
Close encounters: Ritualizing proximity in the age of celebrity. An ethnographic analysis of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato

European Journal of Cultural Studies

2014, Vol. 17(2) 149–169

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DOI: 10.1177/1367549413508098

ecs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

For many celebrities, organizing meet-and-greets with fans and followers has become a permanent feature of their public appearances. As yet little is known about the role and importance of such 'unmediated' encounters within the everyday constitution of celebrity culture. Why would fans be interested in the possibility of direct, personal contact with people they already know from the media? To find an answer to this question, this article presents ethnographic research into meet-and-greets with the Dutch artist Marco Borsato. Results show that these meet-and-greets constitute a meaningful experience for those involved: they validate and enhance emotional involvement, serve as status symbols within the fan hierarchy and, in some cases, can fulfil a vital role in personal life narratives of healing.

Keywords

Celebrity, ethnography, fan, mediatization, meeting

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Introduction

Marco Borsato, the most famous singer in the Netherlands, appears in the doorway. With a warm smile he walks into the room and meets the Smith family. Borsato knows what to expect. His fan manager has just briefed him about the family, whose daughter is suffering from a terminal illness. Her wish is to meet Marco Borsato – her biggest idol – once in her life. Borsato puts his arm round the daughter and nods at the parents. They have a short conversation and after a few minutes the singer disappears again, leaving the Smiths visibly uplifted. The family is escorted out of the room by Borsato's manager, making way for the next group: a young couple whose baby had passed away exactly 1 year previously.

Borsato and his management organize on a regular basis so-called meet-and-greets: get-togethers such as the above, which give fans the opportunity to meet their idol in person. Sometimes these are small-scale intimate affairs, intended for fans who – as Borsato's fan manager puts it – could use a little extra support. On other occasions, they organize large-scale party-style events in which interaction with Borsato is limited to eye contact, a hand shake or the odd word of greeting. Although such meetings differ strikingly from one another, they have one characteristic in common: for a short time the fan comes face-to-face with his or her idol.¹

These meet-and-greets with Borsato do not represent some isolated form of incident. Meetings between celebrities and fans are being organized more and more often, in the Netherlands as well as in other countries. For celebrities, they have become a permanent part of their interaction with the public. Yet there has been little investigation into how the popularity of such meetings can be explained. Certainly, the question of authenticity has always played a crucial role in the construction of stardom, involving a search for the 'real' persona behind the manufactured fame (Dyer, 1979; Holmes, 2005). However, the pervasive circulation of narratives and images about celebrities' private life suggests that there are various sources already *in the media* through which the celebrity as flesh and blood person can be found out (cf. Holmes and Redmond, 2006). This extensive access to mediated depictions of celebrities in 'real life' raises the questions: Why do increasing number of fans feel the need to further validate their image about their idol through unmediated, face-to-face encounters? Why actually are meet-and-greets organized? What exactly happens during these meetings? Why do fans attach so much value to this direct contact with celebrities?

A starting point for this article is the idea that celebrities fulfil an important role in contemporary society. Not only are celebrities currently ubiquitous in the entertainment world: other public domains such as politics and sport have for several years been dealing with a process of 'celebrification', in which the celebrity value of a politician or a sports person is going to some extent to determine whether or not they are successful (Rojek, 2001; Van Zoonen, 2005). In the public's eyes, these celebrities are part of a different world. That is indeed what makes them celebrities: the fact that they are 'different' and have a dichotomistic relationship with 'normal people' (Holmes, 2005). There are, however, moments when this gulf is temporarily bridged, for example, during the aforementioned meet-and-greets. In this article, we shall investigate what meaning fans ascribe to such meetings.

Building on the work of Reijnders (2011), we suppose that the influence of the media is all-pervasive in contemporary society, but that this phenomenon has paradoxically led to a situation in which a direct, unmediated experience with people, objects or places from the media has acquired an important symbolic value. We assert that it is at these moments that the virtual world shaped by the media literally acquires a 'place' in the everyday world.

To a great extent, we are groping in the dark on the question of how such processes of appropriation actually come about in practice. Various studies have been conducted into celebrity culture (e.g. Dyer, 1986; Holmes and Redmond, 2006; Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2001) and fan culture (e.g. Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992; Sandvoss, 2005), but empirical research into actual meetings between celebrities and fans is scarce.² Furthermore, the little that we do know is based on a limited number of studies from the United States (Ferris, 2001, 2004; Gamson, 1994). More generally, studies of fan behaviour have a distinctly Anglo-Saxon focus (De Kloet and Van Zoonen, 2007; Ferris, 2010; Van den Bulck and Van Gorp, 2011). Chow and De Kloet (2008) in their comparative study on local fandom argue that this focus risks producing a homogenizing discourse in which 'fan' becomes a universal label. We can also expect that the local or national context might also have an impact on the set-up, the scope and the outcome of meet-and-greets, including the perception of celebrities, the expectations towards them, the reasons why they are admired by their followers and the ways the meetings are experienced and appropriated.

Taking into account such possible interplays, this article focuses on celebrity meetings outside the realm of global stardom and presents ethnographical research into meet-and-greets in the Netherlands. We have chosen to examine meet-and-greets with Marco Borsato because of his popularity in the Dutch pop world and the size of his following. We have attended three meet-and-greet sessions, spoken to the fan manager responsible for setting them up and held interviews with 15 fans who have taken part in these events.

In the next paragraphs, we shall present the results of this fieldwork. In order to give direction to our analysis, however, we must first identify the theoretical framework to be used. As already stated, so far no sound theories about meet-and-greets or other forms of meeting between fans and celebrities have been developed. Existing studies into the ritual dimension of media culture do, however, present us with a good starting block.

Media rituals

Under the influence of post-modern philosophies relating to hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1981) and deterritorialisation (Appadurai, 1996; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988), recent decades have seen attention particularly being paid to the virtual character of media culture. It has been suggested that the rise of the modern media has set in motion a process of *space-time compression* (Harvey, 1990). This, so it has been supposed, has resulted in a society in which the physical-material, spatial character of human culture has become less important.

