

## The ‘star of evil’: Child Murderer Marc Dutroux as a media personality

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**O**NE of Belgium’s most notorious criminals is Marc Dutroux. In the 1990’s he made the news for kidnapping and raping six girls and murdering four of them. He dragged his victims from the streets and took to his house where he had constructed a ‘child prison’ – an enclosed area in his basement where he kept his victims until they had died or, as with two of them, were rescued by police.

The Dutroux case has received a lot of media attention in Europe. The case was brought to public attention on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1996 when two girls were rescued from a basement in a house. The dead bodies of four other girls were dug up. There was more public outrage when it became known that earlier police work was of inferior quality: in a previous house search officers had not given notice to voices of (then still living) children. Also it turned out that the suspect, Marc Dutroux, had been arrested for sexual offences years before, but had been released.

More flaws in the investigation were brought to light when it was revealed that no reconstruction of the kidnapping of An and Eefje (two of the four victims who died) had been made by the authorities. Dutroux denied his earlier confession of murdering his accomplice Weinstein, the suspect Nihoul was intermittently being prosecuted as business partner of Dutroux, and ten witnesses have died as a consequence of the killings, suicides or questionable traffic accidents. These and other incidents have caused many people to doubt whether the Dutroux’ case will ever be completely solved.<sup>1</sup>

Despite many uncertainties one thing stands out: Marc Dutroux is the pivot of the news reports. It is true that speculations of a ‘pedophile network’ have been made and in that Dutroux has also been characterized as the central

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<sup>1</sup>A part of the investigation on Dutroux is discussed in Winckelmans (1997).

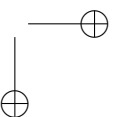
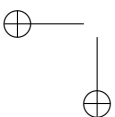


figure. He is ‘the animal Dutroux’, as a large national Dutch newspaper called him.<sup>2</sup>Dutroux is the main character in this drama of evil.

In this article I will attempt to theorize the representation of child murderer Marc Dutroux and other ultimately evil persons. To do so I shall build on conventional star theories by making them useful for ‘stars of evil’. The case material I will be using stems from the period April 23 1998 up to May 30 1998. On April 23 of that year Dutroux, awaiting his trial, managed to escape from prison. He was rearrested the same day, within just hours of his escape but the news reports regarding the sequence of events leading to his escape and re-arrest continued until the end of May of that year.<sup>3</sup> This event is a short and clear-cut episode of the Dutroux case, making its news reports distinct research material. In the years before and after his escape Dutroux has also been in the news, but it is harder to appoint specific dates to the many episodes of media attention given to him and his crimes.

The research material from the above mentioned period consists of 38 articles from two of the largest Dutch newspapers – ‘*de Volkskrant*’ and ‘*De Telegraaf*’ – and 26 news and current affairs television programmes from Dutch public broadcasting organisations.<sup>4</sup>

In the next section I will explore the ideological importance of media stars. After that I will further explore the various existing “star-types”; section 3 will discuss contemporary film – and television stars and in section 4 I will discuss how historical stars are being constructed. The exploration of these various star-types will ultimately feed into an analysis of how Marc Dutroux is represented. In section 5, I will discuss Dutroux as a ‘star of evil’ by proposing

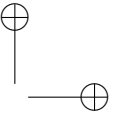
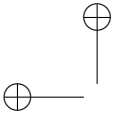
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<sup>2</sup>De Volkskrant, 1998. Restjes ‘witte woede’ bij kindermoord. *De Volkskrant*, 25 April. For this and all other newspaper articles applies: the page number is unknown as the articles have been retrieved from digital archives. The translation of Dutch articles and television programs is mine.

<sup>3</sup>See Leurs (2009) for the controversy that arose over this escape.

<sup>4</sup>De Volkskrant is slightly on the left side of the ideological spectrum, whilst De Telegraaf tends towards the right and is considered to be somewhat populist. I have also included television programmes of Dutch public broadcasting organizations.

Although the escape of Marc Dutroux is a Belgian event, Dutch newspapers and television programmes are valid research material: the Dutch and Flemish share the same language, which allows for news to be exchanged unaltered. Moreover Dutch citizen’s and politician’s were equally bewildered by Dutroux’ escape. A comparison between Dutch and Flemish case material therefore did not bring any substantial differences to light.



two adaptations in star theories in order to enable myself to analyse abject people, such as Dutroux, as media personalities.

## The ideological importance of stars

Belgium is angry, really angry. The sensational escape of public enemy no. 1 Marc Dutroux has sent the people into a blind fury. After the discovery of four murdered girls in his basement of horrors in 1996 Belgium has responded with dismay. But now the country has exploded with fury. As an enraged man from Brussels predicted: "The [theme]colour of the next protest in Brussels won't be white but red".<sup>5</sup>

This is a typical response: Dutroux is a notorious character and every step he takes causes a firm stir. However, it is not inevitable that he gets this much media exposure. For instance, a structural famine in an African warzone costing the lives of many does not get the same amount of attention from media, politicians and the people.

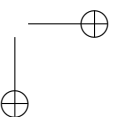
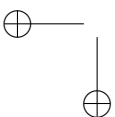
The typical characteristics of television leave little room for abstract notions. Television is able to transmit concrete images, while books use more abstract words to tell, describe, analyse and make judgments. Television places people at the centre: characters turn settings into activities. People have come to be the pivot of other media and their representations because television penetrates most of our culture: newspapers, just like magazines, radio, etc., have copied this way of constructing (news) stories (Fiske 1987, p. 118). In order to understand and analyse Dutroux it is necessary to consider him as a media character.

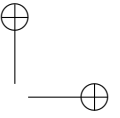
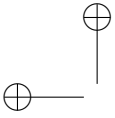
### Characters

Characters on television and in newspapers differ from individuals: characters appear in media. Hamon gives a useful definition of a character. According to him it is:

[...] a bundle of relations of similarity, opposition, hierarchy and disposition (its distribution) which it enters into, on the plane of the signifier and signified, successively, with other characters or elements of the work.

