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## Beyond celebrity history: towards the consolidation of fame studies

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### ABSTRACT

This essay examines the current perspectives on celebrity history, following the varied theoretical understandings of historicisation in particular. The critical analysis of different approaches allows for the distinguishment of the major problem entailed by historicising celebrity. In order to avoid it, I propose a broader perspective of fame history. As presented later, the shift of focus towards fame rather than celebrity was foreshadowed in many milestone works on celebrity history before. The final part of the text offers a methodological tool that could serve as a bridge between different traditions dealing with celebrity and other kinds of fame.


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Celebrity is a product of late modernity. Its historical origins may be found in the 1920s and in the birth of mass media such as newspapers, radio, and ultimately, television – at least according to the view commonly held by many researchers today (Schickel 2000, p. 23; Wheeler 2013, p. 35–6). Numerous definitions of celebrity exclude any discussion of fame before the twentieth century. Daniel Boorstin's (1962, p. 57) oft-quoted belittlement of the celebrity as a person 'known for his well-knownness' was meant as a diagnosis of the pathologies (or 'pseudo-events') of twentieth-century mass culture. For P. David Marshall (1997), celebrities are not simply by-products of modern democratising processes, but rather constitutive elements of the semiotic system engaged in the representation of popular values and means of expression for mass mentality, and therefore, key tools of Western liberal democracy. The intuitive association of celebrity with the present era is rooted in our very language. Celebrity belongs to a matrix of meanings linked to stardom, Hollywood, and gossip culture. Red carpet, camera flashes, and career-changing sex tapes – these are the things we think of when we hear the word. It is rarely mentioned that the term functioned long before all that. The entry for 'celebrity' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes examples from as far back as 1849 in which the word is used with roughly the same meaning that it has today. It was in popular use since at least the eighteenth century (Tillyard 2005, p. 61–9). Some might say that the meaning of the word must have changed. But does a change of connotation necessarily translate to a change in denotation? The familiar contrast between 'false-value' celebrity and deserved glory certainly existed in the early modern era (Marshall

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1997, p. 5–6). Celebrity appears in the *Encyclopédie* entry for ‘glory’ (‘gloire’, vol. VII, p. 716) as another, distinct form of fame (Lilti 2017, p. 86–7). The linguistic development of the term parallels the long embeddedness of celebrity in our culture, the fact vastly ignored by researchers who nonetheless cling to the contemporary associations of the word. Frustrated by this careless dismissal, those who try historicising celebrity keep pointing out the ‘pejorative contemporary overtones’ that permeate the academic discourse on the topic (Morgan 2011, p. 96).

The disparity between these two approaches, the historical one and the one informed more by sociology, constitutes but one problem that discussion of the historicity of celebrity must confront. Despite the objections of some celebrity scholars, this discussion is being conducted and has had many impressive results. Following it closely, one can easily observe that a problem of ahistoricism, in the past the biggest obstacle the study of celebrity encountered, has now been domesticated and largely resolved. However, as I argue below, there is a major flaw in the way historians have approached celebrity until now, an omission which may cause serious misunderstandings in their exchange with social scientists. There is a danger of ahistoricism of a different kind, one related to the fundamental category from which historians derive their research questions. Celebrity itself is an artificial model that should be substituted with one more universally applicable to various temporal and geographical contexts if it is not to lead to a presentist bias. In order to avoid that, in this text I propose a broader perspective of fame history. After describing imperfections in the current historical approach to celebrity, I turn to the potential benefits of shifting our focus to fame rather than celebrity. As will be shown below, this shift has already been foreshadowed in a number of landmark works on celebrity history. Its potential lies particularly in its capacity to integrate various approaches to studying fame, some of which are often undeservedly marginalised. The final part of the text outlines a methodological tool that could serve as a bridge between different traditions dealing with celebrity and other kinds of fame. As the elaboration of a working definition of fame is a major task that thus far no scholar has adequately addressed and goes beyond the scope of what can be covered in this article, I focus on showing how the distinction between forms and contents of fame as concepts is useful for drawing the characterisations of an individual’s fame within a broader framework. The proposal presented below is not merely a theoretical idiosyncrasy; indeed, the fact that celebrity history has been disconnected from broader questions is a major argument that has been used to dismiss it as a topic of little scholarly importance. In the wider sense, the fragmentation of the discipline is representative of an influential trend within cultural history, the expansion of which furthers the incompatibility of individual methodologies. In the ambient hum of theory within historical scholarship, it appears imperative to build bridges.

