champions of the 1960s, is quoted as saying: “First of all I see in what we try to do, a man and a woman. These pairs of brother and sister, how can they convey the emotion—the love that exists between man and woman?” (quoted in Kestnbaum, 2003, pp. 112). Kestnbaum admits that in terms of the symmetry expected in pairs skating, “there is no technical reason why most such moves would need to be performed by opposite sexes” (p. 217). However, historically, convenience led married skaters to develop routines together, and this
helped to entrench what Kestnbaum calls the “compulsory mating dance” of pairs skating and ice dance (pp. 215). To a certain extent, this compulsion stands to counter another, that of viewing figure skating as too “feminine” for a “real” man: “[O]nce an activity such as figure skating is defined as ‘feminine,’ for a male to participate it aligns him with the feminine connotations of the activity and a priori removes him from the status of proven masculinity” (p. 184). It can be argued, then, that heterosexual coupling helps to neutralize this effect.1

Gordeeva recalls her baptism into Russian Orthodox Christianity in chapter 11, mentioning that previously such rituals could only occur in secret. But it was 1990 and, thanks to the denouement of Soviet communism, the churches were reopening. The event led her to feel that “something had changed” inside her, too (Gordeeva & Swift, 1997, p. 162). It also introduced her to kindly Father Nikolai, whom she writes would become her spiritual “guardian” (p. 161). A decision by the team to turn professional followed, which at the time meant that they could no longer engage in amateur competition. They agreed to marry soon after. In April 1991, there was a state ceremony followed by a church wedding, at which Father Nikolai presided.

The couple’s life as newlyweds and touring professionals is highlighted in the next chapter, whereas chapter 13, entitled “A Gift,” deals with Gordeeva’s pregnancy. Although most female, world-class skaters defer or delay motherhood, Grinkov and Gordeeva did not practice contraception, as it was proscribed by the Church. Gordeeva considered an abortion, however, and was dissuaded, in part, by Father Nikolai, who told her: “It’s very important that you have this first child, because it’s a gift to you from God” (p. 199). This episode remains open to interpretation, because Gordeeva still exercised a choice to have her child. Abortion was available to her, and she makes no assertion that it should not have been. Yet, conservative receivers would be inclined to construe the passage as privileging a “pro-life” stance. A decision to move to the United States is reported in the following chapter as is the New Jersey birth of daughter Daria on September 11, 1992. A photo of the newborn lying on an American flag appears in this chapter (p. 207). The entire sequence can be negotiated by way of traditional “family” values and thereby stands to fortify any preconceptions that such a couple would seek out the American way of life and want their child to be born and raised accordingly.

The chapters that follow recount the duo’s experiences as professional skaters, both in privately sponsored competitive events and as headliners for Stars on Ice. Gordeeva regrets having had to leave Daria with her mother for much of this time. Then, with an official decision to allow professionals to return for one additional Olympic Games, the pair trained to compete at Lillehammer in 1994.2 Skating under the Russian flag, they won handily. Afterward, the couple moved to Connecticut with Daria and continued to perform and compete until Grinkov’s untimely death the following year. Gordeeva writes: “There was never any question where the burial would be. Sergei had a Russian soul” (p. 297). These invocations of Mother Russia could serve to dispel the idea that Gordeeva and Grinkov had fully embraced the American way of life. Yet, Gordeeva returned to the United States and, several
months later, skated publicly for the first time as a single, capping off a tribute to Grinkov arranged and performed by their skating colleagues. In the epilogue, she announces that her memoir is to be made into a television documentary. 

My Sergei (Gentile & Dustin, 1998) aired on CBS in a 2-hour slot on the evening of February 4, 1998, during a sweeps period in which advertising rates are set. The broadcast heralded the Olympic Winter Games in Nagano, Japan, and promotional spots for this coverage and, especially, for the skating events, were placed during its commercial breaks. The piece opens with two young skaters, masked reenactors representing Gordeeva and Grinkov, gliding gracefully on an icy pond amidst a dreamy blue haze. The two drift apart, and the female skater is left alone and bereft. We then see a woman wake from her sleep with a start. It is Gordeeva, who rises, looks in on her slumbering daughter, and then enters her study to begin writing a memoir in longhand. Her voiceover narration, in stiff Russian accent, does not faithfully reflect the book’s opening as might be expected. An ad for Olympic coverage inserted later in the broadcast, just as the budding romance of Gordeeva and Grinkov is being recounted, mimics the dramatization that begins this scene; the U.S. pairs team, Jenni Meno and Todd Sand, are shot skating in blue cast while an announcer touts them as an “in love,” married couple.

