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The Nobel celebrity-scientist: genius and personality

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Scientists are a poorly covered area of research in the field of celebrity studies. This article attempts to rectify this issue by discussing representations of science and scientists in a televised Nobel Banquet on Swedish public-service television, SVT. The televised Nobel Banquet is a genre hybrid that consists of two genres; namely, science communication and award show. Drawing on cultural, media, and gender studies, this article examines the mediated persona of the scientist in the televised Nobel Banquet via contextualised textual analysis. The main questions of this article are as follows: in what ways do the media, the genre, and the idea of geniality affect the representation of the scientist? The article suggests that the increasing ‘celebrification’ of scientists is characteristic of the past several decades, and that, among other factors, this has been due to the entry of aspects of entertainment into banquet broadcasts. Through such processes, the ‘celebrity-scientist’ has emerged within the high-status sphere of science. However, a very specific type of celebrity is represented in the Nobel context: the celebrity-scientist is commonly a white man of high education whose fame has been reached through hard work in competition with others of the same kind. This representation of a scientist and its associated quality of genius will here be examined from a gender perspective.

Keywords: celebrity; science; television; Nobel Prize; gender

Introduction

Nobel Day is celebrated each year on 10 December, a day when the world’s most prominent scientists are praised for their work and awarded prizes. This day represents the culmination of several weeks of activities in which press, radio, TV, and web media discuss success narratives of the natural sciences in relation to Nobel Prizes in Physics, Chemistry, and Medicine.¹

The Nobel Foundation, an independent non-governmental organisation founded in 1900, is the sole owner of the fortune Nobel left behind upon his death. The executive board of this foundation is comprised almost entirely of scientists, including representatives of the four prize-awarding bodies stipulated in Nobel’s will. The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (KVA) selects the Nobel Prize Laureates in Physics and Chemistry, as well as the Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, which was instituted in 1968. The Nobel Prize Laureates in Physiology and Medicine are chosen by the Nobel Assembly at the Karolinska Institutet (KI). The Nobel Prize in Literature (awarded by the Swedish Academy) and the Nobel Peace Prize (awarded by a committee chosen by the Norwegian Parliament) have different, non-scientific profiles, providing awards for outstanding work in the field of literature and for activities to promote peace and fraternity, respectively.

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Nobel's will makes no stipulation, however, with regard to the Nobel event that currently receives the most public media attention, the Nobel Banquet. The Swedish public-service TV company Sveriges Television (SVT) broadcasts the event live over an entire evening. With an average audience of 1.2 million viewers (out of 9.6 million Swedes), this broadcast is by far the most popular aspect of the entire Nobel Day, surpassing even the prize ceremony itself (Mediamätning i Skandinavien www.mms.se). The Nobel Banquet, much like its preceding award ceremony, includes certain representations of scientists and science in general. These representations are given meanings that are deeply rooted in a specific time, place, and culture. The Nobel TV broadcast openly mixes entertainment and science, yet behind these are also factors of economics, culture, and politics. Together, these elements form the significant and polysemic media text that is 'the Nobel Banquet', which communicates notions of class, gender, ethnicity, nation, politics, and economics in interrelation with science. The visual and verbal representations of this event both create and reproduce an image of science and the scientist to a geographically expansive and diverse audience.

Peter Weingart (1998) has pointed out that, while the relation between the media and science has a long history, there are certain new features of this relationship today. He describes this modern relationship as a 'science-media coupling', which he predicts will be even more important in the future:

With the growing importance of the media in shaping public opinion, conscience and perception on the one hand and a growing dependence of science on scarce resources and thus on public acceptance on the other, science will become increasingly media-oriented. (Weingart 1998, p. 872)

This article will examine this science-media coupling with a focus on media representations of the Nobel Banquet. The article will begin by discussing how TV has transformed the Nobel Banquet into an award show. This will then be followed by a discussion of the representation of scientists as both celebrities and geniuses.

Method and theory

The history of the broadcasting of the Nobel Banquet dates back to 1950 (six years before the official start of SVT), when the prize ceremony and five minutes of the banquet were shown via TV technologies in two separate locations (a small room within Stockholm's Concert Hall and a cinema) to specially invited guests (Lemmel 1999). In 1959, a longer 45-minute live version of the banquet at Stockholm City Hall was broadcast, and in the 1980s the duration of the banquet was further extended. Today, the broadcast lasts more than five hours and is interspersed with short pre-recorded interviews and background material. Save for 2007, when TV4 held the broadcasting licence for the Nobel Banquet, SVT has broadcast the banquet directly from the Blue Hall of Stockholm City Hall.

This article performs a close analysis of more than 80 hours of broadcast footage. Aside from a few broadcasts in the 1960s and early 1970s, nearly all of the banquets are accessible for viewing from 1976 onwards. Given the length of each broadcast (today roughly five hours), I have analysed every other broadcast from 1976 to the present day. This is one of Swedish TV's oldest programme formats, which allows for the comparison of historical differences in terms of the way science is regarded and represented. Furthermore, interviews have been conducted with prominent figures within the Nobel

system, as well as individuals at SVT who have worked on the TV coverage of the banquet.