### The problem of celebrity history

In 2018 it is increasingly difficult to dismiss historical research in celebrity as a marginal trend. Indeed, there has been a flood of articles and books fully dedicated to the excavation of ‘early celebrity cultures’ or less directly contributing to our understanding of past fame. Since the 1990s the field of theatre celebrity has experienced rapid development, particularly with regard to studies of the celebrated actresses, reaching as far into the past as the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Wanko 2011). Coinciding

with the publication of several key texts of gender theory in the 1990s (esp. Butler 1990), these studies tended to focus on gendered aspects of fame to such an extent that some researchers proposed creating yet another subdiscipline under the name of 'Actress Studies' (Engel 2016, p. 749–50). But this focus was by no means exclusive. Scholars such as Kristina Straub (1992), Felicity Nussbaum (2010), Laura Engel (2011), and especially Cheryl Wanko (2003) have produced valuable findings on various topics, including: the individual agency of celebrated social actors; the early modern celebrity industry (the workings of cultural intermediaries) and various media (gossip, print, and theatre); celebrity as means of financial emancipation and overcoming the birth rank; early fandom; the growing public interest in the intimate lives of the famous; and in particular, how the famous created their identities by navigating between the benefits and limitations of celebrity. A similar range of subjects was covered in parallel studies of early modern opera singers and celebrity writers (Fenner 1994, Rohr 2001, Hall-Witt 2007), while the interplay between celebrity and notoriety was explored in studies of famous criminals and robbers (Linebaugh 1992, McKenzie 2006). Celebrity writers or 'lions' were discussed in allusion to the concept of 'literary lionism' (Salmon 2013, p. 39–66). About ten years ago the lively discussion of historians and celebrity scholars resulted in the publication of books that endeavoured to find the origins of the phenomenon, often-times dated to the period between 1750 and 1850. Stephen Gundle focused on searching for the beginnings of modern glamour, which is usually equated with celebrity appeal (Gundle 2008). Tom Mole analysed the interrelations between the famous individual, the media industry, and the audience in his novel study of Byron (Mole 2007). An outline of the first celebrity cultures in the eighteenth century was provided by Fred Inglis who called for a deeper historicisation of the problem (Inglis 2010). Antoine Lilti (2017) insisted on the significance of public fascination with the intimate as a key factor in understanding the emergence of the 'celebrity class'. Historiography of celebrity gained momentum and broke the supposed boundaries of periodical exceptionalism.

Interestingly, despite the fact that many histories of celebrities had been around for more than twenty years, calls for historicising celebrity have continued to appear since the first edition of *Celebrity Studies* journal in 2010 (Bennett 2010, Morgan 2010). This is not simply a consequence of the sparse communication of findings between various academic disciplines engaged in the discussion. It has much more to do with what is expected from a historical work describing celebrity. In his 2014 article Chris Rojek complained that 'the escalating interest in celebrity studies has not translated into a serious enquiry into the origins of the subject in social and political theory' and criticised the status quo of celebrity history as deeply unsatisfactory (Rojek 2014, p. 455). In his view, the lack of a proper historicisation was a result of naively solipsistic perspective: 'it is as if celebrity [...] belongs to our era and reveals something pointedly characteristic about us' (456). For Rojek, as for many a social scientist, a phenomenon needs to be historically situated in order to create a sufficiently contextualised theory. Consequently, the definitions of celebrity he proposed were general enough to encompass a range of historical meanings (Rojek 2001, p. 10, 2014, p. 456). While this solution has met with criticisms, other attempts to create a more detailed definition – one limited to the contemporary era – have left us either with approaches that deal with various aspects of celebrity separately (personalities, media, audiences or industries), or with modular

descriptions like that of Graeme Turner (2004, p. 10), which in itself acknowledge that the social function of celebrity could be understood better. Rojek may be right in claiming that a better working definition cannot be created without historicising celebrity, a task he considers yet unfinished.

The abovementioned historiographical works do little to dissipate this impression. Instead, they tend to paint a rather static picture of past celebrity. Most of these studies are limited to the arts, with sporadic descriptions of religious and political stars (Wanko 2011, p. 352). The focus of early modern research so far has been on finding examples of historical celebrities and examining the similarities in public perception, the particular industries capitalising on fame, and the forms of individual self-fashioning shared by famous actresses, opera singers, and popular writers. In result, we received books discussing, for instance, Mary Robinson's ways of manoeuvring between different celebrity personas (Wilson 2009) or George Robinson's use of superficial humanitarianism to acquire celebrity status (Krieken 2015). Studies directed towards mass behaviour showed how one fell in and out of public favour; the more ambitious treatments explained the emergence and the interplay of various meanings ascribed to celebrity (Wanko 2011, p. 356–8). While these authors successfully applied modern vocabulary to the eighteenth century with the purpose of exploring past realities, their endeavours did not go beyond the analyses of audience behaviour far enough to, for instance, elaborate on the conditions of audience responsiveness. More interested in historical context than in possible generalisation of their findings, historians re-shifted priority back to the twentieth-century understandings of celebrity, seeing their own say on the topic as that of secondary importance. In doing so, they did not manage to sufficiently contribute to the general understanding of what celebrity is (was?). Their dependence on modern celebrity theory was expressed in the terms of 'early celebrity' or 'pre-figurative celebrity', widely adopted to characterise historical stars. More theory-oriented researchers explored the origins of celebrity appeal and the commercialisation of fan-idol perceived intimacy. However, even these scholars regarded celebrity as something fully developed only in the late modernity. This happened despite their awareness of the possible generalisations, in relation to which they positioned their operational terms. Lilti contrasted celebrity with *glory* and with *reputation*, distinct and much older mechanisms (Lilti 2017, p. 4–7). Mole promised 'to contribute to the project of writing celebrity's history and theorising its significance' (Mole 2007, p. xiv), but delivered only partially, to the extent that his case study of Byron and Romanticism allowed. All of these works are ahistorical in that they tend to make attempts at historicising the constituents of the phenomenon as explicated by celebrity scholars interested mostly in its modern aspect. The perspective is always contemporary, dictated by today. Scarcity of efforts to escape this trap will inevitably lead to a blurring of the bigger picture and to the reinforcement of the observer bias, with historians playing a role subservient to specialists on modern celebrity – at best providing context for the more 'mature' analyses.

