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Olivier Driessens

# Theorizing celebrity cultures: Thickenings of media cultures and the role of cultural (working) memory

**Abstract:** The concept of celebrity culture remains remarkably undertheorized in the literature, and it is precisely this gap that this article aims to begin filling in. Starting with media culture definitions, celebrity culture is conceptualized as collections of sense-making practices whose main resources of meaning are celebrity. Consequently, celebrity cultures are necessarily plural. This approach enables us to focus on the spatial differentiation between (sub)national celebrity cultures, for which the Flemish case is taken as a central example. We gain a better understanding of this differentiation by adopting a translocal frame on culture and by focusing on the construction of celebrity cultures through the ‘us and them’ binary and communities. Finally, it is also suggested that what is termed cultural working memory improves our understanding of the remembering and forgetting of actual celebrities, as opposed to more historical figures captured by concepts such as cultural memory.

**Keywords:** celebrity culture, definition, space, memory, Flanders

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## 1 Introduction

“Today we live in a celebrity culture”, wrote Penfold (2004, p. 289), where “images of stars, people ‘famous for being famous’, are circulated and consumed daily across the world”. On a similar note, Marshall (2006, p. 6; original emphasis) argued that “[a]s phenomena, celebrities intersect with a remarkable array of political, cultural, and economic activities to a threshold point that it is worth identifying the operation of a *celebrity culture* embedded in national and transnational cultures”. These quotes are exemplary for a view shared

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among many authors within celebrity studies that the ubiquity of celebrity in our daily lives and in so many societal spheres is sufficient reason to accept the existence of a celebrity culture.

However, notwithstanding its centrality and importance, most scholars seem to hold an implicit understanding of the concept of celebrity culture, and only very few explicit definitions have been suggested to date. Is a celebrity culture limited to circulating images of stars and particular celebrities with mere “attributed celebrity status” (Rojek, 2001), as Penfold (2004) suggested? Or should we understand it, as Marshall (2006) would suggest, more broadly as a culture that is permeated by celebrity, where social life and many social spheres and activities outside entertainment, media, and sports are “celebritized” (Driessens, 2013b; Van Krieken, 2012)?

Second, and importantly, in the literature we can also find quite different views on the scale of celebrity culture. For example, in the first quote, Penfold (2004) presented celebrity culture as a worldwide phenomenon, as people all around the globe are thought to consume celebrity. Rojek (2012, p. 173) supported this view by claiming that “[t]oday celebrity culture is global and ecumenical. National traditions are not necessarily privileged. Recognition of glamour and achievement is drawn from around the world”. In analyzing sports stars, Wong and Trumper (2002, p. 182) argued that celebrities do not belong to a particular territory: All that matters is their mediation, which turns them into “metaphors for globalization” (Cashmore, 2006, p. 241). Conversely, other authors focused attention on cultural diversity and regional differences, for example: “Celebrity is recognised to be a global, international, yet also often culturally ‘local’ phenomenon which produces modes of representation that can be felt as empowering, disingenuous and impossible to attain” (Holmes and Redmond, 2010, p. 7). We can also think of the abundance of celebrities whose fame does not extend further than the limits of their particular local media-scapes, or also the fairly limited number of celebrities who might be famous on a truly global scale.

After defining celebrity culture, I will focus predominantly on this last theme, on the geography and the culture-specificity of (sub)national celebrity cultures. This is important because it shows us how celebrity cultures actually operate, what makes them potentially different from one another, and how they can be mutually related. My analysis will be built around the celebrity cultures in Flanders, the Belgian Dutch-speaking region with approximately six million inhabitants. Flanders has its own distinct media and celebrity industry. The Flemish case is particularly interesting because it exemplifies those celebrity cultures that use a specific label to denote their domestic celebrities, which can be seen as a strong case of identity politics. In Flanders, for instance, local

celebrities are labelled ‘*Bekende Vlamingen*’ (famous Flemings), which is commonly abbreviated as ‘*BVs*’ in daily speech and writing. Similarly, in the Netherlands, domestic celebrities are labeled ‘*Bekende Nederlanders*’ or ‘*BN’ers*’ (famous Dutch); in the French speaking region of Belgium, Wallonia, there are ‘*Wallons Connus*’ (famous Walloons). In many countries, people and the press use terms derived from the Latin roots ‘*celebritas*’ and ‘*famosus*’ – such as in the Anglophone world ‘*celebrity*’ and ‘*the (rich and) famous*’ or in the Spanish-speaking countries ‘*celebridades*’ and ‘*famosos*’ – without differentiating between domestic and non-domestic celebrities. A third variant can be found in those media cultures where they import labels from other languages to refer to both domestic and non-domestic celebrities. For instance, in Germany a common denominator is ‘*Stars*’, while in France they speak of ‘*people*’ (next to ‘*célébrité*’) and processes such as “peopolisation” (Dakhli, 2008) as an alternative to celebritization.