Recently, question marks have been placed next to this line of reasoning. Various authors have argued that the mediatization of our society has been no simple or comprehensive process, but has arisen in a whimsical manner and is a process that shall never be

complete (Couldry, 2008; cf. Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Morley, 2001). While it is true that the media create a sort of virtual reality, it is a reality with many interfaces and is inextricably linked with empirical, tangible reality. In a comparable way, Reijnders (2011), in his research into media tourism, supposes that it may be the case that society has been extensively influenced by the media, but this has led to a situation in which direct, unmediated experience has acquired a special and irreplaceable value. Because the media has become so important in everyday life, it has become possible to identify a growing need for an unmediated, sensory experience of characters, objects and places, which people have originally come to know in the media (Reijnders, 2011).

These direct experiences with the reality concocted by the media are shrouded in cultural taboos. In the normal run of things, these worlds are indeed categorically separate from one another. As the American anthropologist John Caughey observes, people in modern society live in two separate worlds. On the one hand, they experience the world of 'reality': a sensory reality, able to be perceived and enclosed in time and space. On the other hand, there exists a world of the imagination: a connected complex of stories, images and characters that, as Caughey puts it, derives its primary source of nourishment from the media. In Caughey's opinion, there is generally a clear divide between these worlds. They cross each other's paths only occasionally – a factor which, and we agree with Caughey on this, also possibly applies to the aforementioned meet-and-greets. Such moments are experienced by those involved as valuable but also as extraordinary, as Caughey puts it, because they bring together two transformations: an everyday experience becomes for a short time special and simultaneously what is unusual and unknown becomes normalized (Caughey, 1984).

As Reijnders recently pointed out, the above-mentioned binary opposition between an 'imagined' and a 'real world' is theoretically problematic, for it can be argued that imagination and reality are interwoven in multiple ways. However, we can look at these concepts as an *emic* distinction, as part people try to categorize their own everyday life (Reijnders, 2011). Classical works from symbolic anthropology, in particular two studies by Clifford Geertz (1973) and Victor Turner (1967) also underline this reasoning. In *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), Geertz asserts that every culture is built up from symbolic, dichotomistic categories such as good and evil, safe and threatening or male and female. Although these categories are constructed quintessentially and differ for each society, they are all as a rule regarded by members of a society as being universal truths, as Geertz puts it. When certain phenomena fall temporarily outside of the categorization system – or in the words of Victor Turner (1967) are 'betwixt and between' – then they quickly become regarded as ambiguous and threatening. These phenomena are indeed not only examples of stand-alone anomalies but also constitute a potential degradation of the underlying cultural system.

Meetings between celebrities and fans can also be regarded as 'betwixt and between'. These meetings do indeed constitute a violation of the normal rules of accessibility between celebrities and fans, between the extraordinary and the ordinary, between people with and people without a remarkable social standing (Ferris, 2001, 2004). Accordingly, the British communication scientist Nick Couldry emphasizes the possible disruptive aspects of such encounters in his discussion of incidental meetings with cast members during the *Coronation Street* tour in Manchester. As Couldry states, meetings without formal management could be embarrassing and could destroy the 'mystique' in

which the fans had considerable emotional investment (Couldry, 2000: 97–103). In this article, what we would like to show is that the potential threats arising from this practice are channelled and mitigated by lending a strikingly ritualistic character to organized meetings between celebrities and fans. In other words, meet-and-greets are ritualized meetings in which the contradictions between celebrities and ‘normal people’ are staged and temporarily bridged by the application of an established protocol.

The question is ‘What meaning do these ritualized meetings have for those involved, the celebrity and the fans?’ It is tempting to see the meet-and-greet simply as an instrument for celebrity management. By constructing and staging the difference between celebrities and ‘normal people’, one could argue that the special status of the former is reaffirmed. Couldry comes to a similar conclusion in his study of ‘media rituals’. Although Couldry does not explicitly deal with meet-and-greets, his approach to media rituals can be neatly adapted to these meetings. Media rituals, according to Couldry, are formalized patterns of operation in which the symbolic boundary between ‘inside of’ and ‘outside of’ the media is at the core. A Couldrian interpretation of meet-and-greets would suppose that they involve a ritual in which a symbolic boundary is drawn between celebrity and fan or between those ‘inside of’ and those ‘outside of’ the media. By drawing up this boundary, the meet-and-greet implicitly reinforces the symbolic authority of the celebrity concerned and so – as Couldry’s approach would have it – of the underlying celebrity system (Couldry, 2003).

In this article, we would like to argue that the meaning of meet-and-greets is less unambiguous than might be supposed on the basis of a ‘Couldrian’ perspective. We assert that confirmation of status is certainly an important part of the meet-and-greet process, but that it is not the be all and end all of it. More controversially, we assert that the meet-and-greet is a cultural happening, which involves various parties, in particular, fans, celebrities and media organizations, who each have their own motive for participating and their own perspective on the matter. We assert, in accordance with the work of the cultural scientists Chartier (1984) and De Certeau (1984), that the meaning of a cultural phenomenon arises from a process of appropriation and negotiation, in which the wishes and interests of the public groups concerned should definitely be taken into consideration, next to that of the cultural producers such as the celebrity management. In order to obtain an insight into these wishes and interests of the audiences, it is necessary to investigate further the cultural practice of the meet-and-greet.

The exploration of this meaning-generating aspect of meet-and-greets, however, implies some departure from the Couldrian perspective and a rehabilitation of the relevance of media texts and audience interpretation in this process – dimensions from which Couldry deliberately moves away in his analysis of media power (Couldry, 2000, 2003). In our analysis of meet-and-greets as media rituals, we will turn our attention from the formal patterns of these encounters more towards how the *content* of the meetings is shaped by media texts and the image of the celebrity, and how these factors resonate with the everyday life of the members of the fan community.

Method

Considering that up till now barely any academic research has been conducted into meet-and-greets, this research is of necessity exploratory in nature. We have adopted a

phenomenological approach. Our task therefore consists less of tracing the reality of events ('what really happened') than of getting to the bottom of the possible meanings these events might have for the various individuals and groups involved (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). The research is qualitative–empirical in nature and based on a combination of methods featuring qualitative interviews and participatory observations.

