

FROM HEROES TO CELEBRITIES. Problems of definition and potential solutions¹

The words *hero* and *star* are closely tied and are frequently used as synonyms, which are present in everyday conversation and have long been at the centre of research, but it still cannot be said that they each refer to distinct groups of people that can be clearly defined. The essence of this is that while the word *hero* can be clearly defined in traditional folklore (folk tales and legends) as well as in the works of contemporary popular culture (cinema, literature etc.) in reference to central figures in stories endowed with positive or negative characteristics that also represent the ideal character of a particular community, whose features and life trajectories can be easily analysed,² heroes in contemporary culture are a great deal more difficult to capture. Nowadays, everyday conversation tends to define as heroes a number of people that fall under various categories without identifying any kind of heroic characteristic traits (e.g. courage and self-sacrifice) in the particular individuals. As a result, they define contemporary stars and celebrities as heroes, but they also refer to people in particular jobs (e.g. firefighters and paramedics) as heroes. This mixed use results from imprecise language use, conflation of the words in the media, and basic shortcomings in the scholarly literature on the subject. Indeed, while the heroes in legends and folktales are clearly characterised by heroic features, it is not easy to say the same for stars, even if it seems that way. After all, while the scholarly literature attempts to offer various definitions of the word *star*, their emergence and the various types – moreover, some even attempt to collect various typical attributes of stars and their underlying value systems – the majority of them fail to define the comparative factors based on which their distinction and definition become possible not on their own, deriving from themselves, but in relation to other concepts with similar content. These attempts result in imprecise, conflated, superficial definitions of stars, not merely as famous people and central figures in the news – because this is only a partial reality. This only uses the concept of star as an attribute which is inappropriate for a deeper analysis of the underlying content. It is true that a basic criterion of stardom is fame, but fame itself does not create stars. We cannot call someone a star merely because he or she is famous. Indeed, if this were the case, practically every known politician, including prime ministers and finance ministers, could be called stars, which in the majority of cases is not the case. The word star as a noun should be separated from the attributive usage since this category covers significantly more. In this sense, it conceals the Latin word *celeber*, which

1 The research was supported by the OTKA NK81502 project and the MTA-SZTE Research Group for the Study of Religious Culture.

2 Campbell 1993.

does not merely refer to fame, but also to the moment, in which a huge crowd celebrates, exalts, and deifies the hero. Besides fame, a basic criterion is that he or she has a lasting impact on the community; that is a group emerges from out of the community that knows his or her character, that also recognises him or her and translates its respect to deeds. This, that is respect that can be captured in actions, is called a cult. The definition of the size of the crowd necessary to justify the existence of the cult is incidental, as is the time span necessary for one to separate from the celestoids or “bubble celebrities”,³ whose most important feature is that the camp that knows them increases at an unbelievable scale, and then they pop and disappear after a short period of success. This latter category also implies that the basis for the fame is not (or not necessarily) one’s knowledge or other individual abilities, but an image created artificially by the media which has become integral to the world of ideas among consumers (readers and viewers). As Boorstin has also noted, “the celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness”.⁴ This implication does not rule out that the person declared to be a celebrity may produce a truly valuable contribution to society; it merely refers to the fact that this product is not necessary.

These characteristics, however, are by far not sufficient to define stars since it is a well-known fact, as Hankiss also notes, that the famous, that is people who are known by many and who perhaps also have been surrounded by a charismatic aura by rank, power, money, or some great, special achievement, existed in traditional societies as well. These heroes were surrounded by a number of customs and carefully composed ceremonies and rites and ultimately a myth-making imagination, elevating them to heights above humanity.⁵ At this point, one may ask: what is the factor that separates heroes from stars? Indeed, upon comparing the two categories the difference between them may seem to be insignificant at first sight. Are they truly a manifestation of the same phenomenon and need in different ages?

Researchers on the cult of stardom agree that the star phenomenon basically appeared in tandem with the emergence of the mass media, and then they endeavoured to determine with great passion through thorough argumentation and a review of sources exactly in which century and which decade and in connection with which mass communication genre all this might have taken place.⁶ As Boorstin has put it, “For us, however, ‘celebrity’ means primarily a person – ‘a

3 A celestoid is a famous person whose fame is only the result of his or her presence in the media and stays known only as long as the media keeps the person in the centre. It is “a media-generated, compressed, concentrated form of attributed celebrity” Rojek 2001: 18.