Interestingly, the concept of *Bekende Vlaming* or BV is actually quite recent. It was only after the first commercial television broadcaster VTM started in 1989, which resulted in a huge increase in the number of available television personalities and celebrities, that journalist Alain Grootaers came up with the label BV to describe this group of celebrities (Kruismans and Perceval, 2007, pp. 15–16; Van Gestel and De Meyer, 2002, p. 37). In this sense, the BV-label can function as a token of identification and power: To be called a BV projects a certain status position, subjectivity, but also privileges and expectations on an individual. However, since the advent of reality TV, the BV label appears to be charged with a stronger negative connotation (Driessens, 2013c).

Here, the BV label and the Flemish celebrity culture will be taken as the central example to develop the concept of celebrity culture from within social theory. Starting from definitions of media cultures, celebrity cultures will be conceptualized and then further analyzed by looking specifically at their differentiation into (sub)national celebrity cultures, such as the Flemish. Central in this discussion will be how these (sub)national celebrity cultures are given sense to through the ‘us and them’ binary and result in communities. This also suggests that the concept of memory could be useful here, since it can explain the staying power of certain celebrities, whereas others are quickly forgotten.

## 2 Celebrity culture

As with all kinds of culture, celebrity culture has also proven difficult to define. In the literature, however, we find several approaches and descriptions of it.

Some scholars described celebrity culture tautologically as “a culture in which fame is central”, one that is driven by the media (Van den Bulck and Tambuyzer, 2008, p. 14); whereas others stressed its economic and capitalist dimensions, for they argued that celebrity culture is essentially about celebrities promoting commodities as well as selling themselves as a commodity (e.g., Rojek, 2001, p. 14). Or as Cashmore (2006) vividly phrased it:

We have to examine celebrity culture and consumer society as a tennis fan watches a match: constantly switching focus from one to the other. One can't exist without the other any more than a tennis player can play against herself (p. 13).

A few authors have used metaphors to explain celebrity culture. While Van Krieken (2012) compared celebrity culture with court society, Rojek (2001) added that celebrity culture has religious-like dimensions, as fans idolize their heroes in a way comparable to religious worship. Other scholars argued that celebrity culture is governed by a “celebrity logic” (Gamson, 1994; van Krieken, 2012), although it has not yet been made clear exactly what this logic is or how this celebrity logic ‘colonizes’ other social fields, such as politics. This raises problems of singularity (is there only one celebrity logic?), linearity, or even causality, similar to the ‘media logic’ concept in the discussion on mediatization (Couldry, 2008; Hepp, 2012).

Next, as mentioned in the introduction when referring to Marshall (2006), a view that often returns (see also Evans, 2005, p. 49; Gabler, 1998) emphasizes that celebrity is now “so central to everyday life that it warrants placing in a field of reference that expresses that centrality in terms of a fame *culture*” (Redmond, 2006, p. 35; original emphasis). In this respect, celebrity is seen as a central presentational register (Marshall, 2010), as beneficial to social cohesion through para-social relationships (Rojek, 2001), and as a discursive regime that influences identity and subjectivity, especially in meritocratic terms (Marshall, 1997). In other words, what is typical about modern celebrity culture is its pervasiveness and its integration in our everyday lives (Turner, 2004, pp. 14–20). These claims on celebrity’s centrality remind us of what Couldry (2003) termed the ‘myth of the mediated center’: the myth that the media are the gatekeepers to an imagined social center, of which celebrities are an important element, and is thereby distinguished from ‘non-media’ or ‘ordinary’ people.

Finally, Epstein (2005) further developed the argument on celebrity’s pervasiveness as a criterion to speak of celebrity cultures by looking at what he considered to be three constituting elements of cultures: A culture should have institutions, embody certain values, and revolve around hypes. Celebrity culture’s institutions, according to Epstein, are the promotional industries and media outlets, such as popular talk shows, gossip magazines, but also the bou-

levard sections in quality newspapers. The values in celebrity culture center around publicity, the urge to be visible and promoted. This is accompanied by certain hypes that bring certain celebrities into the limelight, whilst others live in their shadow. According to Epstein (2005) these differences can manifest themselves in hierarchies such as star, superstar, and icon.