First, a total of 15 Marco Borsato fans were interviewed. These fans were approached following an appeal via the singer's fan club; everyone who responded and had attended a minimum of one meet-and-greet was interviewed. All the respondents except one were women, mostly middle-aged and with a low or medium level of education. The interviews were semi-structured by design. A topic list was used but not strictly applied so that the respondents might have the chance to bring their own subjects to the table (Bryman, 2004). Questions which arose during the interviews with the fans were the following, among others: Why had they signed up for the meet-and-greet? How did it feel to meet Borsato for real? How, if at all, did the celebrity's image change as a result of the meet-and-greet? And how did they feel when they looked back on the experience? The interviews were as far as possible conducted in a safe environment for the fans, if possible in their own homes, and varied in length from 15 minutes to 2 hours.

Second, Nathalie Thielen, Borsato's fan manager was interviewed. This interview was conducted in order to find out about the organisation behind the meet-and-greet. The following questions came up during the discussion. Why had the meet-and-greets been organized? What role and meaning did the meet-and-greets have within the wider framework of fan management? How exactly were the meetings set up? What experience had the fan managers gained and how were the meet-and-greets adapted on the basis of this experience?

Complementary to the interviews, there was participatory observation at a number of meet-and-greets, such as the one described in the introduction. These served especially to chart the ritual character of the meet-and-greet: what actions were taken by whom and in what order? During the meet-and-greets the observer kept as far as possible in the background and kept a logbook to write up what had happened and when. Feedback on interesting observations was requested during the interviews.

Transcripts and observers' reports were examined after the event and compared with one another in an attempt to identify recurring patterns and variations in the meaning of the meet-and-greet experience. On the basis of these comparisons, we were able to identify three predominant patterns: (1) the emotional content of Marco Borsato's music is projected by fans onto the person of Marco Borsato himself; the meet-and-greet serves to validate this act of projection; (2) within the social hierarchy of the fan community, access to and contact with Borsato constitutes an exclusive and therefore sought-after status symbol; and (3) in specific cases, the meet-and-greet is imputed with healing powers. These three patterns will be further analysed in the following sections.

Validation

Valuing Marco Borsato begins with his music. As already stated, Borsato is one of the most successful musicians in the Netherlands. Since his breakthrough in 1994 with the hit 'Dromen zijn bedrog' (dreams are misleading – our translation), he has released a new

album regularly, from which the hits – a couple of exceptions aside – still figure high up in the charts. In the time since then he has built up a faithful following, who not only buy his albums but also attend his performances. If he plays for three consecutive nights in a certain concert hall, for many fans it is not unusual to attend all three performances.

For some fans, listening to his music has become part of their daily activity, embedded in the routines of work and housework:

He has such great songs. For me it is all about the music. I play his music every day. If I'm on my bicycle I play him on my iPod. If I have a half-hour break, I always go for a walk and listen to Marco. Walking back home or riding on my bicycle I have Marco on. I listen to him when I take my dog for a walk in the park. If I have a day off, I listen to Marco for at least an hour. Saskia (44, secretary, Maastricht)³

What can explain the attraction of Borsato's work? The fans interviewed are especially enthusiastic over the way in which he manages to capture certain emotions in his music:

I can become very emotional at some of his lyrics or songs, which manage to touch me very deeply. Or sometimes it's like: isn't it funny that this song happens to be on the cd player, you know? Because it seems to be exactly about you. That is really amazing. [...] That it makes you think about yourself. That is really special. [...] There's always a song where I go, like, wow here it comes again! I really get goose bumps. I can't really explain it, that's just the way it is ... Suzanne (40, profession and place of residence unknown)

Fans recognize the emotions that Borsato sings about and use his work, sometimes consciously, to heighten certain emotions or calm them down:

If I was sad then I would put my favourite song on and that would make me cry even more so that I could get it all out. Or if a happy number came on I could really let myself go and then really feel cheerful. Charlotte (27, childcare worker, Middelburg)

With some songs I think: wow, that really sums up how I'm feeling. Then I sort of feel as if the song makes me stronger. If I'm not feeling so good in myself, just so that I can carry on ... [...] You get a sort of feeling that... well, yeah, you are sort of missing something at certain moments. And I find that that comes out in the music. Miriam (26, chemical analyst, Lettele)

What the quotes above reveal is that Borsato's music is not only a form of relaxation for his fans but can also play an important part in their mood management, by, for example, helping them work through times of sadness or loneliness.

This emotional involvement prompts an interest in the singer's personality. Fans wonder whether the singer, whose voice seems so close to them and in whose lyrics they recognize so many of their own emotions, is like that in 'reality'. On the basis of his music, they have built up a warm and solid connection with him, so it seems. But the fans themselves realize that this connection is primarily parasocial: it is not based on any substantial form of contact but on a projection based on digital sounds and images which the fan has made her own (Horton and Wohl, 1956, cited in Ferris, 2001). The

meet-and-greets offer an excellent opportunity to bring this parasocial relationship to a higher level:

I am happy that I have been allowed to meet him a couple of times. I get the feeling from these meetings that he is exactly as he comes across and he is not just playing a role. So that is really what he is like. And if you see him on television, I like seeing what the difference is in real life. That actually there is no difference. Kim (37, secretary, Julianadorp)

I've met him twice in real life. And yeah, that is every fan's dream. To speak to him just once in real life. When you are such a fan of his, when you go to all his concerts, when you feel that you know him so well, at least in your own mind. [...] It was the best day of my life. [...] I had the feeling that I had known him for ages. But that is, of course, not real, because you only get to know what he lets you see. But my feeling was that I really knew him. It was **the** Marco that I saw just as I knew him from TV. [...] If you then find out that behind the personality there is also a lovely warm man, then that is even nicer. Kelly (21, nurse, Uithoorn)

Then you get talking to him as if he is just one of your mates and later you think: wow, that was Marco Borsato! If you see him on television then he seems like a completely different person or that's how it feels. [...] That there is a television screen between us, I don't know Denise (31, childcare worker, Koudekerke)

Fans like Kelly and Denise hang onto the meet-and-greet as a way of validating their image of Marco Borsato. They want to find out whether he has the same richness of emotion and sincerity 'in real life', that he expresses in his songs. That the meet-and-greet is nothing more than a specific social situation with a strongly ritualistic character – a sort of 'staged authenticity' – does not bother the fans in the slightest. They have complete confidence that an unmediated meeting, face-to-face with Marco, is sufficient to establish whether or not 'the real Marco' is the same person as 'Marco on television' (cf. Ferris, 2001: 28).