The term “bubble celebrity” was used by Podjed to signify a person who has suddenly become extremely popular through social networking sites and who disappears from the communal memory without a trace once communication about them stops. For more detail, see his study in this volume.

4 Boorstin 1982: 57.

5 Elemér Hankiss mentions as examples the ancient heroes, the Christian saints, god-kings, aristocrats, popes, and high priests along with famous generals, feared adventurers, rebels, and folk heroes, such as Roland, Joan of Arc, Don Juan, Savonarola, and Till Eulenspiegel. Naturally, the list may be expanded with Hungarian names as well. Hankiss 2002: 105.

6 Rojek (2001) and Gamson (1992) basically tied it to the movie industry, while Buda (1994) links it to the press of the 18th and 19th centuries.

person of celebrity'. This usage of the word significantly dates from the early years of the Graphic Revolution, the first example being about 1850. Emerson spoke of 'the celebrities of wealth and fashion' (1848). Now American dictionaries define a celebrity as a 'famous or well-publicized person'. The celebrity in the distinctive modern sense could not have existed in any earlier age, or in America before the Graphic Revolution. The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness."⁷

While this is essential, it does not provide any explanation for various factors or may even lead one astray. One, if we accept the supposition that the previous appearance of the mass media created this category, then logically it would follow that there were no stars earlier and that heroes will cease to exist in future, which is obviously false since the two phenomena existed and still exist in an overlapping manner. If we take this to its logical conclusion, we may wonder to what extent opinions on two famous personalities differ only because one has become popular by word of mouth and the other through written sources. Moreover, Boorstin also points to a false notion that the visual turn has pushed out the oral flow of information, a shift which has not happened to date and probably never will. Furthermore, if we examine the contemporary cult of heroes more carefully, we can find a number of examples of historical figures, whose popularity has been maintained or has (re-)emerged as a result of the mass media as well as stars who have become popular primarily not through the mass media but initially independent of it; this popularity has emerged because of who the stars were, and the mass media has engulfed it only afterwards. The presence of channels of mass communication does not mean, therefore, that the category of hero has disappeared and been replaced by stardom exclusively. The cult of heroes – be they historical heroes, writers, poets etc. – has continued to exist side by side with the cult of stars, although its popularity, active presence in popular culture, and power to shape identity have been gradually decreasing. Stars practically marginalize heroes from everyday or folk culture and exile them to high culture. All this is part of the process which maintains or causes the separation and emergence of folk and high cultures in tandem with the appearance of mass culture as a result of the emergence of mass communication. While in previous periods, however, numerous elements of high culture continually filtered down to folk culture, and the folklorized elements of high culture were integral and inseparable elements of folk culture, by today this relationship is far more superficial and the two types of cultures are increasingly turning away from each other and even rejecting one another.

Similarly, locating the essence of star culture within the typology of stars leads to no result either, since the different types of stars contribute to differences in the cult that emerges among them because the various groups that like a particular Hollywood actor or a footballer with the body of a fashion model are completely different in terms of age and culture – not to mention a singer, actor, or writer

7 Boorstin 1982: 57.

who embodied the spirit of the age or mass taste during the years of socialism.⁸ It is a key factor, therefore, to consider the specific area in which a particular person became famous when considering the manifestation of the cult since in the case of the cult of a musician or actor, imitating their look is an important feature, while this is not actually the case with political stars, who are able to shape one's worldview and cultural memory a great deal more significantly. The specialities are extremely varied – especially nowadays, when the media uses the attribute *star* in connection with everyone without any discernment (e.g. star lawyer, star broker, star hairdresser, star chef etc.) – thus it makes no sense to list these specialities, especially since they merely describe internal differences within the various types but not the complex definition of the word *star*.⁹