This risk may be avoided by adapting an appropriate approach to historicism and historicising. The danger typically ascribed to conducting celebrity studies on historical material is that of the misuse of contemporary categories. The vocabulary developed in order to organise knowledge about twentieth- and twenty-first-century celebrities obviously cannot be simply transferred to early modern contexts. The problem has already been addressed by historians aware of the undesirable consequences of this practice. Words such as 'fans' and 'fandom' (Wanko 2010), 'celebrity culture' (Morgan

2011), 'public sphere' (Mole 2007, p. 5), and 'celebrity' itself were ably scrutinised in regard to the feasibility of their use for earlier periods. This has an effect only to the extent to which the tools of celebrity studies are operationalised. For example, Mole based his deliberations on an examination of Habermas' concept of the public sphere as well as the idea of 'apparatus' (adapted from the poststructuralist tradition) involving the 'individual-industry-audience' triad; the basic object of his study was 'the apparatus becoming a cultural norm', i.e. the process by which local celebrity cultures' expanded to become the mainstream form of social expression (Mole 2007, p. 6–7). However, with his terms tailored ad casum, he made his point in a theoretical vacuum. How useful are modern or customised research tools if they do not relate to a more objective or more universal basis? We cannot assume that fame was a static, unchanging category before the emergence of one or more sorts of celebrity. Valuable as such studies are, their weakness lies in their inability to pinpoint meaningful correlations that could lead to the creation of a long-term synthesis. In their otherwise noble chase for the detail, historians neglect a bigger picture and thus, do not reach the point of the actual historicising.

Historicisation should not be understood as the mere collection of historical data, nor should it stop at the description of a periodically-perceived historical development. These activities should be preceded by the historical problematisation of the subject matter. Instead of uncritically adopting the contemporary understanding of celebrity, we should strive to see it in the broadest possible sense, geographically and temporally; in other words, to transcend the celebrity. How does celebrity change if one attempts to deprive it of modern commonsensical connotation, to problematise it, and to recontextualise the problems in accordance with specific situations? This fairly basic and introductory exercise is already made complicated by the multiplicity of existing definitions of celebrity; how is one to choose the self-contained core of celebrity and separate it from the context? While some definitions underline the individual charisma of the celebrated (subjectivist approach), others lean towards presenting celebrity as a form of cultural industry (poststructuralist approach). Celebrity is a person (Boorstin 1962), but also a process (Rockwell and Giles 2009), a discourse (Quinn 1990), a system (Marshall 1997), a culture (Barron 2014), and a society (Krieken 2012). But hidden beneath this tangle is at least one recurring benchmark: celebrity is defined in relation to fame (a broader, rather indistinctly demarcated concept) and treated as a magnified version of it. Not every famous person is a celebrity, but all celebrities are famous. Historians often note that there are many kinds of fame and celebrity constitutes but one of them. They discuss the faded meaning of *honour* and the historical development of *reputation* and *prestige* (Kuehner 2016); some insist on differentiating between *celebrity* and *propaganda* (DiMaggio 2009, Barker 2011); older categories of *charisma* and *martyrs* are revived (Dickson 2012). Yet, it is within the discussions of celebrity that fame keeps reappearing. The question remains: are we able to define an idea based on something so strikingly nebulous? A negative answer to that question entails a re-examination of priorities for the study of celebrity: it is fame rather than celebrity that should be placed at the centre of our attention. However significant celebrity seems for today, through such interpretation it would be fitted in the wider problematic of fame or modes of individual distinguishment. This shift in emphasis introduces little change to the histories of individual celebrities which dominate the field, does not necessarily undermine previous findings, and offers a framework which allows for incorporation of neighbouring topics and within which bigger questions may be asked.