After the teaser, the documentary begins in earnest, with a male narrator chronicking the facts of Grinkov’s death before flashing back to his and Gordeeva’s childhood and subsequent history. Reenactors continue to illustrate aspects of the tale for which there is a lack of documentary footage, as well as the substance of story and personal tidbits, such as the couple’s first kiss, provided via interviews with family, friends, and skating champions such as Kristi Yamaguchi, Scott Hamilton, Viktor Petrenko, and Gordeeva herself.

Gordeeva’s diminutive size becomes more striking in the TV adaptation, especially in relation to Grinkov’s from early in their partnership through their first World Championship, when Gordeeva was just shy of 15. Although this matter is discussed in the book, the TV visuals drive it home. It is noteworthy that equally petite, 15-year-old Tara Lipinski was about to win the “ladies” event at the Nagano Olympics when My Sergei aired. One of the promotional spots seen during the broadcast featured Lipinski and indicated her young age and 4-foot, 10-inch (1.47 m) frame. As Kestnbaum (2003) notes, Lipinski created a stir, intensifying concern about the young age at which female skaters had begun to reach their “peak.” However, not all of it was concern over these girls’ welfare, as is Ryan’s (1995) in her book. Rather it was, as Kestnbaum (2003) suggests, an issue of whether these female athletes would be hegemonically valued for their childlike qualities or their “erotic appeal to a male gaze” (p. 154). That skaters such as Lipinski seemed to disallow the second option irked some critics, such as Simon Barnes of the Times of London, who called her a “circus freak” who was “horrible to watch” despite being “very talented” and “strong minded” (quoted in Kestnbaum, 2003, p. 157). Yet, no such critique had emerged in Gordeeva’s case. Within the romantic milieu of pairs
skating, it may be that a young woman’s autonomy and athleticism appear less challenging of patriarchal norms.

The documentary is faithful in spirit to the book. Some incidents are emphasized, partly determined by which provide better visuals. Major performances, such as both Olympic performances, are shown in their entirety, and there is full or partial footage of other competitive and show performances and practices, including the one during which Grinkov collapsed from the heart attack up to the point he began to feel ill. Gordeeva’s performance at the tribute for Grinkov, included near the end of the video, begins as if she is skating as part of a pair, segues to grief and heartbreak, and ends in triumph, determination, and the trademark element for “ladies” singles—the controversial layback spin. Despite its romantic theme, the performance permits those so inclined to recognize Gordeeva as newly confident and autonomous.

Still, the video omits some politically tinged events and issues featured in the book, such as Gordeeva’s baptism, consideration of an abortion, regret at being apart from Daria for extended periods, and certitude that Grinkov could only be laid to rest in his homeland. Father Nikolai is not identified but is shown officiating at the couple’s wedding and Grinkov’s funeral, during which a grieving Gordeeva makes a sign of the cross. Gordeeva’s parents are seen with Daria in Russia, watching the team skate to victory on TV. Against this, an inordinate number of clips and photos are of Daria with her parents. The hammer and sickle of the Soviet flag serves as a backdrop for personal photos illustrating Gordeeva and Grinkov’s early experiences. Later, once the story follows them to the United States, photos are displayed amidst Old Glory. Like the book, however, the video is open to idiosyncratic, contradictory readings, including one in which Gordeeva and Grinkov are a traditional couple happy to be parents and happier still to conduct their professional and family life in the United States.