<sup>5</sup>De Telegraaf, 1998. 'Ik schaam me ervoor Belg te zijn' *De Telegraaf*, 25 April.





Hamon 1977.

This definition takes into account that a character is attributed meaning (the ‘signified’) because of textual relations: a character relates to other characters. But a character is also an embodiment of abstract social values: conflicts between characters are results of social conflicts (Fiske 1987, p. 158-159).

[The young Marc Dutroux] turned into an unmanageable rascal that was kicked out of the ‘Institut des Arts et Métiers’ because of placing porn magazines under the tables of fellow schoolboys. Four times he had to change schools, until his father slapped enough discipline into him to get a grade as an electrician.<sup>6</sup>

A text-immanent interpretation of a character lays bare its relations to other characters in order to construct meanings, and it considers characters to be embodiments of ideological standpoints. For instance, as a young man, Dutroux should have acted according to his age. Underlying this is the assumption that he would not have abused and murdered children if he had been a child in an ideological acceptable way himself.

### **Ideology in text and reception**

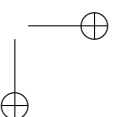
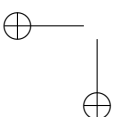
Stars are special kinds of characters: they are not only part of media representations but they are also ‘real people’. Stars have a life both within and outside texts. The latter is what makes them problematic:

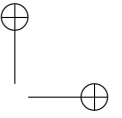
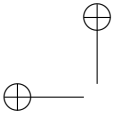
Because stars have an existence in the world independent of their screen/‘fiction’ appearances, it is possible to believe (with for instance ideas about the close-up revealing the soul, etc.) that as people they are more real than characters in stories. This means that they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as ‘characters’ are. Thus the value embodied by a star is as it was harder to reject as ‘impossible’ or ‘false’, because the star’s existence guarantees the existence of the value s/he embodies.

Dyer 1998, p. 20.

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<sup>6</sup>De Volkskrant, 1998. Werkloze wist iedereen naar zijn hand te zetten. *De Volkskrant*, 24 April.



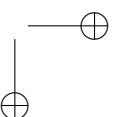
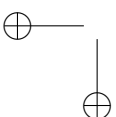


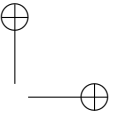
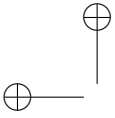
Some values are not just textual matters; they have their extra-textual equals. That does not imply that stars should be judged by their extra-textual meanings: the form in which stars appear are textual constructions. Stars represent people; they fundamentally influence the representations of others in media. By playing a police detective an actor does not only construct an idea of all 'real' police detectives that never make it on TV, he also creates the category of 'police detective': without taking into account a specific portrayal by an actor or a real police detective, the media construct the abstract notion of 'detective'. Stars therefore embody social roles (Dyer 1998, p. 8).

The characters that stars personify carry ideological meanings. Their connotations do not stem from random ideologies; stars (partly) reproduce the dominant ideology. Ideologies can be seen as sets of ideas with which people collectively try to understand their life/world (Dyer 1998, p. 8). Some ideologies are dominant: 'Any dominant ideology in any society presents itself as the ideology of that society as a whole' (Dyer 1998, p. 8).

Ideologically biased statements are presented to us as observations 'of which everyone agrees': an ideology is dominant when it is able to appear as common. Texts express this ideology; this is part of the 'production' of ideology. More importantly, however, it is media audiences who incorporate these ideological texts: media audiences are rewarded for accepting the text's discourses, making it relatively easy to construct meanings. Also, in accepting these discourses, audiences are given a construction of unity in both media texts and their own identities: they get to see themselves as indivisible entities, leaving out contradictions and their accompanying unpleasant feelings (Fiske 1987, p. 55).

For instance, when reading or watching reports on Dutroux it is pleasant to adopt the suggested unity. We are then able to judge him unequivocally. It would cause feelings of disturbance when only parts of the ideology with which he is represented are accepted while the rest is rejected. If we, for instance, only agree with the moral conviction of the killing of children, but not with the upheaval over his escape, we face problems in interpreting the news reports: it makes it impossible to understand the textual relation between both elements. In order to understand the meanings it is necessary to adopt the





unity that is suggested by the text.<sup>7</sup> Identification is therefore based on ideology; it is not just a ‘warm feeling’ for a fellow human being. We find the texts concerning Dutroux to form a unity when we adopt the ideological views on the victims. Only then comes psychological identification. It also works the other way around: when accepting the ideological standpoints on Dutroux, we are placed at a distance from him. He is presented as deviant. Psychological identification is almost impossible as a shared ideological position is missing.

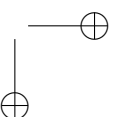
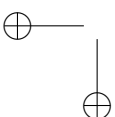
Characters are essential to television and therefore to other media. Stars make up specific types of characters: they are not only media personalities, but they also fulfil a social role. On this level, characters (like stars) carry ideological consequences. Usually stars follow and (re)construct the dominant ideology. Its morals are presented as a unity, creating the condition for the audiences to adopt the same position. The reward for accepting the construction of unity is the unequivocal meaning that can be given to the reports. In the next two sections I will further elaborate on this by discussing contemporary film and television stars (section 3) and historical stars (section 4).

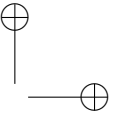
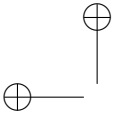
### Contemporary stars: film and television stars

Characters that dominate media representations can be described as stars, e.g. film, television, and historical stars (Pisters 2000). Therefore, one condition for stardom is the existence of media. The audience is separated from its stars by time and place; we only know them through stories and images. ‘In this sense there are no such things as heroes, only communication about heroes. Without communication, there would be no hero’ (Strate 1994, p. 16). The transfer of information is essential for the definition of a star: a star is an actor performing in a specific medium after which his or her character enters another media. His or her fame is a construction that surpasses several media. I shall now discuss the two most prominent types: the film and television star.