## What is in a fame?

Grounding celebrity in fame is often done metaphorically, but completely neglected as a serious intellectual task. The two terms are closely interrelated, frequently equated with one another and used synonymously. Among innumerable examples, the clearest is the work of Leo Braudy (1986), a cornerstone for celebrity studies that uses fame as its central term. The few attempts to differentiate between the two concepts were not very successful. According to Luckhurst and Moody (2005, p. 1), fame and celebrity are different categories that should not be conflated, but their argument is highly unconvincing. They describe fame as ‘the nature of exceptional life’ in contrast to celebrity ‘which focuses attention on the interplay between individuals, markets and media’. This puzzling formulation translates to two distinct approaches in theatre studies, an older one highlighting public perception, and a new one examining ‘markets and institutions through which fame was produced’. It is a false dichotomy. There is no actual theoretical distinction between these terms; it was rather that the newer findings in celebrity studies replaced older approaches to fame, which were once limited to researching public opinion. Wanko (2003, p. 5) assumed a different perspective, claiming that ‘celebrities differ from the traditionally “famous” in that they have rarely executed any heroic actions, nor have they been born into a noble or royal class’, but this could be challenged as well if we take into account the humanitarian acts with which some of the fame-hungry paved their way to celebrity (Krieken 2015) or the category of ascribed celebrity coined by Rojek (2001, p. 17), which clearly relates to the famous royals. Often fame is presented as an indescribable and shapeless substance used as a background, or one from which a more concrete idea of celebrity can be extracted. This is how Lilti (2017, p. 4–5) treats it, admitting that ‘there are many kinds of fame’, but operationalising only celebrity, glory, and reputation. There is a similar trend of drawing a contrast between ante-mortem celebrity with post-mortem glory, where fame is understood as synonymous for each of these terms or as encompassing both of them (Goodman 2016). If this distinction seems sound and clear, consider the Hollywood Walk of Fame, a glorification of celebrity, described as a means to ‘maintain the *glory* of a community whose name means *glamour and excitement* in the four corners of the world’ [italics by A.D. Wesółowski].

One potential candidate for an existing study that examines celebrity in relation to fame might be *The Frenzy of Renown* by Leo Braudy. As mentioned before, celebrity scholars have long used Braudy’s book when purporting to situate their research within the wider context. However, these references were not accompanied by any significant theoretical discussion. Braudy himself never set out to create a theory, but rather an extensive outline of fame history. For this reason, his work is a starting point and not an intended result of rescaling celebrity history to fame history. Nonetheless, Braudy seems to share the conviction that celebrity must be understood within the framework of fame to the extent that he attracts accusations of downplaying the difference between fame and celebrity as only being a matter of degree (Turner 2004, p. 66). *The Frenzy of Renown* presents an array of various sorts of fame and periodically relevant theories accompanying them that give an impression of constituting one comprehensive mosaic, breaking many stereotypes related to modern celebrity. For instance, Braudy notes the all-too-simple dichotomy drawn between heroic glory of the past on the one hand and trivial

modern celebrity on the other in his own reading of past records: 'the process of fame seemed much simpler and the special nature of the famous much easier to appreciate in the ages before the present crush of people awaiting their turn before the camera [...] [T]he terms of the competition were clearer, and the contenders ideal figures, not the locusts of today'. His appreciation of the idea is followed by the clarification of social reality's incompatibility with this picture: 'such Golden Ages of true worth and justified fame never existed [...] our involvement with the famous, as well as our dismemberment and absorption of them into our own natures, is hardly an invention of the twentieth century' (Braudy 1986, p. 8–10). This implied insistence on the underlying role of fame may be one reason that Braudy remains an ambivalent figure in celebrity research. Sociologists are dissatisfied with his lack of theoretical commitment; cultural scholars, including historians, rarely pay serious attention to his long-term analysis. The lack of dialogue between these approaches echoes the recent estrangement of history and social sciences. But it is exactly because of his balanced (or indifferent) attitude that Braudy produces spot-on insights on the nature of fame, as in his formulation of what are perhaps the most important questions of fame history: 'celebrity is in the moment, but fame sits on the cusp between the material – the myriad ways that it can be created and manipulated – and the immaterial: Why this person? Why now?' (Braudy 2011, p. 1075).