Following Dyer, this dichotomy between 'real Marco' and 'Marco on television' can be seen as part of a wider set of oppositions – such as private/public, individual/society – through which the image of stars is constituted and their self is represented. However, as Dyer argues, not only the stars can embody these dichotomies in various ways, but also the public can conceive them in different manners (Dyer, 1986: 10–14). In this respect the establishment of the relation between 'Marco in real life' and 'Marco on television' shows individual differences in the fans' accounts. For Kelly, the Marco who appears on television is exactly the same as the one she encounters face-to-face, and this 'integrity' is further valued by the recognition that '*he is not just playing a role*'. For Kim, the 'two Marcos' are similarly identical, creating the feeling that 'she had known him for ages', but she also acknowledges that this is '*of course, not real, because you get to know what he lets you see*'. In her case, it is less the 'reality' at issue, more the reality of representation, or, with Couldry's words, the authenticity of 'as if' (Couldry, 2000: 89–90): the meet-and-greet creates the opportunity for validating her own fantasy or imagination about Marco. Denise, in turn, takes a – seemingly – contradictory position when stating that Marco on television '*seems like a completely different person or that's how it feels*'. The contradiction here, however, is superficial, for the recognized difference is not the result of a

cognitive comparison between the ‘imagined’ or ‘on-screen’ Marco and the Marco in ‘real life’, but more like an emotional reflection on the *distance* which is normally constructed by the television screen between ‘him’ and her.

On the one hand, the above differences in the interpretations of the fans highlight that making conceptual distinctions between ‘mediated’ and ‘unmediated’, ‘real’ and ‘artificial’, and ‘on-screen’ and ‘off-screen’ become problematic when it comes to the various ways the fans handle Borsato’s image in face-to-face encounters. On the other hand, all the accounts share the underlying motive of the need for validation, the need for an ‘authentic’ experience which can only come into being through bodily proximity with Borsato. In this respect, the differences might be imputable to whether this urge for validation takes place in a ‘rational mode’, a cognitive comparison between images derived from mediated and direct experiences, in a more emotional, ‘intuitive mode’ (Reijnders, 2011) or in the combination of the two.

What then is the image of Borsato precisely that they want to validate? Who is ‘the real’ – or more precisely, the ‘authentic’ – Marco? One thing is immediately noticeable from the conversations with the fans: everyone refers to Borsato by his first name. The conversations are invariably about ‘Marco’ and not ‘Marco Borsato’, ‘Mr Borsato’ or just ‘Borsato’, and there is no question of the conversation being about his band. This manner of speaking is typical of the way in which fans relate more generally to Borsato and his music. Borsato is not seen as the proverbial star, remote from everyday life but as very ‘approachable’ and ‘nearby’. He has remained, to use a popular Dutch expression, ‘completely normal’:

Apart from his good music and his good looks, he is also very accessible to his fans and he is never far away. He is just easy to reach. [...] He is just nice and normal just like you and me. Kelly (21, nurse, Hoorn)

He is very normal, just a regular guy. He is just really nice. Suzanne (40, profession and place of residence unknown)

He is just a normal person, isn’t he? He goes to the toilet, he has showers. But you forget these things because he is famous. You think to yourself: Oh my God, a famous person. Joyce (48, unemployed, Leidschendam)

He has always kept his feet on the ground and that makes him unique. Kees (age unknown, fire fighter, Kerkrade)

Fans talk about Borsato as if he is ‘one of us’ – a friend, a lover, a father or someone they know well, as someone who has not lost touch with ‘normal people’. This image is confirmed in the meet-and-greets. Fans who have taken part in such meetings are full of praise for Borsato’s performance. They remark on how friendly and approachable he was, how he broke the ice by making a couple of jokes and how he was interested enough to take the trouble to get to know about the ups and downs of the fans’ lives (cf. Chow and De Kloet, 2008).

As argued by many authors, the claim of being ‘ordinary’ in the ‘real life’ is an important element of the construction of the celebrity in general (cf. Gilles, 2000; Holmes and Redmond, 2006; Marshall, 1997; Van Zoonen, 2005). The rhetoric of ordinariness is

understood to be part of what is – after Dyer – widely referred to the *paradox of celebrity* (Dyer, 1986): a contradiction between the recognized specialness and uniqueness of the public, on-screen or mediated image and/or performance of the star and the domestic, off-screen life of the celebrity with which the ‘ordinary’ people can identify themselves (Holmes, 2005). For Couldry, this conposition between ordinary and extraordinary plays a crucial role in the affirmation of the symbolic authority of the celebrity in face-to-face interactions with the public: according to him, when stars are approachable, or appear to be ordinary in such interactions, it is precisely the ‘ordinariness’ that becomes the sign of their extraordinariness, suggesting that their ‘ordinariness’ in the extraordinary situation confirm that they are, in reality, not ordinary at all (Couldry, 2000: 95). What is striking in the cases of Borsato’s meet-and-greets, however, is that the ordinary–extraordinary distinction in relation to the selfhood of the celebrity is less apparent: it is in fact the public image of ordinariness – his ‘guy-next-door’ appearance and behaviour on TV shows, videoclips and live performances – which is validated and valued during the meetings.