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<sup>7</sup>Fiske argues this too, but also notes that true unity can never be achieved: ‘Television’s thrust towards unity in diversity never totally achieves its object: the diversity is always there, both in “the world” that television looks at from the lounge room and in the relationships that its viewers take up with the screen’ (Fiske 1987, p. 58).



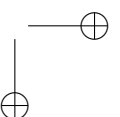
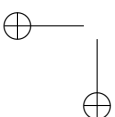


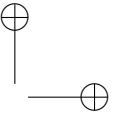
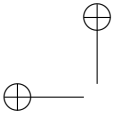
### Film stars

Soon after the introduction of the medium film, several actors received the status of a film star: around 1920 a star system already existed. Boorstin (1992) calls this a shift from the 'star film' to the 'film star': a shift from films with famous actors to personalities around which the film revolves. To fulfil this function, a film star is dependent upon the public opinion of his image. This is not the 'straightforward' image of an actor: Ellis (1991, p. 303) points out that a star is composed of opposing values and an incomplete image. To begin with the latter: the incompleteness of a film star is actually the distribution of image parts over various media but this also exists in the film itself: a visit to the cinema exposes a part of a star image but will never bring us the entire image. A star is a representation, which means that something that is absent is (partly) presented. The conditions for stardom are thus, as previously mentioned, the possibility to appear in the media. There is, however, another feature: the image of films stars is incoherent. Film stars are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary.

Before I discuss this incoherence, I would briefly like to mention Dyer's (1998) vision of the opposing values in a star. Where Ellis 1991 speaks of an ordinary and an extraordinary person, Dyer states four opposites: firstly he briefly describes the ordinary-extraordinary opposition and secondly, the stars' symbolization of the individual personality as well as of their common cultural values. The audience can also read stars according to both the dominant and the opposing ideologies despite the fact that stars generally put forward the dominating values. Fourthly, stars represent both commercial and artistic values. Of these aspects the ordinary-extraordinary opposition is the most important. Identifying the extraordinary within a star is not difficult: in their films people like Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger can apparently deal with the whole world. Off the screen they are almost as successful; both are joint directors of an international chain restaurant (Planet Hollywood). It is interesting to see what makes stars ordinary.

The lifestyle of stars is despite their outrageousness (enormous houses, expensive parties) viewed as ordinary. Dyer gives three explanations for this. Firstly film stars are seen as ordinary people who just have a luxurious lifestyle which does not affect their personality. Besides that, their stardom emphasizes human capabilities (e.g. the ability to take hold of our own destiny) at the





expense of others; the characteristics represented by stars do not come forth of material circumstances. Both explanations are based on the idea that human aspects are not bound to material factors. The third and last explanation is:

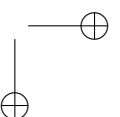
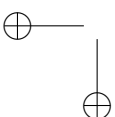
[...] stars represent what are taken to be people typical of this society; yet the types of people we assume characterise our society may nevertheless be singularly absent from our actual day-to-day experience of society; the specialness of stars may then be that they are the only ones around who are ordinary!

Dyer 1998, p. 43.

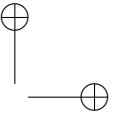
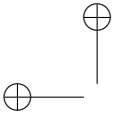
Stars therefore *are* not that ordinary, they just *seem* ordinary; ordinariness is purely a construction of the media. The ordinariness of a star rounds-off their character: 'a man of flesh and blood'. A film star has more characteristics, some of which are not visible. The media audience can then be surprised by the unexpectedness of their performance. The result of multiple characteristics is that film stars are never completely good or bad; they possess characteristics that fall into both categories.

### Television stars

Television stars are constructed just like film stars: they are formed by discourses. Yet there is an important difference. Where film stars bring about a complex game of the ordinary and the extraordinary, television stars do not: they are presented with a lot of glamour. Therefore everyone who frequently appears on the television screen is a star; weather men are television stars just like presenters of game shows, football commentators and news readers. In fact, it is because of their presence some do not call them a star. Ellis (1991) calls these categories 'personalities', whereas Meyrowitz (1994), Boorstin (1992) and Dyer (1998) speak of 'celebrities'. However, whichever term may be used these authors do ascribe television stars the same qualities. Ellis views a 'personality' as '[...]someone who is famous for being famous, and is famous only in so far as he or she makes frequent television appearances' (Ellis 1991, p. 314). For instance, Paris Hilton is a star because of her constant appearances on television. If she appears in related media (e.g. gossip magazines) it is not to play the game between the ordinary and the extraordinary; she appears in the gossip magazines so that we can check whether







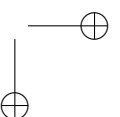
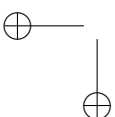
her personality deviates from her television role. Rarely do we discover another personality than the one we already know of being famous for wanting to be famous. Whether you call them 'personality' (Ellis 1991) or 'celebrity' (Meyrowitz 1994, Boorstin 1992 and Dyer 1998), they imply almost the same: we know television stars for their previous appearances. The definition of Meyrowitz for a celebrity is someone '[who is] being widely known for being widely known' (Meyrowitz 1994, p. 63). Boorstin uses a similar description 'The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness' (Boorstin 1992, p. 57). Dyer borrows this term from Boorstin.

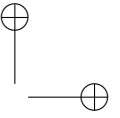
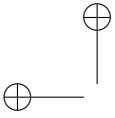
In this section the two most obvious types of media characters have been taken into consideration: film – and television stars. Film stars have an incomplete and incoherent image. Boorstin considers the extraordinary as a characteristic of stars from the past in contrast to contemporary stars: 'The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name' (Boorstin 1992, p. 57). This shows that stardom is historically bound. The following section will show how the changes that stars have gone through are a consequence of the changes in dominance of various media-types.