Historicising fame shifts the focus to more universal questions already tackled within celebrity studies, like the individual predisposition to become famous or the social conditions necessary for such a process to occur, but also to questions that have been blatantly ignored, such as the interrelation between various modes of distinguishment or the transition from one mode to another. Without depriving existing historical findings on this matter of their relevance, treating fame as a constant reference point would allow for the formulation of less artificial and more accurate research questions. Consider the question about who was the first celebrity, so often posed by historians (Leslie 2011, p. 2; Wanko 2011, p. 351). The broader perspective of fame history makes this analogous to the old problem of the chicken and the egg. Which came first? The proper answer to the conundrum is that 'chicken' is an arbitrary label imposed by contemporary biologists who classified species for the ease of identification. There was never 'a first chicken', but a long line of evolutionary descendants belonging to a specific branch of the genetic tree (Fabry 2016). Likewise, there was never a first celebrity, but a long, fluctuating history of fame and famous people. The primacy that celebrity enjoys as an object of study is grounded in its historic impact on Western mass culture (Morgan 2011, p. 98–101). But *sine ira et studio*, there is no reason to make it a topic that is more worthy of scholarly investigation than fame in general. Let us assume that, as our current knowledge suggests, celebrity cultures started appearing in the early modern era, became a cultural norm in the nineteenth century and dominated liberal democracy's sphere of representation in the twentieth, making the phenomenon more than two hundred years old. Can we really understand celebrity, and can we relate it to the more basic questions about human nature, without situating it in regard to the broadest possible historical context, including other, earlier and alternative forms of fame?

Accentuating fame as a general category gives voice to all those who, like Braudy, instinctively saw a connection between celebrity and its root phenomenon. Rojek's definition of celebrity as 'the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an



individual within the public sphere' (Rojek 2001, p. 10) and later as 'the accumulation of attention capital via self-promotion and exposure management' (Rojek 2014, p. 456) clearly included attempts to reach beyond the pervasive twentieth century connotations. By the same token, in his argument for celebrity history Simon Morgan presented many brilliant ideas that could be extended from the study of the twentieth century not only to the eighteenth, but even further back in the past. Another study that recognises the connection between celebrity and fame is the Marxian project of Marshall (1997), whose influential claim was that celebrity, 'a semiotic system capable of disseminating dominant values throughout society', contributed to the creation of mass societies in early twentieth century through sedating and fragmenting the rebellious masses. Marshall himself seems to believe that a wider perspective is necessary and that celebrity can be used as an umbrella term for various expressions of fame (p. 7). Many celebrity qualities recognised by Marshall, like the dissemination of popular values, the representational function, the role in the formation of social identity and the double nature of hyper-individuality and group-representativeness are easy to adapt beyond twentieth century contexts (Morgan 2011, p. 99–101), and in fact, bear resemblance to the older debate carried out particularly in German and Polish academia on role models and archetypes (esp. the works of Max Scheler and Maria Ossowska, see Zdenka 2006, Kelly 2011, p. 197–200, 209–16). Fame could serve as a linking term for all these seemingly disconnected insights.

This perspective is potent enough to incorporate multiple traditions within the social sciences. Fame is the point of intersection of different, independent branches of research, e.g. the scholarship on honour, reputation, etc. and the lively topic of hero history (best represented in recent works by Geoff Cubitt and Max Jones). Focused on the complexity of their topics, these researchers too often ignore yawning gaps in their reasoning about phenomena that are inherently related. For instance, the historical replacement of various kinds of honour by the idea of reputation (Kuehner 2016), however simplified, seems to strongly appeal to researchers fascinated by the novelty of the topic. Thus, impressed by the temporal succession of personal honour turning into self-respect and self-esteem as described by Axel Honneth (1996) or by the status-generating function of horizontal honour (Asch 2005), historians are eager to carelessly periodise fame and claim the dominance of certain forms of it during certain time periods. By this logic, the Middle Ages were an era of honour or 'the traditionally famous', while the early modern period witnessed the birth of celebrity (Wanko 2003, p. 1–6). Such explanations underestimate the longevity and interconnectedness of cultural structures; in reality, various cultural formations, ideas about the famous and social structures intermixed, overlapped, and mutated over time. The death of chivalry and the honourable ideal was lamented by Edmund Burke not in the fifteenth, but in the late eighteenth century, and many contemporaries thought his lament overly hysterical (Dowling 1982). There is also a frequently forgotten social layer. The medieval period was not only a dominion of dead heroes; on the contrary, it was full of people who were famous locally outside of the Church or state apparatus. We know about the existence of medieval preachers whom crowds were obsessed with (Kleinburg 2011) and scholars who attracted huge, European-wide audiences (Jardine 2015). Can we really downgrade them to any of the categories we recognise so far? The same difficulty applies to hero studies as well. The 'Great Men' of the nineteenth century, who scholars insist so

emphatically were different from celebrities, were in fact often subjected to the same mechanisms of recognition as famous actresses or singers. In his chapter on Napoleon Lilti (2017, p. 160–216) discusses how the great conqueror must have manoeuvred between celebrity-like and glory-like appeal. Should we then consider Napoleon a celebrity or a hero? Was he recognised through his honour or the courtly glamour in which he participated? Perhaps an answer to these questions can be found in an exchange between researchers working on different kinds of fame, an exchange they have been thus far unwilling to engage in.