One might suppose that this ordinariness including being accessible and down-to-earth articulated through staged and mediatized performances is just a unique ‘trade mark’ of Borsato; this way, the above-mentioned ordinary–extraordinary distinction, identified by others as a key constitutive element of celebrification, is just simply naturalized and transposed by celebrating Borsato as the ‘ordinary star’ among the ‘regular’ – meaning: extraordinary – celebrities in the pop world. Looking at the broader spectrum of Dutch ‘stardom’, however, we can recognize that this is not the case: other bestselling singers, like Frans Bauer or Jan Smit also share the same public characteristics as Borsato (cf. Chow and De Kloet, 2008), pointing to wider connections with the cultural ethos in which Dutch stars and the markers of their admiration emerge. This ethos, as Chow and Kloet point out, is largely based on the discourse of being ordinary, emotionally honest and unpretentious in the Dutch society at large, suggesting that Dutch idols are appreciated because they embody this very ideal: in other words, it is exactly the ordinariness which is celebrated by fans in Dutch stars.⁴

The parasocial relationship between fan and artist is not only validated at the meet-and-greets, but also to a certain extent developed into a ‘genuine’ mutual relationship. At least that is what many of the fans aspire to. The respondents seem to derive great value from the fact that not only have they met Marco but that Marco has also met them. This reciprocity constitutes in a certain sense a fulfilment of the parasocial relationship. Borsato seems to be fully conscious of this, for he takes the trouble to remember the various fans by sight and by name as well as details of their personal life stories, as is shown in various interview fragments:

The attention that he pays to fans who regularly attend his concerts is special. He gives them a nod of recognition. And if you, say, meet him, he really takes an interest in your life. [...] if you see him again later, he says something like ‘how did that turn out and how is it going now?’ [...] After our first meeting he recognized me in public a couple of times and showed with a friendly pat on my back or by saying hello that he knew who I was Kelly (21, nurse, Uithoorn)

For someone who should be so distant from you, who you have seen on television, to recognize you as well, that is really nice. Denise (31, childcare assistant, Koudekerke)

For me if I go to a concert, I don't need to go up to Marco, but he still approaches me. He says things like: 'Hey Sas, how's it going?' That is really amazing. That he knows who you are, what your name is and that he just comes up to you ... [...] That he always has a wink for you or a smile or a laugh Saskia (44, secretary, Maastricht)

Fans like Kelly, Denise and Saskia value highly such moments of recognition, in which the one-sidedness of the fan–idol relationship is replaced by a certain reciprocity. A comparable attitude was also noticeable among American fans in a study conducted previously (Ferris, 2001: 44). The question is what this desire for recognition among fans actually consists of. Do they really want to have contact with Marco Borsato the person, or is Borsato actually only a medium and the fans are in fact in search of contact with the thing which Borsato and his music constitute a sounding board for – their own inner world?

Exclusivity

What makes meeting Marco Borsato extra special for fans is that he is not only their idol but also that he is the idol for thousands and thousands of other fans. The idea that the meeting is an exclusive arrangement and that they get to experience what many other fans would also like to experience reinforces the pleasure that they derive from the process:

That was a really beautiful day especially because you know that everyone would really like to do it. And because it was so special meant that I was really nervous about it. Denise (31, childcare assistant, Koudekerke)

Of course it's really amazing if someone who is so well-known and famous gives you special attention. I have to take a deep breath and ask myself why this was happening. I still don't really understand that but I just accept it. Saskia (44, secretary, Maastricht)

You just don't know where to look. And there is Marco just standing there and that is just really amazing. And then you think: Oh my God so many people would just love to be in my shoes right now! Kim (37, secretary, Julianadorp)

If I see him after [a performance at] the Sportpaleis or the Gelredome, then I stand there giving him a hug and I think: this is the man who tens of thousands of people have been screaming at. That is what you realize. Lisa (46, bank assistant, Oss)

In fact, what we are dealing with here is an example of what the French philosopher Rene Girard understood as 'mimesis': imitation as a central part of human behaviour and human desire. According to Girard, human desire is partly directed by the social environment. People most covet what is coveted by those around them. Through this shared desire, there emerges automatically among groups of people competition over the object of desire, followed, according to Girard, by the establishment of a pecking order (Van Beek, 1988).

Borsato's fans also form such an identifiable group of people with a shared desire. They travel together to concert halls, share hotel rooms, go out to eat together

and maintain contact with one another via the very many fan websites that exist on the internet – what are known as ‘Borsato-blogs’. The shared object of their desire is, of course, Borsato himself. He is the personification of his music made flesh and also of the emotions which the fans see mirrored in his music. Borsato is the pivot for his fan community. Access to and contact with Borsato then constitutes an exclusive and much sought-after status symbol that determines someone’s position within the fan community hierarchy.⁵ Jealousy and envy in this regard are not far from the surface:

I have also experienced that I was together with other fans of Marco and that Marco gave me a lot of attention and said such lovely things to me and that we then walked back to the car and that I then had two or three people beside me crying because they had not received any attention. Saskia (44, secretary, Maastricht)

The idea that a meeting with Marco Borsato is special and exclusive is underlined by the ritualized set-up of the meet-and-greet. Usually the meetings are held in places where the fans, under normal circumstances, could not gain access. They are literally taken *back-stage*. After passing through security, instructions are given and the fans are assigned a place. ‘Marco will be here in a minute’ they are then told. Nathalie Thielen, Borsato’s fan manager told us about this:

Then I say ‘He’ll be here in a minute, guys!’. You want to show how special this is. So I say: ‘There are eight of you here and [at the concert in one hour] there are 35,000 people’. We want them to understand how special this is. And mostly they do recognize this but I like getting them excited. Nathalie Thielen (42, fan manager Marco Borsato, Almere)

It is questionable whether it is really necessary to heighten the sense of excitement since most of those taking part in a meet-and-greet experience it as a very exciting event in itself:

That was the first time that I had met him in person. It was really amazing. But also at the beginning really nerve-racking. You think: Oh my God there he is! I had been to a couple of concerts but then you only see him from a distance. Kim (37, secretary, Julianadorp)

Saskia was even a little afraid that the meet-and-greet would leave her with a negative image of her idol and that her emotional investment in the music and the fan community would end up in tatters:

Actually I kind of wanted not to meet him. I was afraid that I wouldn’t like him and that it might put a dent in my whole feeling of being a fan. I don’t know. I didn’t want to meet him. I was afraid. He seemed nice, he seemed lovely and his music was everything for me. So if I went there and ... if maybe I was going to find out that I didn’t like him, that made me very, very nervous. Saskia (44, secretary, Maastricht)

Fans like Saskia are conscious that the meeting could also go badly and that would in fact mean the end of an activity that had given them pleasure and happiness for some considerable time. Real-life encounters can indeed result in disappointment in cases

when the unmediated experience involves the potential threat of destructing the world of the imagination: such confrontations were reported, for example, by Reijnders in his discussion of the reactions of *Dracula* fans when faced with the historical facts about the story (Reijnders, 2011), and by Couldry, who points out that many Coronation Street fans prefer keeping distance from the cast members during the tour, being aware that the actors are by no means the same as the characters they are fond of (Couldry, 2000). In this respect, however, the Borsato meet-and-greets are relatively 'safe': not only because a potential gap between the professional role as a singer and the private self of Borsato is less apparent (as it is in the case of an actor), but also because the very dramaturgy of the meetings (including the gestures Borsato takes, the 'lovely things' he says and the overall affirmation of the image of the 'man of feelings' reflected also in his music) blurs this distinction as well.