To conclude this overview, while the discussed approaches and descriptions of celebrity culture provide us with crucial hints and all point to essential characteristics to understand celebrity culture, they do not offer us the necessary conceptual tools to grasp their spatial dimension, specifically their spatial differentiation. Therefore, I will propose a different definition of celebrity cultures, starting from definitions of media cultures.

## 2.1 Defining media cultures

A good starting point to understand media cultures, as I suggest, is the combined work of Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (Couldry, 2012; Couldry and Hepp, 2012; Hepp, 2012; Hepp and Couldry, 2009), wherein they offer very detailed and useful theoretical analyses of media cultures. In reviewing the extant literature on media cultures, Couldry (2012) observed similar problems as we just did concerning celebrity culture:

The concept of ‘media culture’ has until recently been used either as an untheorized descriptive term (to capture the way media somehow ‘feel’ different in the USA, say, from France or Japan), or to capture interpretative generalities about the flow and style of media products at particular times and places (p. 159).

Instead, Couldry (2012, p. 159; original emphasis) defined a culture “*not* [as] a bounded or spatially bordered culture but [as] *any* way in which everyday practices of sense-making hang together”. Two points in this definition need further clarification. First, Couldry’s understanding of sense-making is rooted more in practice theory (Couldry, 2012; Schatzki, 1996) and less in phenomenology, which focuses on experiential (and sensorial) sense-making within life-worlds. Second, what does it mean that a culture is not bounded or spatially bordered? To answer this question, Couldry and Hepp drew on Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s (1995) work in which he differentiated between territorial and translocal frames to understand cultures. Territorial frames assume that culture is anchored in locales and regions, or in nation states – in other words, that a culture belongs to a social group or society. A translocal understanding of culture focuses not on locales and nations, but instead on networks, crossroads, interstices, diasporas, and migrations. However, a “translocal culture is not without place (...),

but it involves an *outward-looking* sense of place, whereas [the territorial frame] is based on an *inward-looking* sense of place” (Nederveen Pieterse, 1995, p. 61; original emphasis). Another important point is that a differentiation can be made between static and fluid views on relations among cultures. The former implies that cultures “retain their separateness in interaction” (Nederveen Pieterse, 1995, p. 61), which results in a global mosaic of cultures, while the latter assumes that cultures interpenetrate, in line with cultural flows in space. As such, we could think of the local as a “world space” (Balibar, 1991, p. 10), or as a manifestation of the global at the micro-level.

Following this, Couldry (2012, p. 159) defined media culture as “collections of sense-making practices whose main resources of meaning are media”. This sense-making is not restricted to making sense of the media, but should rather be understood as “ways of making sense of the world that work primarily *through*, or in reliance on, media” (Couldry, 2012, p. 160; original emphasis). Hepp (2012) extended this line of argument and cogently explained that media culture should be understood as synonymous to mediatized culture. In Hepp’s (2012, p. 70; emphasis removed) words: “Media cultures are cultures whose primary meaning resources are mediated through technical communication media, and which are ‘moulded’ by these processes in specifically different ways”. This definition is very similar to Couldry’s definition quoted above, but adds a component of change, something which is central in the notion of mediatization, understood here as the long-term process of co-articulation of media-communicative change and socio-cultural change (Hepp, 2012).

Media cultures are thus seen as translocal phenomena, for a territorial approach is entangled in “container-thinking of nation states that is not appropriate in times of globalization” (Hepp and Couldry, 2009, p. 10). Media cultures are now built around contents freely floating in and out of different locales (Couldry, 2012, p. 161). This does not mean that media cultures are purely abstract and inconsistent entities; on the contrary, we should see them as “a kind of ‘thickening’ of translocal processes for the articulation of meaning” (Hepp and Couldry [2009, p. 10] here used Löfgren’s terminology). While these translocal processes are “articulated through ‘disembedded’ communicative processes” (Hepp and Couldry, 2009, p. 9), they are still somewhat specific depending on the locale (Couldry, 2012, p. 161).