Chris Rojek (2001, p. 17) argues that celebrity status can include three categories: ascribed, attributed, or achieved. In the first case, celebrity is inscribed at birth, such as the individuals of royal families or the children of celebrities. In the second case, celebrity derives from appearances in the media. In the third case, celebrity status is achieved by a person who has accomplished something.² Here Rojek mentions sports and movie stars as examples, although scientists who have received a Nobel Prize could also fall within this category.

The field of celebrity studies has so far predominantly examined stars in various fields of popular culture (e.g. pop music, Hollywood movies, fashion, sports and reality TV) to the neglect of celebrities in more prestigious, high-status contexts, such as economics, politics, the fine arts, and the sciences. The lack of research on the latter is probably due to the traditional but mistaken view that celebrity culture belongs solely to low culture. More specifically, there is a particular lack of critical research on the Nobel Prize, especially the scientific Nobel Prizes. Previous research has approached the Nobel Prize from a variety of different perspectives (for example, Altman 1978, Zuckerman 1977, Feldman 2000, Lindahl 2001, Abukhanfusa 2001, Joseph 2002), yet a critical examination of the scientific Nobel Prizes and their relation to the media is missing. Two rare exceptions in this regard are Mulkay (1984), who, from a social interaction perspective, has studied the praise shown to the laureates and their respective responses, and Källstrand (2012), who has studied the representation of the Nobel Prizes in the press from 1897 to 1911.

According to Dayan and Katz (1992/1994), the Nobel broadcast can be understood as an annual media event that follows a standard narrative model for such an event, including a contest, conquest, and coronation. The narrative of the Nobel Prizes begins with a contest between various researchers concerning the solving of problems. This is then followed by the conquest for a prize via each year's winners of the Nobel Prizes. The final coronation of the award ceremony then comes in a final celebration (i.e. the banquet, which mixes science and entertainment).³ Nick Couldry (2003) has criticised Dayan and Katz's notion of the media event, arguing against their understanding of the media industry's role in such events as merely 'depicting reality'. According to Couldry, the media works to construct the event. That is, Dayan and Katz examine a media event in terms of its reflection in the media, whereas Couldry, in discussing what he calls a media ritual, places more emphasis on how the media constructs such events. However, there is perhaps a third way to understand the relationship between media and science in the Nobel Banquet. That is, the banquet might be interpreted as a co-construction that involves both the media and the scientific community (Ekström 2004). The banquet is obviously constructed by the media, yet it is also highly regulated and influenced by the scientific community, as the Nobel Foundation is dominated by scientists, and the broadcasting rights to the event are owned by Nobel Media AB, an affiliated company within the Nobel sphere that has great influence over broadcast content. The banquet produces ideas and beliefs about what science is, within the scientific community and the media as well as in society and culture at large.

Much like Chris Rojek (2001, p. 45), I approach celebrity from a poststructuralist perspective in this article. Studying representations of a scientist from a poststructuralist perspective does not intend to examine who he or she truly is, but to understand representations of scientists as socially and culturally mediated. Informed by cultural, media, and gender studies, this article studies the mediated persona of the scientist in the

televised Nobel Banquet through contextualised text analysis. The term ‘mediated persona’ in this article denotes not only an image created by the media that is loosely attached to a living individual (Evans 2005, p. 19), but also an image created by both the media and the field of science in collaboration. This paper consistently uses ‘he’ when speaking of a scientist to emphasise one of its results, namely that the dominant discourse in media texts constructs the scientist as a man.

The Nobel Banquet and television

The few studies that have examined media representations of the Nobel Banquet (Ramel 1994, 2001, Lemmel 1999, Flavo and Lindblad 2000) suggest a strong scepticism to pervade the field of science towards the media. In particular, the award committees of both the KVA and the KI have protested against the media’s infiltration and alteration of the banquet. Such resistance has been expressed in defence of research and science from mass media popularisation and glamorisation. A similar tension has been expressed in relation to the Nobel literary prize. In a conversation between Swedish Academy members Per Wästberg and Anders Österling, the former once argued that ‘the attention to the Nobel Prizes has created an enormous interest but also a vulgarisation of it all’. Wästberg stated: ‘I think it is mass media that has caused this. I mean television’ (Odelberg 1977; my translation).

A contemporary expression of resistance can be found in this study’s interview with a former member of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in the Nobel Committee for Physics, who states:

A: I must say . . . if you try to grasp the essence of this TV transmission and these five hours, if you asked me if it actually speaks to something about being a scientist, not a thing I would say! Not a damn thing!

Hillevi: Mm.

A: But you will gain insight into how to cook for many people, and you can see . . . how it looks at the cemetery where the Nobel Laureates are buried and such things. I mean . . . there’s actually incredibly little in the broadcast that could be used to explain how wonderful it is to be a scientist! (Interview, 10 October 2013; my translation)

In its desire to strengthen its brand, the Nobel Foundation board appears to be more open to the requested changes of the media than its award committees. In his autobiography, the former CEO of the Nobel Foundation, Stig Ramel, explains how he, in cooperation with the royal family, reformed the banquet’s format to increase its ‘televisuality’ (Ramel 1994). Ramel began to change the banquet and lighten up the event overall in 1974 by decreasing the number of speeches and placing them under time restrictions, as well as introducing student orchestras.