**Fans, celebrity, and the “brave young widow”**

In her essay “The Cult of Celebrity,” Rose (1999) avers that “the response to celebrity always harbours a political context,” adding that one critique of the Princess Diana phenomenon was that such deep emotion on account of a mere celebrity precluded the rationality vital to progressive politics (p. 13). No less an arbiter of American political culture than Stephen Colbert, host of the satirical “news” program *The Colbert Report*, would seem to concur that excessive emotion and conservatism go hand in hand. In the persona of a blowhard, right-wing commentator, Colbert pontificated in the show’s debut episode: “I don’t trust books. They’re all fact, no heart. And that’s exactly what’s pulling our country apart today . . . . [W]e are divided between those who think with their head, and those who know with their heart” (Colbert, Karlin, & Stewart, 2005). He went on to introduce the term “truthiness” into the national parlance to label the often conservative tenets that arise not from the intellect but “from the gut.” Barbas (2001) associates conservatism with both affect and the cult of celebrity in her investigation of movie-star fandom.
between the World Wars, arguing that many such fans vociferously “praised their idols for having resisted Hollywood’s corrupt values” (p. 115).

The mourning of Princess Diana, as an outgrowth of a cult of celebrity, may provide other parallels to the present case, which involves fans’ grief over the death of Sergei Grinkov. Rose (1999) contends that a role of public figures such as Diana is to “make you feel you know them, that you have some mysterious but no less powerful link to who they are,” and that this allows one to experience a sense of genuine sorrow on their behalf (p. 13). However, Johnson (1999) alleges that Diana was “the object of many transferred feelings that had little to do with her own life and death” (p. 31). As a team, Gordeeva and Grinkov dealt almost exclusively in a highly subjective form of public expression and related interviews which, necessarily for Anglophone audiences, were brief and unaffected. The mourning of Grinkov, then, is more likely sprung from these fans’ own projections and idiosyncratic readings and/or third-party representations than from the duo’s own public relations efforts.

Kelleher (1999) also observes “rhetorical appropriations of Diana’s death” and that bereaved followers and the media responded with “moralizing discourses . . . against the behaviour of others,” such as the paparazzi and the royals (pp. 79, 83). But since Gordeeva and Grinkov’s union was intact when he passed from natural causes, there were few if any obvious targets for moralizing discourses. These would then have to arise from an even more subjective orientation. According to Turnock (2000), Diana inspired melodramatic identification at the connotative, associative level, as Ang (1985) found to be the case with female fans’ attachment to Sue Ellen, the long suffering, alcoholic wife of J. R. Ewing in the classic soap opera Dallas. Although some critics (see, e.g., Kennedy, 1997) bristle at feminist explanations of the Diana phenomenon, both Ang and Turnock agree that through such melodramatic identification, women who “feel trapped and powerless within society” find acknowledgment of their predicament (Turnock, 2000, p. 43). When the focus of attention is an idolized male, however, and affinity with his female counterpart occurs via her connection to him, emotional identifications are less apt to reflect needs or motives of a feminist stripe.

In fact, in her analysis of figure skating fans, Kestnbaum (2003) reckons that although identification and competence inspire much devotion to figure skating, sexual attraction is even more motivating. A majority of her respondents, most of whom were women, stated that male skaters and the men’s event were the main impetuses for their fandom. As one remarked: “Men’s singles is most exciting to me because of their high technical ability (the fact that many of the male skaters are not hard on the eyes doesn’t hurt either)” (p. 260). For men’s skating to feature homoeroticism, Kestnbaum alleges, “it is necessary to posit a male spectator” (p. 259). But she finds that skating fans are mostly middle class, heterosexual women. Referencing Mayne’s (1995) claim that through their reception of skating, female fans are better able to appreciate the perils of performing femininity, Kestnbaum takes it a step further: “For many women, watching male skaters in the position of being subjected
to the same sorts of judgments further enhances perception that these standards are in fact socially constructed . . . .” (pp. 257–258).

Kestnbaum’s (2003) fan study neglects the possibility that pairs skating offers unique avenues of appeal, although the volume hints at this elsewhere. If pairs skating is a “compulsory mating dance” (p. 215), then fans might not only identify with the male or female partner, or via sexual attraction to either or both, but based on an aura of idealized romance the pair may exude. Fans, then, might be attracted to pairs skating in an unparticular way, construing it connotatively and associatively, as in melodramatic identification. Rather than reacting to the texts it generates in discrete fashion, however, they can derive a generalized “fit” for their worldview and then, selectively, associate it with individuated personae and textual matter. Their allusion to specific textual components is considered in these terms as an outgrowth of a neutrosemic condition.