## Historical stars: electronic, typographic and oral heroes

Typically contemporary behaviour suggests equivalence between stars and the audience; stars are 'exactly as ordinary as real people.' Old stars such as gods and heroes on the other hand show 'ideal ways of behaving' (Dyer 1998, p. 21-22). The ideal behaviour of former stars is based upon a larger distance towards the audience. Gods and heroes fulfil an exemplary function; they are the inaccessible ideal that people strive towards but can never reach.

The historical change of an exemplary function to that of equivalence is the result of innovations in media technology. Inventions such as the printing press, television and internet have transformed the star discourse and therefore our conception of stars (Strate 1994, p. 17). McLuhan formulates the importance of media specific properties in what has become a famous pronouncement '[... ] "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action'





(McLuhan 1964, p. 24). He considers media as extension pieces of human capacities. By changing the medium, the sensory experiences of people change. Thus the hearing capacity is very important in a world without the alphabet: tales must be told and listened to. In the ‘alphabet era’ the eye becomes more important: tales are written down and are read (McLuhan, M. and Fiore, Q. 1967, p. 44). However, the influence of media specific properties reaches further than just changes in the use of our senses. Written stories differ from told tales; it is through the alphabet that the novel can adopt its characteristic form.

Characters in novels are capable of character development: a novel shows ‘life by time’<sup>8</sup>. Each media era has its own stars. The star discourse of our time relates us on a more or less equal level with the star: they are partially ordinary and ‘merely’ show a ‘typical way of behaving’.

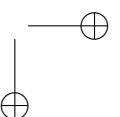
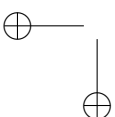
Historical stars have a discourse that is almost the opposite of contemporary stars. The historical development of stars has been divided by Strate (1994) into three parts: in our times there are the ‘electronic heroes’ who replaced the ‘typographic heroes’ that in turn originated from the ‘oral heroes’. The modern ‘electronic hero’ has been formed by an environment in which telecommunication plays an important role; information can be multiplied or shared rapidly. Because the emphasis lies on speed, the new has priority over the traditional. The old is too slow whilst the new is simply new enough. For this reason the ‘electronic hero’ is a contemporary character: he or she can become famous extremely fast but shall, as a result, remain a ‘light figure’:

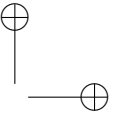
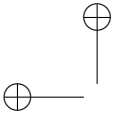
[...] the electronic hero is no hero at all. [...] Unlike the heavy figure of oral culture who is qualitatively greater than us, or the typographic hero characterized by significant achievement in a specialized sector, the light figure of electronic culture is ordinary, just like us.  
Strate 1994, p. 20.

This reminds us of what Meyrowitz, Boorstin and Dyer define as ‘celebrity’ and what Ellis calls ‘personality’.

The stars of our time followed after the ‘typographic heroes’. The stars from written tales are not as temporary as the ‘electronic heroes’ but are also not ‘flat characters’. Because information could be stored in writing, a character could be detailed and subtly developed, unlike the instant loss of infor-

<sup>8</sup>Dyer adopts this quote from Forster. See Dyer (1998, p. 94).





mation in contemporary times; books are not as temporary as television programmes. The 'typographic hero' is a 'realistic', mortal character that can be admired for its magnificence. Hamlet is an example of a 'typographic hero': he is impressive as a prince, erudite ('to be or not to be'), but above all he is also a waverer. '[... ] typographic heroes are known for their ideas, their intellectual and creative production. Action may still be present, but it is the mental, not the physical, that is emphasized' (Strate 1994, p. 19).

'Typographic heroes' are famous for their actions as well as their mental performances. But there is also another characteristic:

A further difference between oral and literate cultures is that in the latter, a clear distinction is made between fact and fiction, leading to a further distinction between fictional and nonfictional heroes, a distinction that does not exist in oral cultures.

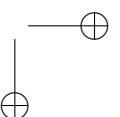
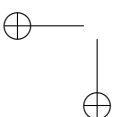
Strate 1994, p. 19.

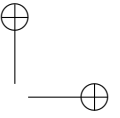
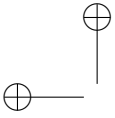
According to Strate the oldest star category is the 'oral hero'. This is because information could not be put down into writing but could only be remembered. These characters are out of proportion ('larger than life') and super human: Moses split the Red Sea, Thor rode on a carriage through air and allowed it to thunder and Heracles brought back the dog Cerberus from the Hades. Indeed no human tasks.

Limited capacity for the storage of information in turn limits the number of heroes possible in oral cultures so that they tend to be composite figures; the actions of many are attributed to one hero. Needing to be both economical and memorable, oral heroes tend to be predictable, characterized by clichés and formulas (e.g., clever Odysseus, brave Achilles, etc.). They also tend to be impersonal, generic, or type characters, as details relating to individual idiosyncrasies would tax the storage capacity of collective memory and are not essential for cultural survival. Moreover, to enhance memorability, the stories of oral heroes are dramatic and conflict-oriented, characterized by contests and combat.

Strate 1994, p. 17-18.

Just like those of contemporary film and television stars, the characteristics of oral heroes are generally representative of valued and beloved personalities. In this light, it is of interest to explore how an abject personality, such as Marc Dutroux, has gained stardom. Just like the aforementioned





stars, Dutroux is a well-known personality, who has been widely discussed in the media. However, the theories on stardom need to be adapted in order to be able to understand villains such as Dutroux. In the next section I will firstly discuss Dutroux on the basis of existing ‘star theories’, after which I will propose two adaptations of theory in order to be able to understand Marc Dutroux as a ‘star of evil’.