This leads us to the question of how media cultures are differentiated from each other. Without neglecting the importance of national borders (given the fact that media institutions and infrastructures are sometimes still delineated by territorial limits), territory is not a good criterion for distinguishing between media cultures (Couldry, 2012, p. 161). One way to look at media cultures could be by variations that arise through socio-economic differences, for example

(Couldry, 2012, p. 162), or more generally, when the members of a media culture “are likely to recognize its distinctiveness, its way of ‘hanging together’” (Couldry, 2012, p. 159). This is what Hepp (2012) termed “communitization”, understood as the process of community building. This implies that individuals can belong to several media cultures at the same time. Taking Flanders as an example, it could be said that related to this politico-geographic space, several media cultures can be observed, many of them not strictly linked or restricted to this territory. To mention just a few: the (online) gaming culture, which has an explicit translocal dimension, the blogosphere, or the media culture of soap fans. In this last instance, media culture is largely delineated by language and (sub)national borders, but even then, given transnational communication flows, migration, or diasporas, these delineations can never be strict or absolute.

## 2.2 From media cultures to celebrity cultures

Having discussed the state of the literature, how can we conceptualize celebrity cultures based on the approach outlined above on media cultures? Does it suffice to replace ‘media’ by ‘celebrity’ in Couldry’s (2012) definition of media cultures, defining celebrity cultures as collections of sense-making practices whose main resources of meaning are celebrity? Although this transposition seems quite simplistic, I would argue that it allows us to best theoretically and empirically understand what celebrity cultures are about. It is not only about the collective of specific celebrities themselves, but also about the industry that produces them and the different commodities built around them that people consume, about the different meanings attached to celebrities, and about what people do and say in relation to celebrity.

In contrast with some of the approaches discussed above, celebrity cultures should certainly be understood as a plural and not as a monolithic global phenomenon. Indeed, the different media cultures crossing different spaces also generate their own celebrities and thus correspond to certain celebrity cultures. This important point needs further clarification. First, it implies a strong relationship between media cultures and celebrity cultures. On the one hand, celebrity cultures can be seen as a specific kind of thickening of media cultures; on the other, celebrities are conceived as individuals with a certain amount of “celebrity capital” (Driessens, 2013a), or accumulated media visibility, which results from recurrent media representations. In other words, the circulation of media representations of individuals in media can render them famous (instantaneously or slowly, for a shorter or a longer period of time) and recognizable



for certain audiences. Second, even though certain media cultures consist of niche audiences built around specialized and niche media outlets, it would be a mistake to limit our conception of celebrity cultures' audiences to fan communities (Busse and Gray, 2011), thereby excluding other media consumers who may indeed be less inclined or even indifferent to (certain) celebrities. Third, just as media cultures are open and leaking, celebrity cultures are open and leaking. Certain "niche celebrities" (Giles, 2000, p. 5; Negra, 2005) and "subcultural celebrities" (Hills, 2006), or individuals who are relatively unknown to the wider public but well-known within certain taste or fan cultures, for example B-movie actors and cult-TV stars, can of course also circulate in other, possibly more mainstream, celebrity cultures. A possibility could be when these lesser-known people and their lives are given a wider audience through increased media attention, for instance when less mediatized sports, such as hockey, are suddenly thrust into the center of attention during Olympic Games, or when a previously 'niche celebrity' is awarded a major international prize and subsequently makes headlines.

Following Epstein's (2005) suggestion outlined above, are hierarchies an essential characteristic of celebrity cultures? I would argue that these hierarchies are not necessarily defining, but indicative of the variable range and depth of media flows, thickened as media cultures and celebrity cultures. Neil Gabler (1998, p. 160) ironically summarized this as following: "In the life movie all celebrities are equal, but some celebrities are more equal than others". One way to look at this is to assess celebrity cultures according to the media platforms and outlets that support them, differentiating between mass and niche media outlets. For example, in Flanders, it could be said that a dominant celebrity culture is one that is centered around the most popular gossip magazines such as *Dag Allemaal* and *Story*, which report on the lives of local (and international) television personalities, musicians, sports stars, movie actors, but also certain politicians and chefs. We could assume then that these major gossip magazines are among the agenda-setters for celebrity news, together with certain radio programs, tabloids, and blogs perhaps, although this agenda-setting needs further empirical analysis.