Accordingly, things almost always turn out positively in practice. For all the fans who were interviewed for this research, the meet-and-greet with Borsato was a valuable experience, which served to confirm or even improve on the image that they had of the artist. It was an experience in which, in some cases, even powers of 'healing' were imputed to have been present. To understand this aspect of the meetings, the connections between the media texts and the fans' personal life also need to be considered. Our analysis will suggest that media content can constitute an essential factor in the meaning of media rituals – in our case, of the Borsato meet-and-greets.

Healing

Dealing with pain and sadness is a large part of the subject matter of Borsato's music. An example of this is his prominence in the 'Dela Top 50' – allegedly a summary of the songs most played at funerals in the Netherlands. Borsato is only surpassed on this list by the all-time favourite 'Time to say Goodbye', by Andrea Bocelli and Sarah Brightman. Borsato figures at number 2 with 'Het Water' ('The Water'), and three places further down is his hit 'Afscheid nemen bestaat niet' ('There's no such thing as goodbye').⁶

Many of his other songs also deal with the question of how you, as a person, should deal with life's setbacks. In this respect, he tries to avoid a systematically melancholic tone: Borsato prefers to emphasize in his music the willpower and love that people can experience at such moments in an elevated form and which are sometimes needed to be able to withstand such periods. In this sense, 'healing' – the recovery of the appetite for life after a physical or psychological ordeal – forms one of the central themes of Borsato's work.

The relationship between music and healing is not unique to Borsato. In the fields of musicology and psychology, it has been acknowledged for a long time that making and listening to music can have therapeutic value (Aasgaard, 2006; DeNora, 2000; Edwards, 2007; Ruud, 1997). Music can alter people's moods and calm them down. It can transform unhappiness in the listener into happiness (Podolsky, 1954).

Many studies have also appeared about the role taken by the musician in this process. The work of the British sociologist Chris Rojek is important in this aspect of research. One of Rojek's propositions is that sacrality is a universal concept: in all societies certain objects, places or people are regarded as sacred. In secular societies such as ours, as Rojek puts it, sacrality is no longer associated with an official religion but

with celebrities from the media: 'In secular society, the sacred [...] becomes attached to mass-media celebrities who become objects of cult worship. Magic is often associated with celebrities, and powers of healing and second sight are frequently attributed to them' (Rojek, 2001: 53). Rojek talks among other things of the magical qualities which are ascribed to dead celebrities, like the resurrection of Elvis Presley and the pilgrimages to his grave in Graceland. In addition, he points to the attraction that living celebrities command: when celebrities walk about in public, many people feel the need literally to touch them. Perhaps the fact that they project a form of sacredness plays a part in this, Rojek reasons. He describes this as the 'Saint Thomas effect'. Just as Thomas only believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ after he had touched his wounds for himself, so, according to Rojek, do fans have a strong urge to touch celebrities personally to acquire physical evidence of their earthly existence (Rojek, 2001: 62).

For as long as humans can remember, touching a sacred person has brought with it powers of magic and healing, as appears to be the case from a recent study into the history of the 'healing touch'. From the ritual touching of charismatic leaders like Jesus Christ and Buddha (and their followers) to the laying-on of hands by royal families and their seventh sons in pre-modern Europe, physical contact with highly placed or charismatic people has been ascribed magical powers by numerous groups of people (Classen, 2005).

Various elements from theories of celebrity culture (Rojek, 2001) and the history of the 'healing touch' (Classen, 2005) come together in the meet-and-greets with Marco Borsato. What is particularly noticeable is that the fans who are invited to attend a meet-and-greet are often people who have had some sort of negative experience. Every month fan manager Nathalie Thielen receives hundreds of emails and letters from fans with a request to meet Borsato, or in which Borsato is simply thanked because the correspondent has been helped through some difficult period of her life by Borsato's music. In some cases, Thielen decides to invite the fans concerned to a meet-and-greet. If that is impossible for logistical reasons, it can also happen that Thielen visits the fan at their home or in hospital accompanied, of course, by Borsato. Daniëlle, for example, wrote a letter from the sickbed of her daughter – one of the victims of the attacks of Koninginnedag 2009⁷ – in reply to which she received the following telephone call:

On Thursday the telephone rang. It was an unknown number, but I picked up anyway. It was Nathalie and she said: Yes Marco is actually going to come to the hospital. Well, I literally and metaphorically dropped the telephone. [...] The feeling that I had at that moment was indescribable. [...] You ask for something small from him and he actually comes along in person! [...] Senna was alone in a room and we had shut the door. Then there was a knock on the door and someone opened it and he said 'Hey Senna!'. And the look in the child's eyes! It was kind of ... Oh, Marco! Well, the look on her face, she was completely overwhelmed. And you stand there as the mother with tears in your eyes. [...] And then he comes in and shakes everybody's hand and begins to talk and he was really there for her and really paid attention to her. He held her hand the whole time and gave her a cuddle ... Yeah, it was just great. Daniëlle (age and profession unknown, Tilburg)

The coming of Borsato was seen by Daniëlle as a proverbial gift from heaven and a valuable contribution to her daughter's recovery. Suzanne had a comparable experience:

[My friend Kim] was in the middle of chemotherapy and naturally enough did nothing more than sit on the sofa like a zombie. Then one time in the street she saw a black Porsche draw up and she thought is this Nathalie? Then she saw Marco getting out. He sat with her for an hour and a half. It was really nice. Just normal. Not the feeling of: hey there's a pop star on my sofa. There was a nice conversation about her children in a photo. He was even a bit emotional and held her and gave her a hug, you know? That was amazing. [...] She then called me and said: 'You'll never guess who was just here, you know?' Yes it was just really great. Then she said: 'here in my little council flat!'. I said I bet he isn't bothered about that. He also grew up in a very ordinary neighbourhood. Suzanne (40, profession and place of residence unknown)