Internet fan commentary on the Usenet newsgroup rec.skate during Gordeeva and Grinkov’s heyday is illustrative. In response to a 1994 post asking “who’s the best looking?” a fan replied: “I vote for Gordeeva and Grinkov. They are the best looking couple, and when they showed their baby during one of the Olympic spotlight[sic] she was adorable, too. How much cuteness/good looks can you have in one family?” In 1993, another fan commented on married pairs teams: “A husband and wife can demonstrate much more emotion sometimes than a pair who are teamed only in sport (I just finished watching my tape of NBC’s durasoft championship, and loved Gordeeva/Grinkov as usual).” Shortly after Grinkov’s death, similar sentiments, such as the following, were expressed on the newly formed Usenet newsgroup devoted to figure skating, rec.sport.skating.ice.figure (RSSIF):

I would watch skating programs on occasion until the day I saw Gordeeva[a] and Grinkov. They immediately affected me because of the obvious feelings they had for each other. I responded to that big time . . . . The way she looked at him—she truly adored him! Always smiling! I really felt their love. Their artistry on the ice will never be equaled. I send my love, prayers, and thoughts to Katia and her beautiful Daria. (1995)

Gordeeva, of course, would go on with her professional and personal life after Grinkov’s death. In addition to coauthoring My Sergei and contributing to its video version, she signed a long-term contract with Target stores that included the launch of a perfume in her name. She achieved some initial success as a singles skater in professional contests, but it soon became clear that she could not compete with those more schooled in the discipline. Show skating was another matter, and she performed as a single for Stars on Ice until 1999, when a simplified pairs routine with colleague Ilia Kulik was added. Kulik had been the 1998 Olympic gold medal winner in men’s singles and, like Gordeeva, was a transplanted Muscovite. Soon, they became an item. They wed in 2002, a year after their daughter, Elizaveta, was born. In 2006, a fan on a televisionwithoutpity.com forum recalled what transpired online in the course of these events:
[D]id anyone find it sickening how many of Gordeeva’s fans turned against her once she started dating Ilia Kulik? For some reason, many of the core Gordeeva fans (like the ones who were in the G&G forums) were uber-conservative . . . . Many “forums” were shut down because the conversations turned into “you’re going to hell” religious ranting. It was awful, how many of them became “Sergei widows” and obsessed about Gordeeva “betraying” Sergei’s memory by marrying Kulik.

Most English language user forums on sites dedicated to Gordeeva and Grinkov did cease to exist after Grinkov’s death as this poster indicates, but messages on the RSSIF Usenet newsgroup remain to chronicle the unfolding phenomenon he/she describes.  

It becomes possible to see how such discourse both helps erect and exploits neutrosemic, accumulating its own master narrative that opportunistically borrows from an array of particularized texts. Still, it must be noted that Gordeeva’s detractors were by no means a majority of figure skating fans on the Internet but, rather, the most invested faction of those who had been “G&G” enthusiasts. There are certainly fans of skating and G&G whose self-perceptions did not rely for validation on intense involvement in and/or highly selective interpretation of the pair.

Signs of such investment and subjective reading became evident when, nearly a year after Grinkov’s death (1996), fan conversation turned to who might partner Gordeeva in a new pairs team. “I think all this pairing off of Katia going on . . . is heartless,” said one. Another concurred: “Please! Katia has already said she’ll never skate pairs again, and let us remember it hasn’t even been a year since Sergei’s death.” These posts clearly equate pairs skating with romantic coupling, and one alludes to Gordeeva’s own statements, echoed in the epilogue of her book: “[T]he thought of pairs skating with anyone but Sergei does not seem to be an option at this point” (Gordeeva & Swift, 1997, p. 337). Here, Gordeeva does not close the door on such a prospect and may in fact detect that there are more than just her preferences at play. By this time, it was likely clear to her that, given the stance of some of her fans, taking another partner would not be a deft career move. By 1997, there were reports of a romance between Gordeeva and a Russian ballet star, which prompted scattered protestations that enough time had not passed for any such thing to be acceptable.