Another way to look at celebrities' stratification is to focus on the use of common categories ranging from A-list celebrities to Z-list celebrities. The A-list is populated by the top layer of celebrity cultures, such as Hollywood stars and other celebrities with a far-reaching international appeal and recognizability. At the lower end, in the Z-list, are the "scum-of-the-earth celebrities who populate the reality shows" (Connor, 2010, p. 227). Although the value of this categorization is relative and unstable, it does tell us something about the di-

versification of celebrity cultures, also in terms of the global versus the local. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

### 3 (Sub)national celebrity cultures

Is the notion of ‘(sub)national celebrity cultures’ unproblematic, in the sense that it is contradictory to the above-presented definition of celebrity cultures as being essentially translocal and not territorial? Does it make sense then to speak of ‘(sub)national celebrity cultures’? At first glance, it may seem a contradiction in terms, but this is obviously not the case; as has been argued, translocal cultures are not necessarily without place, they only imply an outward-looking sense of place. Second, we must not forget that media cultures are embedded in a material geography, since through their infrastructures and institutions they are anchored in specific territorial and/or linguistic spaces. This is certainly the case for media cultures and celebrity cultures in Flanders, where the main language is Dutch, a language also spoken in The Netherlands, but not in its other neighboring countries (France, Germany, and Luxembourg) and regions (Wallonia). Concerning the institutions and infrastructures, it could be noted that Flanders is densely cabled, that a strong public broadcast (VRT), several Flemish commercial broadcasters (e.g., VMMa) and media conglomerates (e.g., *De Persgroep*), but also foreign media companies (e.g., *Sanoma*) are operative in this space. Third, we could see these (sub)national celebrity cultures as ‘thickenings’ of translocal processes and media flows in a certain geographical space, in this case, Flanders. Still, given global communication flows and the Internet, for example, this is only relative, and refers back to Balibar’s (1991) concept of the “world space” mentioned earlier.

Given this specific account of (sub)national celebrity cultures as both material and symbolic (Morley, 2009), as being translocal as well as embedded in certain places, the next step is to analyze how we can understand the Flemish celebrity cultures, or theoretically discern what is included and what is not, what makes them specific compared with other celebrity cultures. These issues pose serious challenges, challenges that may be almost impossible to really overcome. For instance, given the multitude and variability of translocal media flows, or the constant creation of new celebrities and their fluctuating status positions, how could we precisely delineate what Flemish celebrity cultures are? And how do we empirically determine the point when one becomes famous, when the exact media threshold has been met to be called a celebrity?

These fundamental problems notwithstanding, I will address two main routes that could improve our understanding of what a (sub)national celebrity

culture is – here the Flemish celebrity culture. (Sub)national celebrity cultures are understood as the collection of dominant mass-mediated celebrity culture, in addition to several niche and subcultural celebrity cultures, organized around niche media and specific interests and groups of people. The first route looks at these (sub)national celebrity cultures as made sense of through an ‘us and them’ binary, but, importantly, without neglecting its material basis and geography. The second route focuses on the importance of communities and leads to the suggestion that perhaps the notion of ‘memory’ could also be productive in thinking about how (sub)national celebrity cultures can be demarcated.

### 3.1 Binary opposition

(Sub)national celebrity cultures can be seen as a binary construction of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. In the case of the Flemish celebrity cultures, this ‘them’ is two-fold: On the one hand, there are international or foreign celebrities and celebrity cultures; on the other, Flemish can also serve as a differentiation to both the other Belgian region Wallonia and the federal state of Belgium. In other words, people’s sense-making practices relate to blurred thickenings at different levels (from the transnational and more national to the regional and local level).

First, Flemish celebrity cultures are made sense of in opposition to international celebrity cultures, with the American (especially Hollywood) and British as leading examples. In comparison, Flemish celebrity cultures are understood to be small-scale and less intense. They are at times less professional, relying on a celebrity industry that is not as developed or mature, with a celebrity press that does not push the limits as far as the paparazzi, certain tabloids and gossip blogs do in the US or UK (Fairclough, 2012; McNamara, 2009; Petersen, 2011). The appeal and recognizability of Flemish celebrities also does not stretch very far and is generally restricted to the Flemish territorial space (see below), in contrast to many Anglophone celebrities. Taken together, “[t]he representation of the lives and doings of the local celebrities and of the lives and wrongdoings of the global celebrities differ considerably” (Luthar, 2006, p. 160), which thus creates a symbolic border between domestic and foreign celebrities. To give one example, in local Flemish productions such as the docusoap *The Pfaffs*, the ordinariness and simplicity of the celebrity family is accentuated, whereas its American counterpart, *The Osbournes*, builds on American myths and values and is more extraordinary (Dhoest, 2005).