There is a significant difference in the way they appear. While some of the scholarly literature – rightly – emphasises that heroes appear as a result of mass needs, they express and satisfy socio-cultural needs and desires generated from the bottom up as a result of which in reality they operate as a point of orientation for the wider social milieu; the figure of the stars in most cases is created on the basis of the needs of mass culture. Although it is connected to the needs of the receiving audience, it is not fully identical with the needs of the masses. Although it is obvious that stars cannot be successfully created with a long-term cult structured around them in an entirely artificial way, despite the will of the masses, this does not mean that the masses are only able to embrace only phenomena that satisfy their own needs.¹⁰ Celebrities provide an excellent example of this since they are the precise embodiment of this process of creating needs from above. Although their short-lived success shows not only that everything can be sold in a consumer society – though only through continual renewal and other marketing techniques – but also that artificially created people become known or popular because they are outstanding and interesting in a positive way, albeit much more frequently in a negative way. However, all of this disappears once they have become known since the factor that placed them in the centre of attention also disappears.

The stars and the myths constructed around them, however, like the mediaeval exempla, express the anxiety of people in modern and postmodern societies resulting from the transformation of their society and culture along with their need to have these problems solved. All of this cannot be complete since basically all this takes place not through a pattern of solution created by the individuals

⁸ A number of examples can be mentioned here, but let us illustrate the difference between two football players, David Beckham, with his macho image that has made him the icon of contemporary mass culture, and the legendary Hungarian footballer, Öcsi Puskás, who was and has remained a national hero for Hungarians, similar to Pelé for Brazilians. Their significance in defining symbolic identities and public opinion differs significantly.

⁹ C.f. Gamson 1992, Barbas 2001, Braudy 1986.

¹⁰ This is discussed, for example, in relation to mass hysteria by Blackman and Walkerdine, who note that the masses in fact do not accept as much of what they receive as was originally presumed. They emphasise that the masses are also able to resist information received through the media or relate critically to it. They argue that the success of the media is the outcome of their compensation for all the phenomena that individuals lack in their lives. Blackman and Walkerdine 2001: 13, 50.

together; but rather they receive a pattern to follow and imitate in such a way that it suggests the false illusion that this depends on one's personal free choice as if following the pattern were the self-fulfilment of the individual and the solution to one's problems. In the meanwhile, in the case of the contemporary star cult, the possibility not to follow the star practically exists only because the individual follows something or somebody else instead, to which one also needs to adjust, therefore losing the possibility of realising one's own needs purely and overcoming one's fears.

No longer do we have the preventive communal censorship that made it possible for various folklore phenomena in traditional societies to be accepted, partially modified, or rejected; it has been replaced by a passive mode of behaviour, which only offers the appearance of activity. In this sense, the star cult and its recent superficial branch, the celebrity cult, is nothing other than a pseudo-event, a true simulacrum.¹¹ That is, it is based on the prior forms of an earlier phenomenon and its function and role in the structure of popular culture are similar, but the functions and characteristics of the original phenomenon have never managed to adapt in their totality.

Another difference between the two categories is that, besides the different channels of acquiring knowledge, the method is also different. While during the periods preceding the emergence of mass communication, heroes were first local heroes and their cult spread from this small community through word of mouth, stars in modernity or postmodernity, thanks to means of mass communication, appear immediately before a wide audience. Their cult, therefore, (usually) does not originate in the local.

In connection with the depth of the cult, we can find interesting but in many cases overtly superficial and emotional analyses, some of which look at the star cult as a religious phenomenon, something that has partly replaced religion as it has lost its significance. It has filled the void, and therefore it is seen as a quasi-, pseudo-, or para-religious phenomenon, a religion substitute. In agreement with Rojek, Cashmore has observed the following: "Celebrities appear as gods in human form or simulacra of departed deities. Celebrity culture, in this view, becomes a functional equivalent of religion, with beliefs and practices associated with religion 'converging' with those of celebrity culture".¹² A shared feature of these analyses is that they attempt to establish a parallel between the so-called institutionalized religions, especially their various manifestations in folk or popular religion, and the dimensions of adoration, characteristic of the star cult,¹³ in such a way that they use religious terminology to describe the star cult by focusing on a few similar characteristic features. This is how stars become gods and saints,¹⁴

11 On the simulacra, see Baudrillard (1996) in more detail. In his monograph, Chidester (2005) interprets as fake a number of phenomena in popular culture that also demonstrate religious functions on the subcultural level.