By early 1998, Gordeeva’s more adamant critics were accusing her of being a mercenary who was happy to be rid of Grinkov:

Katia didn’t “write” a book. She doesn’t have the ability to do so. However, assuming (for the sake of argument) that she did indeed write “My Sergei” for herself—not for profit—then she should have refrained from having it published. The ONLY reason Katia had “My Sergei” published was to take advantage of the market. I still maintain that Katia views Sergei’s death as the best thing that ever happened to her.

Although less invested fans objected that Gordeeva had every right to seek financial security for herself and Daria, the cadre of detractors insisted that she already had
more than enough money to live on. Accordingly, and at about the same time, the "bad mother" critique surfaced: "[I]t's quite an easy choice to make, really. If you care about your child's welfare, you stay home with your child" (1998). Interestingly, such an argument was not raised when Daria's parents plied their art together but only when Gordeeva continued working absent Grinkov and his implicit sanction. Here, moralizing discourses were clearly developing around Gordeeva, emanating from those for whom Grinkov was the true idol.

Others belabored various arguments as to why Gordeeva was "lucky" to have had Grinkov, such as the notion that he was much more attractive than she:

Sergei had a handsome face and body. Katia is a very pretty FACE, period . . . . In her book Katia mentions she could not believe someone as handsome as Sergei who could have any woman with a beautiful face AND body would want her . . . .

Of course, some would argue that Katia has a cute little figure . . . . (1998)

Not only does this post embellish Gordeeva’s comments, but it also suggests that the appeal of Gordeeva and Grinkov for this fan was primarily an attraction to Grinkov and that any positive identification with Gordeeva, or with the romantic aura the pair projected, was lost along with him. Around this time, there were also accusations that Gordeeva had not been properly solicitous of Grinkov's health and was, consequently, complicit in his death.

Assaults on Gordeeva seemed to multiply exponentially. Later in 1998, unsubstantiated rumors circulated that she was having an illicit affair with a married Stars on Ice colleague. When a fan asked whether such a rumor was confirmed, one of those purveying it responded:

If you want Katia to come out and announce it in a press conference . . . then you’ll have to wait until hell freezes over. She’s got that reputation of the brave young widow with the cute-as-pie daughter thing going. She’s got to hold onto those endorsements, you know.

Another declared: “I think Katia should give back to America all of the money she made because of her ‘decent young widow’ status and I am talking millions!” (1998). Here, the fan assumes universal grounds for the appeal of Gordeeva’s story—a particular brand of "decency."

In 1999, when Gordeeva began skating with Kulik, the pairing was unfavorably compared to Gordeeva and Grinkov:

To me, Katia & Ilia’s skating has completely different flavor then [sic] Katia & Sergei’s. Sergei was this big, strong, beautiful man; Katia was a little elf, gazing adoringly into his eyes. It was always innocent and romantic, even after they got married and had Daria. With Ilia, the whole thing seemed so full of lust. All of a sudden Katia turned into this sultry seductive woman.

The discussant not only fixates on Gordeeva’s supposed naiveté and “elfin” appearance in relation to Grinkov but resists viewing her as a mature sexual being. She is
still envisioned as a girl idolizing a pop star, even in her late 20s. This is a twist on the
cult of celebrity, because the fan is dismayed that Gordeeva no longer appears to
stand in for her in revering Grinkov. The fan also assumes that Gordeeva and
Grinkov’s style would not have also matured had he lived. Thus, Gordeeva remains
frozen in time, operating as a symbol of marital fidelity, feminine delicacy, and other
things obviously prized by this fan.

Also in 1999, anticipation of a romance between Gordeeva and Kulik was often
met with convoluted arguments as to why it could never work. In response to
a counterpoint that while Gordeeva was 6 years Kulik’s senior, Grinkov had been
older than Gordeeva, too, an apparently male fan claimed the following:

Women lose their physical sex appeal to men very quickly after their 30s . . .
while men can be physically attractive even after their 50s . . . . This is why it is
more ‘normal’ to have older man-younger woman relation[s] rather than the
reverse.

In the view of some, Gordeeva had already gone too far by daring to pursue her
romantic and professional life without Grinkov, so the prospect of her transgressing
yet another gender-related boundary in a romance with Kulik was even more
upsetting.