If fame is to be put at the centre of the question, what would its historicisation look like? It should certainly go hand in hand with a renewed theorisation of the problem. Such a process would necessarily involve formulating the definition of fame inclusively enough to integrate different kinds of fame while remaining open to internal reorganisations, particularly the creation of a basic typology of fame and interrelated processes. After establishing what types of fame we can observe, how they are related to one another, and what other social structures they coincide with, it would be possible to launch the project of determining historically meaningful variables of each type and presenting them as ‘the temporal structurations of social actions and processes’ (Hall 2007). This would constitute a starting point for ascertaining the relations between existing studies that have considered the subject of fame so far. Studies of fame should not be limited to its any singular manifestation, even the most influential one. Instead, they should strive to tackle the broadest questions relevant to human nature, such as: Is fame an inherent quality of our social functioning? What is its relation to less individualistic social mechanisms, such as status? Did it evolve bottom-up (from reputation-like mechanisms) or top-down (from our myths and legends)? In following this path, history and sociology could reinvigorate some of their old alliances, like the one with anthropology, but should not be afraid to form new ones with moral philosophy, social psychology and perhaps, even biology (see the memetic study of glory by Thomas Ryba et al. 2014).

Finding answers to each of these questions demands careful examination that is a topic for further research. However, I would like to contribute one distinction that I find particularly useful for current issues in fame-related research.

### Forms and contents of fame

Let us consider Lilti’s juxtaposition of celebrity and glory once more. For the sake of establishing a working definition of celebrity, Lilti contrasted it with reputation and glory. As he rightly pointed out, reputation corresponds to the collective judgment that a community makes about each of its members. Conversely, glory concerns exceptional achievements of ‘heroes, saints, illustrious men’ and is awarded by ‘cultural institutions and people of good taste’ mostly posthumously. Both of them are challenged by celebrity, a new idea emerging in the eighteenth century that was characterised by ephemerality and gossip rather than sustained commemoration and concerned with audience rather than posterity, publicity rather than personal interaction, and fascination with the private lives of public individuals rather than raising statues (Lilti 2017, p. 5–7). While the distinctiveness of reputation was clearly maintained throughout Lilti’s book, the separation between celebrity and glory was often problematic. Most celebrated

writers, like Lilti's favourite Rousseau, were by no means transient visitors in the public sphere, but well-established public figures over the course of decades. Some men who were famous according to more traditional markers used celebrity mechanisms to achieve an even greater illustriousness (e.g. Mirabeau, Lilti 2017, p. 177–192). Many figures referred to as 'a star as much as a political hero' (p. 193) – Robespierre, Washington, Napoleon – combined a statesman or a war hero image with publicity management and aspirations to become one of the 'Great Men'. The lack of clear distinction is further underlined by the fact that their contemporaries frequently used words 'celebrity' and 'glory' ('célébrité' and 'gloire') interchangeably, in each of the meanings that Lilti described (p. 86–104). Lilti himself was aware of the fact that his operational terms do not translate into clear definitions, as what was thought about fame and what made someone famous mix with one another, sometimes indistinguishably. He acknowledged that 'it would be absurd to plead for an absolute division' between celebrity, glory, and reputation (p. 7) and focused on the novelties that constituted the eighteenth century celebrity rather than introducing a robust theory. Nevertheless, while Lilti's working definitions function well within his book, the theory of fame cannot simply ignore all the grey spheres left in between.

The crux of the problem lies in the assumption that the cultural industry arisen around celebrity (the media, commercialisation of public figures' images, the fan-idol one-sidedly-perceived intimacy etc.) is inseparably conjoined with the meanings ascribed to it, the judgements made about it, and the shape of discourse revolving around it. Analogously, glory is based on posthumous commemoration that is supposedly inextricable from heroic deeds. In practice, this inseparability is often an effect of reification fallacy, when celebrity scholars analyse ideas which they encumber with the weight of actual bearing on reality, e.g. when they are unwilling to admit that Napoleon participated in the celebrity market because they fear calling him something as frivolous as celebrity. These model formulations are undoubtedly useful in some contexts, but unsatisfactory when it comes to presenting the diverse shapes that fame assumes. They were barely adequate to cover the examples cited by Lilti and will be of limited use in building long-term syntheses or big interregional and intertemporal comparisons. Instead, I propose to speak of forms and contents of fame which have separate, but interconnected histories. In this perspective, forms can be understood as a set of activities, actions and behaviours that constitute the making of fame of any kind as well as reactions to this process, whereas contents refer to meanings imputed or openly attributed to the famous in connection with their person or image. Forms are what people do; contents, what they think about what they do.