### **Dutroux as a ‘star of evil’**

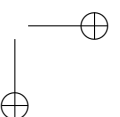
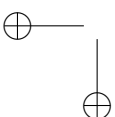
Dutroux is the focus of the press coverage on his escape. He is represented as a morally abject person with an iron grip upon his surroundings. Not only are his two accomplices under his control but also his opponents. He governs as a mighty sovereign and acts upon his own discretion. That is, at least, the construction of Dutroux’ character within the media. Dutroux does not have a supporting role, he is the main figure. He has the same function as the leading figures of a story: he keeps the story going.

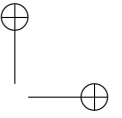
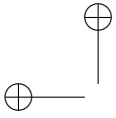
As Dutroux is dominant in the media reports concerning his escape I attempt to understand him as a ‘star’. Dutroux also has an image that is distributed over various media. He has gained his greatest fame through television but he has also appeared in newspapers, magazines and on radio. No single medium brings the image-parts together. Dutroux possesses this characteristic of film stars: his image is also incomplete.

However, Dutroux’s characteristics do not entirely fit conventional star theories: In contrast to ‘common stars’, he is morally evil.<sup>9</sup> And unlike with film stars, the ordinary and the extraordinary in his case do not go hand in hand. It is not difficult to view Dutroux as extraordinary: he represents ‘The Evil’. He is exceptionally bad in his deeds. However, it is impossible to assign him ordinary characteristics. In the media researched, Dutroux’ character has

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<sup>9</sup>There are no adequate theories on morally abject stars; theories on e.g. ‘Blaxploitation’ stars are not appropriate. Although ‘Blaxploitation’ star theories deal with ‘bad ass’ characters, they stand in an ethnic context (Koven 2001). Dutroux lacks this context, which would make it incorrect to relate him to such stars. The horror genre also provides hardly any ties, because it is concerned with fictitious bad guys that are not part of a public debate. There is, however, literature on serial killers (e.g. Seltzer 1998), but this does not explicitly and exclusively deal with the media appearances of suchs morally abject persons; it is mainly concerned with causes and impacts of their crimes.





not been rounded-off. In the Dutch television programme *Netwerk* a voice-over explains: 'Dutroux represents all that is evil'.<sup>10</sup> Never does Dutroux become ordinary: 'Not only were the young girls kidnapped by Dutroux terrified, his wife did not dare open her mouth when she was addressed by him. And even the prison guards preferred to meet his wishes'.<sup>11</sup> Apparently Dutroux is singularly able to scare many different people. It is impossible to call him an ordinary person; Dutroux is not a 'round character'. Nowhere does he become ordinary. He has the image of being exceptionally evil without being ordinary at the same time. He thus partly shares the features of a film star: he is incomplete and extraordinary, but he is never ordinary.

Moreover, Dutroux only partly resembles TV-stars; his regular appearances on television do not represent the earlier mentioned phenomenon of being 'famous for being famous'. Because Dutroux is famous for being a morally abject person we have reason for knowing him from somewhere. We know his deeds, mourn the victims and are outraged, scared or angry, when we see him on television. In the news coverage it becomes apparent that he is not famous for the sake of being famous:

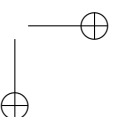
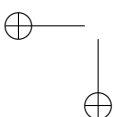
In 1993, the administrating minister of justice Wathelet signed the request for the early release of Dutroux for these crimes (the rape of five minors in the eighties). Barely on free foot however, he once again choose the path of destruction. After the discovery of four dead young girls in his cellars in August 1996 he was made to serve the sentence for the previous rapes as well.<sup>12</sup>

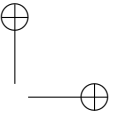
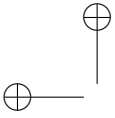
Dutroux appears on television because he has committed terrible crimes and turned the country 'upside down' with his escape, which led to the resignation of two ministers. He appears in the news because he is, amongst others, the topic of debate within the national government. Not something that could be understood as fame without any other qualities. Though television is the main medium in which he appears, he is not a television star. He is not 'famous for being famous'.

<sup>10</sup>Netwerk, 1998. Avro, April 23.

<sup>11</sup>De Volkskrant, 1998. Werkloze wist iedereen naar zijn hand te zetten. *De Volkskrant*, 24 April.

<sup>12</sup>De Telegraaf, 1998. België in rep en roer na 'vrijlating' Dutroux. *De Telegraaf*, 15 May.





In short, Dutroux fulfils the characteristic of incompleteness but it is impossible to see him as ordinary: he is famous for his extraordinary actions. Dutroux is also not entirely seen as a television star: he is not, as aforementioned, ‘famous for being famous’. Each time he appears on the television it is not to take part in a game or talk show (the two formats most suitable for fame-for-fames-sake). Each time he appears in a programme, it is because of his moral abject characteristics. He is the kidnapper, violator and assassin of several children.

The two most important contemporary star categories are partially applicable to him, but to typify his character more closely we must take into account his extraordinary characteristics. The extraordinary is central to the representation of Dutroux; he never becomes ordinary. His image is extremely one dimensional: ‘[... ] Marc Dutroux, the most hated criminal of the country [... ]’<sup>13</sup>, ‘Dutroux stands for excessive evil [... ]’<sup>14</sup> and ‘public enemy number one.’<sup>15</sup> He is too one dimensional for the ‘round character’ of a novel or a film character. Everything we learn about him reinforces what we already know, which makes identification almost impossible. As such he does not resemble contemporary film or television stars, who display ‘typical ways of behaving’. As a discursive construction, he more closely resembles the characteristics of historical stars.

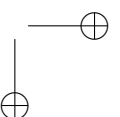
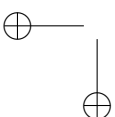
Similar to historical stars there is a large distance between the star and the audience. Through the specific technological properties of media they embodied ‘ideal ways of behaving.’ They had an exemplary function that the ordinary public could attempt to pursue but would never reach. Dutroux is not an exemplary character, but he does share the large distance from the audience with stars from former times. He has a perversity that ‘ordinary people shall never reach’ but also do not wish to reach. He more closely resembles typographic and oral heroes than electronic heroes such as film and TV-stars.