By the time Gordeeva’s out-of-wedlock pregnancy became known, any kid gloves
that remained were promptly jettisoned. Gordeeva was labeled “hordeeva” by some
of her accusers and, later, even her new baby could not escape the outrage: “Her last
name will be hordeeva since she is illiagetimate [sic]” (1999).5 After the attacks of
September 11, Gordeeva’s “immorality” was compared to Bin Laden’s, and the “bad
mother” theme emerged anew:

I wouldn’t go as far as he [another poster] does in his descriptive terms but
I am, to say the least, not too enamored with the lifestyle she (Katia) has chosen
to lead . . . . I still do believe we should raise the kids we have . . . . I don’t think
money is the issue—she had plenty of that even before Sergei died . . . . (2001)

Gordeeva continued performing in Stars on Ice along with Kulik but gradually
reduced her participation to a guest-starring role. Meanwhile, teenaged Daria
Grinkova began to compete as a singles skater.

Discussion and conclusion

Ekatarina Gordeeva was abruptly left without her husband and professional partner
in a culture where skating was her only source of support. Although other respon-
sible entities surely saw them as profit-making ventures, Gordeeva’s memoir and its
video version were, from her perspective, likely meant to ameliorate uncertainty
(economic and otherwise) about the future for herself and her child. Unlike Princess
Diana and other foci of cults of celebrity (see Rose, 1999, p. 13), there is little reason
to believe she strategically presented herself in order to milk an audience with
particular expectations. Nor is it probable that she understood the political dynamics, or broader interpretive context, within which her memoirs might be read. Whether she was steered in a certain direction by others involved in these projects is impossible to verify, although the marketability quotient of an old-fashioned, romantic “fairy tale” for a basically traditional, U.S. audience was probably no mystery to them. Regardless, although they allow room for interpretation, the memoirs resonate with a conservative worldview which, it turns out, many of the pair’s avid fans embraced—fans who grew to depend on validation for it from pairs skating generally and via the couple’s performances and personal story as connoted via a bounty of texts. That Gordeeva and Grinkov were tagged by these fans as embodying “family values,” and favoring the United States to a Soviet system they believe was brought down by virtue of American exceptionalism, eventually situated Gordeeva atop a precarious pedestal, vulnerable to being toppled at the least provocation. Ironically, it may have been that very Soviet system of sport that prevented her from having a more normal adolescence, in which other romantic opportunities might have arisen to diminish fans’ perceptions of her “innocence.” As it is, and according to one contrary reading, what did occur seems less a virtuous choice than a product of convenience.

The vocal G&G fans who turned on Gordeeva and mocked her as the “brave young widow” once she began moving on with her life primarily reflect two of the three forms of address discussed by Kestnbaum (2003). Many were clearly attracted to Grinkov and, by the same token, identified with Gordeeva in her role as his “adoring” partner and wife. But if competence was also appealing to this group of fans, it was mostly in terms of the extent to which the pair conveyed a sense of idealized romance through their skating. The love story, partly by animating codes of romantic individualism (McRobbie, 2000), became an avenue of identification. The peculiar assumption that Gordeeva would have no financial worries if she retired from skating to parent her daughter is inexplicable without such motivation, for it was only once she was on her own and, therefore, in shakier financial straits, that such an argument was made. As long as the team was intact—manifesting the sought-after ideals through its performances—it was just fine if Grandma took care of Daria. That some disparaged Gordeeva’s appearance in contrast to Grinkov’s, when more objective eyes might find such a claim tenuous at best, suggests that attraction to Grinkov—the “big, strong, beautiful man”—was crucial to the duo’s appeal. Such fans did not mind and, in fact, may have liked that Grinkov challenged hegemonic norms of masculinity by performing in embellished, tight-fitting clothing, knowing Prokofiev from Tchaikovsky, and a death spiral from side-by-side double axels, as long as his (hetero)sexuality was beyond question. By being part of a male/female team both personally and professionally, Grinkov indulged in both a love of skating and heterosexual attraction without triggering cognitive dissonance and was therefore “safe” to idolize. However, once he was gone, the “Sergei widows,” as Gordeeva’s detractors were labeled by other fans, viewed themselves as stepping into the shoes of his actual widow when, in their estimation, she had stepped out of them.
Theories of celebrity operate rather distinctively in this matter and beyond any correlation between emotional investment in celebrity and conservative ideology. Here, affective identification functioned not merely to reject the reason facilitative of progressive politics but via adherence to a deeply held, traditional worldview. No critique of patriarchal or other hegemonic power relations can be said to have spurred these fans, in contrast to Ang’s (1985) judgment regarding enthusiasts of Dallas’s Sue Ellen, or Turnock’s (2000) appraisal of the Diana outpouring. The idea that conservative devotees would discover “truthiness” in pairs skating is one thing, but since Grinkov was a hub of their attention, and there were no others to hold culpable for his death, Gordeeva became the target of blame through moralizing discourses steeped in patriarchy, whereas in Diana’s case, blame was directed at the establishment.