This duality was indirectly implied in previous studies. Lilti (2017, p. 7–8) noted that 'the development of specific mechanisms of celebrity was thus accompanied by the topic of celebrity' which he recognised as 'a collective effort to think about a new phenomenon and provide the foundations, narrative or linguistic, with which individuals tried to navigate the strangeness of the social world'. His notions of celebrity *mechanisms* and *topic* foreshadow the separation of forms and contents. Much earlier the distinction was hinted at by Turner (2004, p. 10) during his discussion of Braudy's uniformity of fame. Turner argued that in Braudy's account the inflation of fame that gave birth to celebrity in early modern era created, 'differences of degree, rather than of substance'. Perhaps most convincingly, Gundle (2008, p. 19) wrote that glamour, the

object of his work, involved ‘the superb injection of fantasy into public rituals and consumption practices, and arose from the opportunities that these supplied for possible or imaginary transformations of the self’. The metaphor of injecting a perception into a practice vividly illustrates my point. However, while these researchers more or less consciously distinguished the abstract and the practical aspects of celebrity, they failed to notice that forms and contents function, to a certain extent, independently.

The approach that I propose is meant to contribute to a better understanding of fame on the levels of both theory and practice. Specifically, it is useful in drawing connections between the findings of alternative traditions that centre around fame. Let us use the example of the hero history approach, a tradition averse to joining forces with celebrity studies, and yet bearing many similarities to it. The definition of a hero most widely used by hero historians was formulated by Geoff Cubitt:

A hero is any man or woman whose existence, whether in his or her own lifetime or later, in endowed by others, not just with a high degree of fame and honour, but with a special allocation of imputed meaning and symbolic significance – that not only raises them above others in public esteem but makes them the object of some kind of collective emotional investment (Cubitt 2000, p. 3).

This definition clearly overlaps with, for example, Lilti’s thoughts on celebrity and glory. However, hero and celebrity vocabulary are problematically untranslatable. Heroes can partake in both earthly fame and posthumous remembrance. They are seen only as positive figures and serve as an object of ‘collective emotional investment’ which is unlike the sentiment ascribed to the usual type of famous persons. But what precisely is this collective feeling? Is it different from the meanings that are attached to celebrities by the masses? Is the hero a kind of celebrity? Is the hero’s domain glory? Are celebrities heroes? If one follows Cubitt’s definition of hero, all of these questions will inevitably be answered negatively. One is then left to conclude that these two categories are separate. But one then has to consider the absurdly counterintuitive fact that research into heroes does exactly the same thing as research into celebrities: it analyses how media filter an image of a hero, examines the many faces of a hero and how the hero attempts to manoeuvre between them, and attempts to understand the social construction of heroic reputation and the appeal of an individual. A useful overview of questions asked by hero historians is provided by Max Jones (2007) in his text on the significance of the heroic appeal. In order to present various approaches to explaining this question, Jones used the example of Major-General Sir Henry Havelock, who campaigned against the Indian Rebellion in 1857. Berny Sèbe’s account of Havelock as a celebrity appeared two years later (2009), thus too late for Jones to have been able to consider it in his article. The confluence of celebrity and hero should not be surprising when one considers the fact that Havelock was the object of a scandal (a typical characteristic of a celebrity), that his fame was disseminated and greatly influenced by mediator figures (strong mediation is considered a distinguishing mark of a celebrity), and that the representation of his image had a lot to do with gender stereotyping (a major object of interest in the actress celebrity tradition) (Jones 2007, p. 444–5). Where, then, lies the real difference between heroes and celebrities as objects of study and, more importantly, how can this difference be expressed in methodological terms?

The premise that forms and contents of fame have distinct histories and that the tension between these two categories is a major characteristic of fame of any kind enables a better organisation of knowledge about individual celebrities (or heroes), as exemplified by the case of Havelock. Instead of constantly moving back and forth between alternative historiographical traditions in order to collect bits and pieces of hero history and celebrity history findings, one could divide the analysis into two methodological tasks. The description of the forms of the Major-General's fame would include both the monumentalisation of him as a hero and the press scandals around his image, allowing for comparisons with other contemporaries who were immortalised in statues or glorified upon their deaths as well as with the scandalous celebrities. Havelock's biographers and politicians who constructed the heroic propaganda could be understood as playing similar intermediary function to brochures inviting for a famous actor's play. On the other hand, Havelock's representation of the masculine ideal could serve as good comparison material for the ways in which well-known singers or writers presented their gender. How Havelock rose to fame and what it symbolised to people could be then diagnosed as typical or atypical for famous people in general. This would make it possible e.g. to establish to what extent the death of a 'hero' could be represented as scandalous in the nineteenth century and whether the development of celebrity culture impacted this extent.

Moreover, an approach that distinguishes between the forms and contents stands in clear contrast to Cubitt's reading of a hero. Examining the contents of fame entails an assumption that there are meanings ascribed to all famous persons, while Cubitt defines heroes through the symbolic significance of the few. However, it could be argued that all the famous are subject to some sort of 'collective investment' that takes the shape of the attention they receive. A closer reading of Cubitt's definition reveals that he himself is not overly insistent on the exclusiveness of heroism, as he uses Jack the Ripper – a murderer notorious mainly through the press! – as one of his examples, and refers to 'symbolic significance' as 'imputed meaning', a much more inclusive term (Jones 2007, p. 441). Cubitt's definition, like most formulations of the concept of celebrity, is basically reducible to a sort of fame, but it does not provide any possibility to determine what forms of fame are typical for heroes other than the 'high degree' of honour they are endowed with. Cubitt not only does not offer clear criteria for determining who is to be called a hero, but omits all the structural questions about the study of heroes. This problem finds its answer in the forms-contents method.