Second, Flemish celebrity cultures are, to a certain extent, also constructed and reconstructed against the French-speaking Wallonia and the federal consti-

tution of Belgium. This is not surprising given the historical and on-going regionalization process in Belgium, which has resulted in a federal country where the regions have gained more political sovereignty over the years. In that sense, it is important to highlight that celebrities (including heroes) can serve nationalist purposes, that is, they can embody or symbolize emotional attachments to a nation. Henderson (2005, p. 38), for example, remarked that heroes, such as George Washington, had been used to increase the historical legitimacy of the newly born US nation. A more recent example is Steve Irwin, a television wildlife expert, who stood as a symbol for the average Australian and who received a public funeral and praise by the then Prime Minister, John Howard (Bennett, 2011, p. 147). In other cases, celebrities may also represent or enact a particular reading of a nation's history and culture. Alan Titchmarsh's gardening program on BBC, for instance, has been shown to represent a particular version of 'Britishness' that promotes traditional values against openness for other cultural or ethnic influences (Bennett, 2011, pp. 160–167). In general, celebrities can be seen to advance national sentiments and identifications, they "elaborate nations and national identities" (Goldsmith, 2009, p. 22) – or, reformulated more in terms of a translocal instead of a territorial frame: Celebrities can orientate people's sense-making practices toward certain thickenings of culture.

Returning to the Belgian case, we can observe that the labeling of individuals as famous Flemings or Walloons is particularly a domestic issue. Outside of Belgium, these subtle differentiations are hardly ever made and celebrities are generally labeled as famous Belgians. What needs closer empirical scrutiny in this context is which labels are used in the press of a specific region in Belgium for denoting celebrities from other regions. Are Walloon celebrities, for instance, called famous Belgians as an act of recuperation or an attempt at identification in the Flemish discourse? And how do the press and people deal with famous people from the bilingual region of the Brussels capital, such as cycling champion Eddy Merckx or soccer player Vincent Kompany, who are neither Flemish nor Walloon?

Third, after discussing the two constituting outsides of Flemish celebrity cultures, let us move on to the 'us' in the 'us and them' binary, specifically how this 'us' should be determined. A relatively easy answer to this would follow from a territorial understanding of culture, namely 'those Flemings or inhabitants of Flanders who are famous in a certain way in a certain field among a certain group of people'. A specific subcategory of these national or local celebrities has been termed "localebrities" by McElroy and Williams (2011, p. 197). They are "figures who are known only to those within a very specific geographical national or local area". Their media visibility is quite limited and

remains often strictly local (Ferris, 2010). Yet, the concept of localebrity stands for a specific subcategory since its definition is mainly rooted in reality television, and especially because the authors depart from the Welsh case, which seems underrepresented on television in the UK. The Flemish case is very different from the Welsh case since it has a strong media culture of its own and a public broadcaster (VRT), unlike BBC Wales, which is part of a larger broadcasting company.

However, rather than following this territorial approach, the translocal understanding of culture endorsed in this article steps away from the idea that a culture coincides with a particular nation or social group. Conversely, it focuses on networks, crossroads, and connectivity. As a general but broad rule, it could be said then that Flemish celebrity cultures consist of those famous individuals who circulate in Flemish media cultures and who appear especially in Flemish-produced media content. Although this rule remains rather vague, the openness is necessary to include not only those famous inhabitants of Flanders (as the territorial frame on culture would suggest), but also those living abroad but who are still, for some reason, considered to be a BV. An example is Astrid Bryan, a young woman originally from the Flemish city of Antwerp, who has been living in Hollywood for a long time. She became famous through her participation in a docusoap on Flemish women living in Hollywood, broadcast in 2010 by the Belgium-based channel VTM. Due to her huge popularity, she was given her own docusoap the following year by the competing broadcaster VijfTV, entitled “Astrid in Wonderland”, which is still running today. Another advantage of this rule is that it excludes those famous Flemings who are perhaps famous abroad but not in Flanders itself. This happens sometimes to musicians, for example, to the acid house band *Lords of Acid* (or Maurice Engelen), who played to sold-out venues in the US but only later received some recognition in Belgium even though they are Belgian-born and -based. Finally, Flemish celebrity cultures are about famous people who appear especially in media content such as television programs, news articles, radio shows, which has a manifest connection with Flanders or Belgian(-based) media, and whose main language is Dutch. This is because the Flemish media and cultural space is, to a large extent, also intersected by internationally produced media content and transcultural media flows, for instance, from Hollywood. These obviously have little to do with Flemish celebrity cultures, hence the criterion that there should be at least a link with content produced by individuals, organizations, companies or industries who have a ‘territorial’ or ‘ethnic’ link with Flanders. Yet, this criterion cannot be absolute, as a recent example will show: In the Flemish press, there has been a lot of buzz about Flemish television presenter Jan Leyers because he had been invited to host the highly reputed talk show *Zomergasten*

at the Dutch public broadcaster VPRO, which is also quite popular in Belgium. In other words, it could be said that the visibility of Jan Leyers on Dutch television contributed to his celebrity status in Flemish celebrity culture. Generally, because of the very rich empirical complexity behind the different criteria I have mentioned, the rule suggested here is certainly not without flaws or exceptions, but should be seen as a middle ground solution to capture the large majority of cases to which it does apply.