12 Cashmore 2006: 253.

13 For example, Doss 1999, Doss 2008 and Ward 2011.

14 Ward 2011.

attendance at concerts and funerals or visits to their graves become pilgrimages,¹⁵ and posters of them become icons. There are very few studies, however, that deal with the differences beyond the superficial similarities¹⁶ and analyse which religious dimension can indeed be recognised in the star cult and to what extent it can be recognised.¹⁷ That is, can a star cult in any form truly be identified as a religion? Does it satisfy functional conditions associated with the definition of religion? Or does it much rather refer to a social behavioural form which reveals similarities with religion and the cult of saints in some areas and with the cult of heroes in others? At any rate, the definition of the star cult is aided by its comparison with religion because these authors do not wish to define it as a phenomenon in its own right.

The cult of heroes, stars, and celestoids provides a very powerful demonstration of different manifestations beyond all this. The hero cult is structured primarily around identity and thus manifested on the level of thinking and feeling (e.g. memory and respect) and related actions, primarily in rites tied to remembrance. Although one of the most important dimensions of manifestation in the case of modern stars is identity, there is a much stronger focus on the external patterns of action – which can be, for example, an imitation of the lifestyle and look of the star or pilgrimages related to them etc. – than on the internal, emotional level. The spirit of the consumer society can be captured in an attitude of enjoyment which pushes the more essential, internal elements of identity into the background. At the same time, it can be clearly seen that in the case of the star cult the elements of action often show a closer connection to a kind of pseudo-religious attitude as a result of which the adoration that emerges around the figure of the star may take forms similar to the cult of a saint. All this, however, embraces only a smaller segment of identity, and, in a significant portion of cases, it is unfit to offer solutions to essential questions related to self-identity, worldview, existence, and ways of thinking. The celebrity cult reaches beyond all this in that it lacks any kind of pattern of internal identity; it no longer functions as a point of orientation and remains on the level of frivolous entertainment of the *carpe diem* type.

The most important difference, however, can be detected in the different base structure of the hero and star cults. This difference is similar to that between following tradition and following fashion. On the surface, similarity is created through following or imitating something, but the important content on a deeper level is different. In the case of tradition, we can identify community values, while in fashion it is individual values. In following tradition, individuals also maintain and adapt it to their current circumstances, but in the process they are not performing an individual series of actions. This is partly because following tradition in the majority of cases has taken place in communal spaces; the individual represented his own personal and communal identity in one, and the community

15 This phenomenon is examined in detail in Margry (2008), in which the authors in the volume use the term *secular pilgrimage*.

16 Hopgood 2005.

17 Povedák 2011: 182-190.

confirmed the individual. Moreover, in all cases, tradition is a symbolic storehouse of the values, knowledge, enervation, and information necessary for survival. In connection with that, while the emergence, actions, and evolving cult tied to historical heroes basically occur under circumstances which push community values into the foreground – that is, the historical heroes engage in their individual deeds in the interests of the community and the people – the entire existence of the stars is rooted in individualism. While we cannot meet a hero that has become a hero because he has achieved self-actualization by placing himself in the centre of attention, we can list numerous heroes who have pushed themselves and their personal desires, aims, and interests into the background and acted and suffered for others. Heroes, therefore, can never be understood on their own, only as members of a community, as symbolic embodiments of that community, and therefore serve as models for community identification. In contrast, the star cult is closely tied to some sort of a particular middle-class mythology that centres on individual success. The essence of its mythical element is that it represents the success of the market leaders as if this success were possible without alienation and thus legitimates the entire system of mass culture on the level of a global world order. It offers a false image that provides compensation for the ordinary person following the star that makes him believe that the trajectory and the situation of the star is available for him; that is, it provides an individual pattern of identification, while it is the illusion of the reality that can be achieved.¹⁸

Besides differences in the base structure, an essential difference is expressed in Boorstin's thesis, which states that "we can fabricate fame, we can at will (though usually at considerable expense) make a man or woman well-known; but we cannot make him great. We can make a celebrity, but we can never make a hero. In a now-almost-forgotten sense, all heroes are self-made. Celebrity worship and hero worship should not be confused."¹⁹ The hero cult and the star cult cannot be used as each other's metaphors, but, in light of all this, the question arises whether we are dealing with the manifestation of the same phenomenon in different periods, that is whether the differences or similarities are more powerful and decisive or whether are they only linked on the basis of fame.