As with typographical heroes, Dutroux’ physical appearance is highly dependent on the mental connotations triggered by his actions. The Dutch television programme *Netwerk* states that Dutroux had altered his appearance weeks

<sup>13</sup>*Jeugdjournaal*, 1998. NOS, April 24.

<sup>14</sup>*Netwerk*, 1998. AVRO, April 23.

<sup>15</sup>*Vandaag*, 1998. TROS, April 23.



before his escape, making him unrecognizable during his flight.<sup>16</sup> It seems as though this was a premeditated action; his physical perversity (escaping in 'disguise') originated from mental perversity (a strategy of defeating morality). Such 'intelligent perversity' is unforgivable. Moral abjection is pre-determined, systematic and even rational. And that reason betrays us, makes it still more shocking. A poor consolation is that Dutroux is physically recognizable as an abject character: 'during his escape Dutroux wore pale blue prison blouse, blue trousers with white lining and white sport shoes'.<sup>17</sup>

However, something else is at play with Dutroux: fact and fiction merge. He is attributed all kinds of fictional quotes and ideas. TV presenter Stefan Sanders points out that Dutroux' motive to escape has been annexed by the Belgian press: he only wants freedom, but it is presented as if he wants to trick the country.<sup>18</sup> Dutroux partially resembles 'typographic heroes': he is famous for the mental aspect of his actions. But he does not fall into a discourse separated from fiction; he is simultaneously real and fictitious.

The typographic heroes were preceded by oral heroes. What Dutroux shares with these oral heroes is that he is also out of proportion, 'larger than life'. Dutroux is '[... ] the most famous Belgian criminal of this century [... ]'<sup>19</sup>: he is not only the most famous criminal (as in exceeding the status of fame), but also of the entire century; he could be seen as the most famous Belgian of the century.

Vivid are still the images made Friday morning at one o'clock the day he was brought back to his cell in Arlon. Eyes closed, poised in the back seat with a broad grin on his face, he lets himself be transported back. Marc Dutroux had succeeded again: the country was on edge and two ministers had resigned. "You see, I can boss everyone around", is what he apparently called out when being arrested.<sup>20</sup>

He is excessively evil because he is in everything, even in his (alleged!) ideas and facial expressions, infinitely abject. Besides being super human 'oral heroes' are also 'conflict oriented'. Dutroux is central to a tale twisted

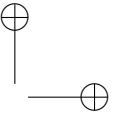
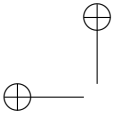
<sup>16</sup>*Netwerk*, 1998. AVRO, April 23.

<sup>17</sup>*De Telegraaf*, 1998. Regering België wankelt na ontsnapping Dutroux. *De Telegraaf*, 24 April.

<sup>18</sup>*Het Blauwe Licht*, 1998. VPRO, April 29.

<sup>19</sup>*De Volkskrant*, 1998. België en Dutroux. *De Volkskrant*, 25 April.

<sup>20</sup>*De Volkskrant*, 1998. Restjes "witte woede" bij kindermunument. *De Volkskrant*, 25 April.



with conflicts. The representation of Dutroux contains similar conflicts. Wilt-ing, the spokesman of the Amsterdam police force, lets Dutroux ‘clash’ with the innocent that form the rest of society: ‘someone this dangerous [...]’.<sup>21</sup> He is also allocated qualities that are for that moment speculative: ‘[...] child murderer Marc Dutroux’.<sup>22</sup> He has, at the moment that this newspaper bulletin was written, not yet been condemned for child assassination. Yet Dutroux has already been placed in a conflicting situation.

The preliminary conclusion can therefore be drawn that where Dutroux, as a morally abject person, deviates from contemporary stars, he does resemble historical stars: he partially resembles ‘typographic heroes’, but has more in common with ‘oral heroes’. With ‘typographic heroes’ he has in common his mortality and his mentally charged actions. There is however with ‘typographic heroes’, a clear distinction between fact and fiction; this is not the case with Dutroux. As such he more resembles the ‘oral hero’, the oldest star type: he is an exceptionally ‘flat character’ in conflict. Morally abject persons such as Dutroux take position between the ‘oral’ and the ‘typographic heroes’, whereby they have most in common with the oldest stars. This may be considered as a critique on McLuhan: media specific properties are apparently not mighty enough to dominate the contents of the media entirely. Stars that are negatively assessed (from the devil and Medusa to Dutroux and Bin Laden) are not ‘round characters’ that are now presented as human despite the change in media forms. The McLuhian power of the media has been reserved for the positively assessed stars: they have grown along with the media developments. Moral goodness has become more human whereas moral perversity remains at a distance.

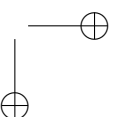
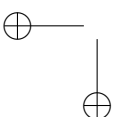
Dutroux is, just like every other moral abject person, not completely in accordance with ‘oral’ and ‘typographic heroes’: he is not a goodhearted darling like Salomon or Noah. To understand Dutroux theoretical adaptations are necessary.

### Two theoretical adaptations

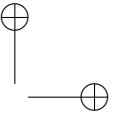
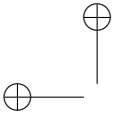
‘Oral’ and ‘typographic heroes’ fulfil an exemplary function: their behaviour is a directive. Because Dutroux has a different exemplary function,

<sup>21</sup> *Barend en Witteman*, 1998. VARA, April 23.

<sup>22</sup> *De Telegraaf*, 1998. Dutroux-rechter Wathelet wankelt. *De Telegraaf*, 2 May.







he is of course the 'anti-example', he can only be understood with theoretical adaptations. To understand Dutroux as a 'star of evil' two aspects of the theories of historical stars must be modified.