Importantly, the forms-contents method enables researchers to make broad comparisons across historical periods, cultural domains, and different kinds of fame. Consider another example. A major subject within the political sciences is the so-called celebrity politics, a problematic conflation of politics and fame, which includes the mixing of statesman and celebrity archetypes that accelerated in the 'late modernity'. In other words, with time, spheres of politics and entertainment collapse into one another and become more interchangeable and interdependent. Although the problem is often discussed, it suffers from a lack of systematic comparison; specialists recurrently complain about the 'superficial and anecdotal' literature that they encounter (Marsh et al. 2010, Street 2012). Existing approaches, either coming from political or celebrity studies, allow for the examination of the problem's symptoms: stars enter political life using their renown, and the other way around, politicians adopt mechanisms typically used by

celebrities (Street 2004, Kellner 2010); political personae mimic the celebrity's public faces (van Zoonen 2006); celebrity activism becomes increasingly more influential in politics (Tsaliki et al. 2011). We can show what people think about this phenomenon (Inthorn and Street 2011) and later chronologise its progressive development (Wheeler 2013). But after all this effort, the basic question of why celebrity politics has appeared and gained influence is still left unanswered. What should not escape our attention is the fact that the concepts of a celebrity and a politician are untranslatable, seen as endowed with distinct sets of supposedly incompatible meanings to the extent in which sharing the same communication platforms can be perceived as preposterous (think of Trump and Twitter). In this case, insisting that these concepts are separate stands in the way of possible generalisations.

The suggested method entails resigning from the above categories in favour of discussing forms and contents of fame and relating to problematic celebrities and politicians alike as 'the famous' or 'public figures'. This way, one obtains a common denominator for varied objects of possible comparisons. From there, it is only a step to creating a suitably nuanced study pertinently addressing the celebrity politics question. For instance, imagine a comparison spanning over two hundred years (e.g. 1800–2000) that focuses on two lineages of famous people – one embedded in a selected branch of entertainment and another in politics – and aims at describing the dynamically changing tension between fame forms and contents in case of each lineage. The hypothesis could encompass continuity of both lines (similar relation of forms and contents for each kind of fame) and their eventual convergence. The advantages of such a study over other historical works reflect all the benefits of comparative method and rely on the opportunity to confront alternative developments of the phenomena set against the constant of characteristics they share. Specifically, treating the forms and contents as an intersection of social and imagined realities, where their congruence or conflict find expression, helps navigating the comparison and indicates the internal configuration of an individual's fame. In other words, this approach directs research towards answering questions concerning the mutual influence of the ways in which the famous are produced, mediated, and perceived while offering an inclusive category that enables a researcher to go beyond his or her implicit assumptions about where one's fame belongs.

The above examples and my proposal leave room for the development of more concrete theoretical devices. The significance of this approach lies mainly in the fact that it allows for a unification of various histories relating to different kinds of fame. However, it also tackles old questions and could reinvigorate old debates. Forms and contents could be considered a reformulation of the problem of cultural notions versus social actions, the exact interrelation of which is an object of a major dispute within the social sciences (Navon 1996). The emphasis of fame could be understood as contributing to the debate between social historians, who have been often accused of striving to find universal laws in history, and cultural historians, who have focused on the all-encompassing culture while obsessively avoiding all-encompassing comparisons. In today's academia, building wide platforms for methodological exchange is often approached with suspicion, especially on a subject so easy to dismiss as fame. Historians are affected by it doubly; traditionally concerned with topics like births of nations and empires collapsing they tend to find subjects like celebrity superficial and

limited to very recent mentality shifts. But they cannot ignore their responsibility to look through the widest of lenses<sup>1</sup>.

The question of historicising fame is at its root the question of periodical particularism. Should the categories a historian uses be tailored to his or her materials while any attempt at generalising is abandoned as naïve? Or should historians theorise across the epochs at a risk of misrepresenting the specificity of individual periods? Analogously, the problem of fame itself might be treated by a historian twofold, as a peculiar expression of the zeitgeist or as general phenomenon inherent to human societies. The initial scepticism regarding the latter solution may falter after one learns that many seemingly different approaches to studying fame ask identical questions. However history might never become as universal as many historians tried to make it, it certainly may become less fragmented, as the perspective of fame studies shows.

## Note

1. History of the Walk of Fame [online]. Hollywood Chamber of Commerce. Available at: [walkoffame.com](http://walkoffame.com) [Accessed 16 March, 2018].

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