What is noticeable about Suzanne's description is the paradoxical relationship with Borsato, which was also remarked upon in an earlier paragraph by other fans and in our discussion of the ordinary–extraordinary dichotomy: on the one hand, Borsato is seen as an important and unique person – a famous pop star who turns up driving a Porsche and is a little 'out of place' in a modest council flat. On the other hand, Borsato is regarded as 'just a regular guy from Alkmaar', who in his everyday dealings is very 'down-to-earth' and 'ordinary' and does not feel that it is too much trouble to sit for a whole hour on a sofa beside a fan who is very ill, with a cup of coffee and a biscuit – a living symbol of Dutch modesty (cf. Chow and De Kloet, 2008). Borsato, who '*also grew up in a very ordinary neighbourhood*', represents here the celebrity 'who appear[s] to be fundamentally *unchanged* by wealth and fame' (Holmes, 2005: 31, emphasis in original) – a characteristic which is generally articulated positively in the discursive construction of the celebrity paradox (Holmes, *ibid.*), and a quality which presumably resonates well with the expectations of his followers, given the earlier described realm of Dutch celebrity culture.

What is finally noticeable about the quotations above is the importance attached to physical contact. What recurs in all the interviews is how nice the fans find it that Borsato does not only talk to them but also gives them a kiss, puts his arm round them and – as the fans themselves put it – gives them 'a cuddle'. Proximity is not enough, what is important here is the physical contact. An intrinsic element of the meet-and-greets is the fact that Borsato touches the fans: rubbing the shoulders, an arm round the waist or a couple of kisses – these are elements that recur in the interviews and the fans clearly value them greatly. The physicality of this behaviour is ascribed to Borsato's Italian origins, from which fans draw a contrast with their own self-styled, Northern European 'reserved nature'. Borsato's hugs confirm for the fans his image as a warm, emotionally rich man. Or as one of his fans articulates it: 'Marco is a real people person'.

Once more a parallel can be drawn with the work of Rojek. Rojek (2001) asserts that physical contact with celebrities for 'normal' people can take on an almost magical meaning.⁸ Celebrities are seen as the embodiment of sacrality. This seems also to be the case for fans of Borsato who take part in a meet-and-greet, especially if they, or someone in their family, have been suffering from some serious illness. Their experience is only 'real' and fulfilled if physical contact has been made – if they have encountered Marco Borsato beyond the world of words and images.

Conclusion

In this article, research has been conducted into the meaning that fans of Marco Borsato attach to a meet-and-greet with their idol. On the basis of the 15 interviews and participatory observation during a series of meetings, it can be concluded that the meet-and-greets constitute a meaningful and remarkable experience for those fans researched. In this regard, three recurring patterns can be identified.

First, the meet-and-greet is a means of validating and enriching the emotional involvement with the music and character of Borsato. The fans assert that they feel a strong connection to Borsato's music. They recognize the emotions that Borsato sings about and use his songs not only for relaxation but also to enhance certain moods or to work their way through an emotional experience. Borsato's music, they say, plays an important part in their everyday mood management. Their emotional involvement with the music is projected onto the character of Borsato. Although the lyrics were not written by Borsato himself, his fans assume that he has experienced the feelings that he sings about and that he must certainly be a man of emotional richness. As their estimation of the man and his music grows, there emerges among fans a need to test this image of Borsato on the man himself. Fans expect that the meet-and-greet can meet this need. The parasocial relationship is, as it were, validated during the meeting and is enhanced with an individual, unmediated experience of the man behind the music. What is important here is the supposed reciprocity of the relationship: small signals of recognition that Borsato gives at subsequent meetings.

Second, it has become clear that the meet-and-greet constitutes a much sought-after status symbol among the fans. Although the extent of the involvement varies strikingly, all those interviewed regard themselves not as individual fans but as part of a wider *fan community*. They travel together, talk to each other a couple of times a year, contact each other via the Borsato-blogs and sometimes become firm friends. Such mutual contact reinforces their shared interest. As the fan community takes on a more permanent form, so a certain hierarchy emerges. Within this hierarchy, access to and contact with Borsato constitute the highest level of ambition. The meet-and-greet offers an excellent opportunity for achieving this: the fans can meet their common idol, gain personal insight into what he is like 'in reality' and subsequently share these experiences through the medium of photographs and stories with their fellow fans.

Third, the meet-and-greet can fulfil an important role in personal life narratives of sickness and healing. Although not exclusively so, the majority of meet-and-greets are intended for and coveted by fans who have gone through some difficult experience. Issues of this nature mentioned during the interviews were children with incurable diseases, long-term relationships which had ended or having to deal with the death of a partner or parent. Borsato's music played a significant part in working through such forms of grief and sadness. If it then becomes possible for the fans actually to meet the singer, whose voice was so important to them during their darkest moments, they ascribe to this meeting a particular power. Physical contact with Borsato gives them the feeling that they are not alone and that the emotions which they have felt themselves but have often been unable to articulate or to share, now have a place and are embodied in a man of flesh and blood.

More generally, the above patterns revealed that the content of Borsato's songs, the perception of Borsato as an authentic, integrant personality, and the fact that the extraordinariness of the meetings lies first and foremost in the physical contact with the otherwise distant Borsato all contribute to the significance of the meet-and-greets. If we compare the outcome of these meetings with the features of the encounters with 'soap stars' in Couldry's analysis of the *Coronation Street* tour, striking differences can be recognized: in Couldry's account, being fan of the show generally does not involve emotional investment with the *stars*, and tour participants generally refer to the characters, not to an actor or actress (Couldry, 2000). Apparently, the main organizing principle in that case is the cognitive distinction between fiction and reality made by tour participants, resulting in a playful, but rational comparison between the reality and imagination when entering the set. In that play, the accidental meetings with cast members can be disruptive; therefore, many participants prefer avoiding such direct contacts. In contrast, meetings with Borsato take place more in an emotional-intuitive mode (Reijnders, 2011) in which bodily proximity and emotional fulfilment play the most crucial role.