### 3.2 Communities and remembering

Following Couldry's (2012) suggestion that media cultures can be distinguished on the basis of the recognition of their distinctiveness by the members of certain media cultures, we could extend this argument to celebrity cultures as well. This would mean that an aspect of the thickenings of celebrity cultures are communities formed around celebrity to which people feel connected and give sense in comparison with other communities (see also Hepp, 2012). For example, based on interviews with readers of gossip magazines, Hermes (1995, pp. 118–142) argued that communities are formed around gossip. For some readers, celebrities were part of their extended family and they provoked feelings of belonging and caring.

There is also another way to look at Flemish celebrity cultures beyond being centered around communities, but as centered around audiences created by the media. Celebrities are not only an effect of high visibility and their recurrent circulation in the media; several of them are also intentionally constructed and manufactured as an audience-gathering mechanism (Franck and Nüesch, 2007). For instance, in the very intense and highly commercialized Japanese media and celebrity cultures, idols (or industrially manufactured and intensely promoted singers, media personalities and models) “are produced and packaged to maximize consumption” (Galbraith and Karlin, 2012, p. 2).

Importantly, the supply of celebrities that audiences can consume and possibly identify with is constantly changing. There is a group of celebrities that maintains longer careers and succeeds in keeping their fame at a high level for a longer period of time, even after having died (e.g., Elvis Presley or Princess Diana), but most celebrities just come and go. Put differently, there is a process of individual and collective remembering and forgetting of celebrities, as if celebrity is at the intersection of presence and absence. This brings us to the role of memory in understanding celebrity cultures and their differentiation, also in terms of space.

The field of memory studies is without question a booming field, but a difficulty is that along the way of its growth, the meaning of memory has

stretched beyond limits according to Berliner (2005). He gives the example of social memory, which has been explained as the way culture is moving from one generation to the next. Yet, in this way, memory becomes conceptually indistinct from and intertwined with culture itself. In addition to social memory, there is a rich diversity of memory derivatives, such as collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992), or communicative and cultural memory (Assmann, 1995). What is central to understanding memory is that it has been strongly and exclusively linked to the past, or how the accumulated past is reproduced and lived in the present (Berliner, 2005).

As a consequence, the concept of memory as it stands offers only a partial solution to theorize the continual process of the remembering and forgetting of celebrities by communities related to celebrity cultures. Assmann's (1995, p. 127) concept of "communicative memory", for instance, is limited to those (individual) memories that are shared in a disorganized way and interpersonally in a social group through everyday communication, with a time span of 80 to 100 years. Where this communicative memory ends, "cultural memory" begins; it contains objectified information about the past and covers a much longer history than communicative memory, for example, as stored in archives. Applied to celebrity cultures, communicative memory could correspond with shared personal memories about earlier movie stars (see Kuhn, 2002; Stacey, 1994) or the consumption of celebrity news stories during childhood, for instance, whereas cultural memory could include information about famous, great or notorious men and women such as Napoleon, Mozart, Queen Victoria, Marie Curie, or Jeanne d'Arc. These historical figures are still widely circulating in education and in research, but also in "media memory", "the systematic exploration of collective pasts that are narrated by the media, through the use of the media, and about the media" (Neiger, Meyers, and Zandberg, 2011, p. 1). A good example can be found in historical television programs such as the BBC's *Great Britons*, a transnational television format (Oren and Shahaf, 2012) in which, through (online) voting, people chose their greatest countrymen and -women. This format was also adopted in Belgium, where each language community's public broadcaster (i.e., the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking) organized their own television election – which resulted in very different rankings, although there was a certain degree of overlap.