Firstly historical stars were greatly loved whereas Dutroux is unloved. His infamously is proportionate (if that were measurable) to the degree that he exceeded the dominant moral standards. As this is an obvious adaptation I shall be brief; an example of a negative appraisal can illustrate this point. Dutroux is not merely scorned in an academic sense, people would rather see him dead than alive.

The Belgian children themselves reacted disbelievingly. "Let them shoot him down," called the youngest occupants of the country. Others are frightened that Dutroux shall escape his sentence. "Then he shall surely return from a far country and with another face," stated an 11-one year old boy.<sup>23</sup>

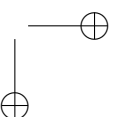
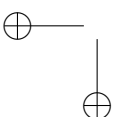
This plea for a death sentence originates from the conception that Dutroux has not only committed evil deeds but that he *is* indeed evil. He is an immoral beast. The first adaptation of the theory of historical stars speaks for itself: where King Salomon and Noah fulfil a positive role, Dutroux is as a morally abject person who is assessed very negatively. I mention this obvious adaptation for the sake of completeness.

The second adaptation is more complex. For this we must firstly consider Fiske and Reeves. Fiske understands television as a text that moves between two poles: on the one hand there are forces that strive for the closure of meaning, on the other hand there are forces that strive for openness of meaning, so that the audience can negotiate its contents (Fiske 1987, p. 84). The opposition of openness and closure is what Bakhtin refers to as 'heteroglossia'. Reeves explains this term:

*Heteroglossia*, the concept at the heart of Bakhtin's philosophy of language, is, according to Holquist, "as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide [...]". Reeves 1987, p. 151-152. Emphasis in original.

A heteroglot text contains several meanings unlike a monoglot text, which contains a singular message. The plural meanings in heteroglot texts (Fiske

<sup>23</sup>De Telegraaf, 1998. Ontsnapping 'monster' teveel voor ouders. *De Telegraaf*, 24 April.



calls these open texts) has consequences for the position of a star: the media representation of a star is an open discourse. In other words: a star discourse has several layered meanings. Moses can be considered a leader (a sociological explanation), God's gift (the Jewish-Christian-Islamic vision) or a false guide (as the admirers of the Golden Calf saw him); he carries several meanings. This is not the case with Dutroux, who in contrast to Moses is negatively assessed. He is not multi-interpretable: child psychiatrist Peter Adriaansen calls the escape of Dutroux a psychological calamity for children. "In their eyes Dutroux is no longer a human of flesh and blood, but the personification of evil."<sup>24</sup> This negative appraisal is not only reserved for children: "The escape of national enemy no. 1 is experienced by the larger part of society as an unprecedented international embarrassment".<sup>25</sup> Dutroux is therefore not a heteroglot star. But how should we then judge his discourse? He is not merely a monoglot (or closed) text; there is more at stake: Dutroux is absolutely hated.

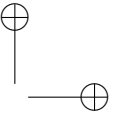
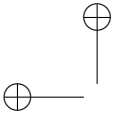
Reeves applies a discursive reading of 'stardom' and can therefore conclude: "[...] a star is the *discourse* of an *individualized social type* – and as such, the star represents a *strategic socio-ideological worldview*' (Reeves 1987, p. 154. Emphasis in original). Stars produce social meanings that contribute to the 'maintenance of society in time': they represent cultural values that either match or are in conflict with other cultural values.<sup>26</sup> We now reach the core of the second theoretical adaptation. Dutroux is not only void of heteroglot texts but also of conventionally closed monoglot texts. His discourse is not simply or incidentally a restricted meaning; it is part of a strong

[...] "Opprobrious discourse". This is a kind of moralizing discourse which reproaches and rebukes, which scolds and condemns, which expresses disapproval of actions or individuals. It is discourse which carries the implication that the actions are shameful or disgraceful, and hence that the actions bring shame, disgrace, or discredit to the individual or individuals who performed them.

<sup>24</sup>De Telegraaf, 1998. Ontsnapping 'monster' tevel voor ouders. *De Telegraaf*, 24 April.

<sup>25</sup>De Telegraaf, 1998. Regering België wankelt na ontsnapping Dutroux. *De Telegraaf*, 24 April.

<sup>26</sup>This can be understood as a critique on the 'famous for being famous' theories on stars. They suggest that contemporary stars do not possess any qualities; however, their core quality is that they can align the meanings they generate with wider cultural values. It is their merit that they are reproducing the meanings and values of the society in which they function.



Thompson 1997, p. 45.

The texts, in which the non-fiction 'stars of evil' like Dutroux are central, are closed in their specific manner of giving meaning: they are morally compelling.<sup>27</sup> This despite the fact that (partial fiction, partial non-fiction) historical (oral and typographic) stars were generally not just positively assessed, but also the discourse concerning them was relatively open and not always of a moral nature: they could also carry character values that were not linked to ethics. As such, the biblical hero Samson boasted his strength, that was, until Delila deprived him of his long hair unprecedented. With Dutroux of course no doubts must exist in relation to the portrayal of good and evil; the closures in the texts concerning him are meant as moral lessons.

The name Dutroux emerged for the first time in august 1996. The disappearance of a number of young girls had disconcerted Belgium. On July 4th 1996 the parents of An Marchal (18), Eefje Lambrecks (19), Laetitia Delhez (14), Sabine Dardenne (13), Julie Lejeune (7) and Mélissa Russo (8) made a plea to the yet unknown kidnapers and that moved the entire country: "Whoever you are, we beg you to return us our children." When Dutroux was arrested on August 13th 1996 it was already too late for four of the six girls. Only Sabine and Laetitia could be rescued on time from the cellars of the child murderer. Julie and Mélissa had died of starvation when Dutroux was caught for theft and no one could look after the children.<sup>28</sup>

These descriptions leave little room for textual negotiations. The abomination Dutroux causes gives him the titles '[... ] the "animal of Belgium" [... ]'<sup>29</sup>, '[... ] "state enemy number one" [... ]'<sup>30</sup>, '[... ] public enemy no. 1 [... ]'<sup>31</sup> and '[... ] "monster of Belgium" [... ]'<sup>32</sup>. Television programmes

<sup>27</sup>For the attention for 'serial killers' in popular culture and the relation between popular culture and actual serial killers, see Seltzer (1998).