Such differences not only imply that meetings with celebrities can operate in divergent ways and with different outcomes, depending on the level of organization, the form and the content of the medium and the profile of the audience. They also suggest that understanding meet-and-greets as 'media rituals' requires not only the analysis of the formal categorizations underlying these encounters, but also the exploration of the interplay between the layers of the contexts in which the meet-and-greets emerge and the meanings different actors attach to them.

In this sense, on the one hand, the results of this research seem to be strongly related to the specific profile of Borsato and his fan group. So it is remarkable that the meet-and-greets with Borsato have been so stripped of the trappings of stardom: his fans value the fact that Borsato has remained so 'normal' and 'nice', despite his successful career as a musician. This emphasis on the normalness and down-to-earth qualities of a celebrity ('he must also go to the toilet!') seems much less usual among fans of, for example, celebrities from America (Ferris, 2001, 2004; Gamson, 1994) or Asia (Chow and De Kloet, 2008). Furthermore, as it has been pointed out, the appreciation of these down-to-earth qualities can be linked to the more general celebration of ordinariness in Dutch society at large. In this respect the binary opposition of ordinariness-extraordinariness as a cornerstone of the construction of celebrity and therefore the key to understanding the fan-celebrity relationship has been problematized in this article, or, at least, calls for a more elaborated analysis of the wider societal ethos, cultural dispositions and the related discourses on selfhood in which the star-fan interaction comes into being. Besides that, Borsato has a fan group with a typical social profile: women in middle age. It is questionable whether the sharing of emotional stories about sickness, death and family problems crops up quite as often in other groups.

On the other hand, there are also a number of features common to earlier studies of meetings between fans and celebrities. The need for validation and enrichment of an existing parasocial relationship also often seems to crop up among American fans who participate in fan-celebrity meetings (Ferris, 2001: 44). Such similarities seem to point to a more general pattern. Making sense of these patterns and the underlying variations related to them would require, however, an international comparative study to be undertaken in the

future, in which meet-and-greets with various celebrities from different sectors of society (music, film and politics) would be compared.

What this article has brought to the fore is that fans and other groups in various contexts highly value a face-to-face meeting with their idol. That the celebrity and his fan manager may attach other significance to such meetings, for example, commercial gain, matters little to the fans. For them the meeting with the celebrity offers a means to fulfilling more personal or group-related needs. In this sense, this study underlines the necessity for a more elaborate, multi-actor approach, in which a cultural phenomenon such as the meet-and-greet is not interpreted on the basis of one perspective, but where the interests of celebrities, media organizations and fans are all compared integrally with each other.

This research has been directed specifically at meet-and-greets. The urge for making tangible something that is not tangible but mediated seems to have a greater scope in present-day society. The graves of celebrities, for example, can have immense pulling power for the fans. Striking examples of this are the grave of Jim Morrison in Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris or the mausoleum of Elvis Presley at Graceland. The grave of Elvis attracts more than half a million visitors every year and a few years ago was even accorded the status of 'national landmark'. Such celebrities were during their lifetimes nigh on inaccessible but now fans can get to within 6 feet of their hero. Another example is the vibrant market in clothing, artefacts and garbage of celebrities on websites such as Ebay.com (A piece of chewing gum spat out by Britney Spears can fetch amounts of up to US\$14,000). Sometimes it is not the characters but the places known through media narratives which can exercise considerable pulling power on the fans: various film and television locations have grown in recent years as tourist attractions (Reijnders, 2011).

In this sense, it seems to be the case that there is a broadly held need for *proximity*: people would like to be literally close to the stories and stars which they have grown up with. It could be suggested that this need for *proximity* implicitly betrays a feeling of *distance* – a yawning gap between what is experienced as the world in the media and the world outside of it. As the influence of the media on our world continues to gather momentum, so, it seems, does the unmediated experience acquire a unique, if not magical, character. These moments of proximity – close to Marco – are valued and cherished, for they offer an anchor for everyday life in a celebrity-obsessed society, an anchor for *la condition humaine* in an ocean of stars.

Acknowledgements

Thanks goes to all the fans that have participated in this research project, as well as to the master students of the Erasmus University Rotterdam that have assisted in this project.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. Since the overwhelming majority of Borsato fans are females, in the remaining part of this article fans in general will be referred to as 'she' and 'her'.

2. An important exception is Couldry's analysis of occasional and incidental meetings with cast members during the Granada Studios Tour (Couldry, 2000). However, the features and the context of these encounters differ greatly from organized meet-and-greets, which, as it will be discussed later, result in strikingly different outcomes than the Borsato meetings.
3. All quotes are selected from the interview transcripts. These transcripts are open for co-researchers on request to the first author. To guarantee anonymity, the names of the respondents have been changed, unless requested otherwise by the respondents themselves.
4. Interviews conducted by Chow and De Kloet provide several illustrative examples of how the celebration of ordinariness in Dutch culture resonates with the expectations and attitudes of fans towards their idols: *'I think there is no other country where the people and the artists are so sober'*. [About the possibility of emerging a Dutch Madonna]: *'No. The Netherlands won't take it. If you do it so big and are so big in the Netherlands, they would find you arrogant and tell you to behave normally'* (Chow and De Kloet, 2008: 14).
5. Early studies into fandom tended to celebrate fan groups as active and egalitarian communities (e.g. Jenkins, 1992). Recently, fan scholars have become more critical of power dimensions within fan communities (Hills, 2002: 46–64). This study confirms both perspectives: Borsato fans talk about friendship, equality and loyalty, but at the same time, their fan community is characterized by a clear hierarchy, complete with due tensions and conflicts.
6. For an overview of the 'Dela Top 50', see: http://muziek.dela.nl/uitvaart_top_50.html (downloaded on 20 July 2011).
7. On 30 April 2009, a man drove his car into a festive parade which included the Dutch Royal Family. Eight people were killed, including the driver. The Queen and her family members were unharmed.
8. This can also be the case when people get into physical contact with media spaces in more general, for example, when 'ordinary' people get onto television. According to Couldry, the extraordinariness of becoming part of studio audiences for most people lies less in the opportunity of seeing visiting guests, but to 'touch' or 'being touched' by the medium: to be seen when the camera pans the audience. (Couldry, 2000: 55)

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