Unlike many other public widows, such as Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis or Yoko Ono, Gordeeva did not become famous by way of marriage. She is equally responsible for garnering whatever notoriety had been attached to her name as Grinkov. Yet, this did not prevent many of Gordeeva and Grinkov’s fans from considering him their true object of devotion and monitoring and policing her widowhood accordingly. Kestnbaum’s (2003) claim that by witnessing male skaters being judged on their bodies and performance, female fans discern that such criteria are socially constructed for both sexes, is not borne out with the fans studied here. Instead, they held Gordeeva to draconian standards of “proper” femininity in the service of her husband even (and especially) after he died, expecting her to retain the childlike innocence she had as his young partner and an assumed submission to his—but only his—erotic gaze. Both a conservative worldview and dedication to Grinkov deepened their investment, so that his death, and the realization that Gordeeva would, in fact, live on as a separate entity, sent them into a tailspin symptomatic of a circumstance in which vital needs of the self are at stake.

This is neutrosemic at work. It is not, then, a matter of clearly delineated content, such as individual movies, books, or television series that fans engage and interpret. Rather, it is that fans project their most salient worldviews, values, and motivations onto multilevel, neutrosemic texts that enhance the opportunity for selective reading and from which they can more readily derive personal validation. In terms of the public widow, as I discovered in the case of Yoko Ono (see Scodari, 2007), fans make certain claims of ownership with regard to a deceased, iconic male celebrity. This is not the sort of ownership celebrated in germinal treatises on fan culture (see, e.g., Jenkins, 1992), for it does not involve defying corporate interests that govern the production of mass media texts. Instead, it is the fans’ presumed ownership of the personae of actual people, in this case of a late male icon and the woman he has left behind. Consequently, she must not only bear her own loss but also the brunt of theirs. His acolytes scrutinize her activities, expecting her to operate within narrow parameters that keep sacrosanct their original modes of identification. If he is frozen in time, she must be as well—a metaphorical manifestation of the ancient Egyptian ritual of entombing the widow alive along with her departed husband, without whom she is thought to have little import.
Notes

1 The “official” sanction against same-sex pairs competition, the “compulsory mating” aspect of the event, and the supposed, “feminine” character of figure skating were all spoofed in the 2007 film comedy *Blades of Glory* (Ewing, Kramer, Gordon, & Speck, 2007), in which washed-up singles skaters form a male pairs team whose main rivals are a brother and sister who exhibit incestuous overtones.

2 Remarking on the Harding/Kerrigan affair that dominated the pre-Olympic news, Gordeeva observes: “The whole world watches the Olympic Games, waiting for them every 4 years. It is one of the things that is beautiful on this Earth, and to have them spoiled by something so unsportsmanlike was terribly sad” (Gordeeva & Swift, 1997, p. 749).

3 The Usenet newsgroup archive is accessed via http://www.groups.google.com. The institutionally approved protocols for this research require that forum, newsgroup, and bulletin board posters be considered human subjects whose anonymity should be preserved as much as possible. Therefore, this essay cites their postings only by year and location.

4 The remainder of fan postings quoted in this essay are from the Usenet newsgroup RSSIF, accessed via http://www.groups.google.com.

5 It is unclear whether “illiagetimate” is just a crude misspelling or an attempt at a play on words.

References