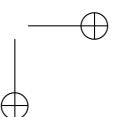
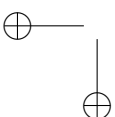
<sup>28</sup>De Volkskrant, 1998. België leeft al anderhalf jaar met zaak-Dutroux. *De Volkskrant*, 24 April.

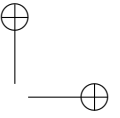
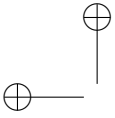
<sup>29</sup>De Telegraaf, 1998. Boswachter held van België na Dutroux-tip. *De Telegraaf*, 24 April.

<sup>30</sup>De Volkskrant, 1998. Belgische kindermoordenaar baant zich een weg naar de vrijheid met ongeladen pistool; Oplettende boswachter ontdekt Dutroux, vastgelopen in de modder. *De Volkskrant*, 24 April.

<sup>31</sup>De Telegraaf, 1998. 'Ik schaam mij ervoor Belg te zijn'. *De Telegraaf*, 25 April.

<sup>32</sup>De telegraaf, 1998. Ontsnapping 'monster' teveel voor ouders. *De Telegraaf*, 24 April.





reconstruct his movements in ‘slow-motion’<sup>33</sup>, which causes a dramatisation of the discourse. This is reinforced by commentators who isolate by blame: ‘Belgium in deep crisis after escape Dutroux’<sup>34</sup> and ‘He once again holds the entire nation in seizure’<sup>35</sup>.

In short, we can typify Marc Dutroux as a ‘star of evil’: he is the representation of a person with exceptional moral perversity. To be able to read him discursively, we must relate him to historical stars. With the ‘oral hero’ he shares the attribute that he has an exceptionally ‘flat character’ situated in conflict. With ‘typographic heroes’ he shares their mortality and mentally charged connotations. In contrast to Dutroux, fact and fiction are clearly separated with ‘typographic heroes’. That places him in between ‘oral’ and ‘typographic heroes’ whereby he shares most attributes with the oldest star types. However, he does not entirely correspond to these star types either, therefore two theoretical adaptations have been necessary. Firstly Dutroux is negatively assessed whereas ‘oral heroes’ were generally positively assessed. Secondly, he plays no part in a (relatively) open text but is part of an ‘opprobrious discourse’: a strongly moral directive. Dutroux as ‘star of evil’ contributes on his part to the conservation of cultural and moral standards: he is (literally) the absolute anti-example.

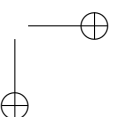
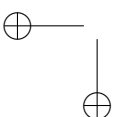
### **Conclusion – Dutroux as a morally abject character: the ‘star of evil’**

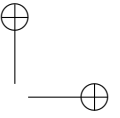
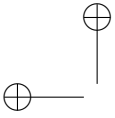
In order to enable myself to describe Dutroux as a ‘star of evil’ I had to take into consideration the importance of characters. Television centres on the representation of people and with the central position of television in the media landscape the remaining media (in this research the newspapers) also give people centrality. The most important characters become media stars; they represent the dominant ideology which has consequences for media consumers. Television viewers and newspaper readers receive a pay-off for adopting their reading strategy: as a result the process of giving meaning to a text

<sup>33</sup>E.g. in: *2Vandaag*, 1998. EO, April 24.

<sup>34</sup>*Journal*, 1998. NOS, April 24. 2000 hrs.

<sup>35</sup>*Nova*, 1998. NPS/VARA, April 24.





becomes univocal. The audience shall therefore usually adopt the dominant ideology as represented by stars.

Next, I have examined the various existing star types. We have seen that the image of film stars is incomplete. Moreover, film stars are incoherent; they are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary. Television stars, on the other hand, do not embody this ordinary-extraordinary contradiction: on television you are a star, simply because you are a star.

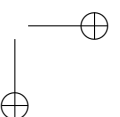
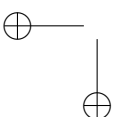
This notion raised the question of how to understand Dutroux as a character. Dutroux could not be categorized under the obvious 'film and television stars'. He merely fulfils one of the two necessary characteristics of a film star: his image is incomplete. Also, moral abject persons like Dutroux are indeed extraordinary but are in no respect ordinary. Furthermore, despite his multiple television appearances Dutroux proved not to be a television star. He is famous for his actions; he is not 'famous for being famous'. As such Dutroux therefore deviates from contemporary stars and shows a stronger likeliness to historical stars.

Dutroux as a 'star of evil' requires two adaptations to be typified between 'oral' and 'typographic heroes'. With the 'oral heroes' he has in common that he has an exceptionally 'flat character' which is in conflict. With 'typographic heroes' he shares their mortality and the fact that their actions have a mental connotation. One difference, however, is that in the reports on Dutroux fact and fiction cannot be distinguished. The 'star of evil' therefore takes position between the 'oral' and the 'typographic heroes'. But two comments are necessary; morally abject persons are always assessed negatively, whereas regular historical stars were generally assessed positively. Secondly, they cannot be placed within (relatively) open texts but are subjected to an 'opprobrious discourse': strong moral directives. 'Stars of evil' such as Dutroux are the absolute anti-example.

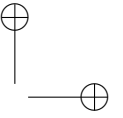
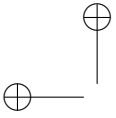
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