Yet, importantly, this work on cultural or communicative memory entails several limits, two of which are relevant here. First, Zierold (2008, p. 401) has rightly pointed out that Assmann's (1995, 2004) conceptual framework has been elaborated in studies on pre-modern societies. Applying it to our current media-saturated societies is not that easy, however, as we need to rethink cultural memory in relation to modern media technologies since "coordinates of time



for social processes of memory have shifted” because of the “acceleration processes of modern media” (Zierold, 2008, p. 401). Second, the notions of cultural or communicative memory as defined above do not help us to theoretically grasp the actual remembering and forgetting of today’s celebrities, which is also a kind of “memory work” (Kuhn, 2010). What concept could possibly complement these memories and together describe the reservoir of celebrities to which people in different communities make sense? While the concept of media flows is important to understand the actual circulation of celebrity representations and meanings, I propose to borrow the concept of ‘working memory’ from neuroscience and cognitive psychology.

Working memory is the active part of our memory system and it “combines the temporary storage and manipulation of information in the service of cognition” (Baddeley and Hitch, 2010, p. 3015). The cultural variant of working memory can clarify the temporary retention (and forgetting) of today’s celebrities (and other cultural bits and bytes). It is culture’s short-term memory, compared with communicative and cultural memories, which have a long(er)-lasting time frame. Cultural working memory could thus be thought of as the rapidly and constantly changing collection of recent cultural information that is, at least temporarily, retained by, and shared among, individuals. In that sense, it differs significantly from Durkheim’s (1997 [1893]) “collective consciousness”, which has a strong normative dimension, as it stresses the sharing of moral attitudes and beliefs. Cultural working memory is located not only in the memories (or brains) of people, but also in current cultural products, among which are media products and representations. Examples are YouTube-videos, which can be popular for a very short period of time and quickly ‘forgotten’ shortly thereafter, or celebrity blogs, which constantly produce new stories about celebrities climbing or falling down the ladder of fame.

In my view, the cultural working memory concept has the advantage of accommodating for the fact that celebrities (and their media representations) can survive on a longer term and thus become part of ‘communicative’ and ‘cultural’ memory (or a variant of these). Another advantage is that cultural working memory helps us to solve, or at least reverse, the impossible question of how famous one should be to be a celebrity: namely when the person is part of the cultural (working) memory of a community that corresponds with a certain celebrity culture. Further work can carve out this cultural working memory concept in more depth; it is, unfortunately, not possible to go into more detail within the scope of this article.



## 4 Conclusion

This article has aimed to contribute to theorizing time and especially space of celebrity. However, in doing so, it has encountered many challenging questions and difficult problems, many of which could not be fully answered in this article. Instead, the aim has been to offer well-considered indications that can be the premise for more detailed examinations in the future.

Starting from the work on media cultures, the undertheorized notion of celebrity culture has been defined as aggregates of sense-making practices whose main resources of meaning are celebrity. Celebrity cultures are necessarily plural, with different kinds of niche and mainstream celebrity cultures crossing certain geographical spaces. Informed by a translocal frame on culture, it has been argued that celebrity cultures are not necessarily overlapping with social groups or nations, but instead are thickenings of diverse sets of media flows that are not strictly confined to (supra- or sub)national borders. Accordingly, it has been suggested that (sub)national celebrity cultures, such as the Flemish, are given sense to through the ‘us and them’ binary. ‘Them’ refers to international celebrity cultures, as well as other familiar ‘regional’ or ‘national’ celebrity cultures. ‘Us’ can be determined by following the general rule that celebrity cultures comprise those celebrities who circulate in and are represented in a corresponding media culture. Celebrity cultures also correspond with certain audiences or communities, on the basis of which distinctions between celebrity cultures can be made in terms of geography and composition. Consequently, it has been suggested that memory can help us explain the available repertoire of celebrities in relation to which of these communities give sense. Yet, because memory in its current conceptual stance is only useful in thinking about the past and history, this article has added the notion of ‘cultural working memory’ to capture also the remembering and forgetting, and thus the constant renewal of today’s celebrities.

A lot of work still needs to be done to further develop this cultural working memory concept and to prove its usefulness for empirical analyses. Another important study area is comparative research on celebrity cultures, including non-western or non-Anglophone celebrity cultures. What kind of sense-making practices do people of different communities develop in relation to celebrity? How and to what extent do they actually feel connected to fellow members, as Couldry (2012) suggests? What are the most important differences between (sub)national celebrity cultures, and how can they be explained? Moreover, while the focus here has been on differentiation, how are these celebrity cultures connected and perhaps overlapping? In turn, examining these empirical

research questions might further improve our theoretical understanding of celebrity, celebrity cultures, communitization, and memory.

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