18 Baudrillard 1996.

19 Boorstin 1982: 48.

	HERO	STAR	CELETOID
Feature	Famous	Famous	Famous
Method of attaining this feature	Becomes famous spontaneously	Becomes famous through the mass media	Becomes famous through the mass media
Motivations and needs	Fame created through mass demand	Created personalities in general	Created personalities
Social embeddedness	National perception	Popular to varying degrees at a subcultural level, little national perception	Popular at a subcultural level, "unpopularly famous"
Effect on society	The hero cult manifests itself in people's thinking and emotions (e.g. commemoration and reverence).	Action generally plays a relatively strong role in the star cult, e.g. imitation of externals, though it is also apt to trigger emotional responses.	The celeb cult consists almost exclusively of action. It triggers superficial emotions (repulsion or attraction).
Duration of cult	A long-lasting cult, as long as several centuries	Short-term cult of no more than a few decades	Generally nine days' wonders
Depth of cult	A complete mythology is developed around it (including hero motifs).	Mythological elements may emerge around the star.	Tabloids
Underlying value system	Actions performed by them amid circumstances tied to a focus on community values are explained in terms of the interests of the community, or the "people"	The star's entire existence is generally rooted in the soil of individualism, with fame generally achieved for him- or herself.	Complete individualism, perhaps a negative, destructive, anti-social value system as well.

Chart 1. Heroes, stars, and celebs: A comparative characterology

This picture is shaded further by the fact that classical researchers of the star cult are tied to the Western cultural realm and proceed from its associated features, but the operation of post-socialist societies is somewhat different. One of the reasons for this is that the officially communicated value system of the communist and socialist dictatorships basically rejected hedonism and the central role of consumerism. They had an ambivalent relationship to the stars themselves since they primarily constructed cults around political leaders and they sacralised them (in a cult of personality). Popular people not tied to politics, therefore, could have become dangerous, as a result of which it was strictly regulated who could become popular and how. This type of central control and censorship, however, created famous people that were different from those in the West, a fact which could be observed well, for example, in music, where, for instance, the lifestyle, liberalism, spiritual awakening, relationship with the green movement, and anti-political attitude of the Western hippie movement were thoroughly missing in the general populace here. If such bands existed, they were part of the underground

subculture.²⁰ Naturally, these stars did not disappear with the political changes but survived the age, and their legacy is still detectable. This sort of legacy produces stars who are completely incomprehensible for representatives of Western culture and are practically unsellable in the West.²¹

Moreover, the degree of ambivalence in these post-socialist societies in their relation to their historical heroes and the extent of the superficiality of their knowledge of them perhaps stem from this ambivalent legacy. This is partly a result of the fact that the communist and socialist systems only supported a national identity to a limited extent,²² preferring internationalism instead. These political systems created their own heroes, which developed alongside and partly instead of the pantheon of national heroes. They selected from among historical heroes based on conscious political arguments, elevating some of them and providing them with certain schematic marks, while dooming others to being forgotten. The impact of all this appears significantly in the transformation of national identity and development after the political changes. The reconstructions of national identity and the cul de sacs of the reconstruction of national identity are closely tied, therefore, to the cult of historical heroes.

Our conference in Szeged, Hungary, focused on this phenomenon in the autumn of 2011. It was the first conference to deal with the hero and star cults in post-socialist societies. Like every pioneering initiative, this was not perfect either and did not provide a complete picture of the phenomenon. However, we hope that it will not be these childhood illnesses that determine the image evoked in the reader, but rather that this undertaking will serve as the basis for an ongoing process.

20 Klaniczay 2003.

21 Povedák 2008.

22 Brubaker 1997.

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