The strategy for the celebration was to begin with pomp and ceremony, a magnificent entry down the steps to the roaring accompaniment of the almost forgotten City Hall organ, the Nordic region’s most powerful, then continue with ceremonial toasts, and then gradually become sparkling with fun. (Ramel 1994, p. 222; my translation)

A definite turning point in the event came in 1991, when the Nobel Prize celebrated its ninetieth anniversary. This year, the award ceremony took place in the Stockholm Globe Arena sports stadium. Ramel had some difficulty in persuading the board that the Globe

could be used for other things than ‘loud rock concerts’ and ‘noisy hockey derbies’ (1994, p. 266). Only because of the Pope’s service within the Globe would the board accept that the arena could be a possible location for the Nobel Prize ceremony. According to Ramel, the location was a major success:

It was magnificent and beautiful for television. It looked even better on TV . . . It was worse for those who sat in the stalls. Personally, I had a giant Japanese television camera in front of me, but I could comfort myself with the fact that the broadcast went out across the world by way of ultra-modern technology, ‘high vision’, which meant that the viewers saw the show better in Tokyo than they did in the Globe. (Ramel 1994, p. 267; my translation)

Ramel also contacted a group of creative professionals concerning the highlighting of Swedish handicrafts at the anniversary event. Thus, special Nobel housewares were produced, including china, glasses, cutlery, and tablecloths, all of which were included in the event itself. According to Ramel: ‘The Nobel Banquet was designed to be a work of art where service at the tables would be combined with music and dancing and the theme of the four continents would recur in different colours and music’ (1994, p. 269, my translation). The Nobel banquets following this anniversary event have been similarly designed ever since, although with varying themes from year to year.

The guests of honour at the Nobel Banquets are, of course, the event’s laureates and their families, yet these only make up a fraction of the approximately 1300 people who today dine in the Blue Hall of Stockholm City Hall. At the top table presides, aside from the Nobel Laureates and their partners, the Swedish royal family, including the king and queen, their three children, and the latter’s partners. Also included at this table are the king’s sister, ministers, diplomats, the chairman of the Nobel Foundation, and academy members, among others. Around the hall, there are also other famous figures from politics, business, church, culture, science, and other fields of society. All are dressed in full gala attire, with ladies in long dresses and their finest jewellery, and gentlemen in evening dress, preferably including their medals. Candlelight and stunning flower arrangements adorn the tables, where a three-course dinner is eaten accompanied by fine wines. The climax of the banquet is the dessert, served by a large number of waiters marching down the magnificent staircase, accompanied by music and fireworks.

At the award ceremony, which is held in the daytime and at a different location to the banquet, a prestigious and solemn mode is maintained, with the scientists’ achievements and science in general held in the highest regard. This is symbolically emphasised when the assembly, including the royalty, rises when the award winners enter. The speeches at the award ceremony are each related to award-winning discoveries, and the TV commentators of the event do not report on seemingly frivolous topics (such as dresses), but research. Compared with the award ceremony, the banquet is more glamorous, although it retains a focus on science in its own manner.

However, after Nobel Day in 2013, the largest Swedish broadsheet paper criticised the staging of the event by Swedish public-service TV. The critical editorial stated the following:

If only SVT could take their public service mission more seriously and let the superficiality, frivolity and royal splendour play supporting roles. The Nobel Banquet is not the Oscars. Instead, it offers a great opportunity to share, in an easy way, the achievements and dedicated research of brilliant minds. (Birgersson 2013; my translation)

The editorial writer's dissatisfaction with the Nobel Banquet derives from the fact that the event is a mixture of two different genres: science communication and award show. Science communication is often understood as involving the translation and dissemination of scientific results to an uninformed audience according to a linear and hierarchical distribution model (Ekström 2004, p. 10). A statement by the CEO of the Nobel Foundation, Lars Heikenstam, speaks to the banquet's efforts at science communication: 'despite or perhaps because of the glitz and glamour, as long as the Nobel Banquet can get people interested in science, the broadcasts have a *raison d'être*' (interview, 1 February 2013).

The televised Nobel Banquet can be viewed as a genre hybrid that, on the one hand, promises its viewers information on science, and on the other, glamour, which is a key component of many award shows. These shows have become increasingly common in TV content over the past decade. Swedish TV broadcasts galas where the best TV programmes, movies, sports accomplishments, music, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender or questioning) individuals, among others, are praised. The most popular of all award shows worldwide, however, is the Academy Awards. The Academy Awards began in 1929 as a dinner event at which prizes were given out. In 1945 the gala was broadcast on American TV for the first time, but it was not until the 1950s that it took on the glamorous tone that has become its distinctive characteristic today. The new format of the awards was developed in relation to TV coverage. In 1955 one reporter noted the following, echoing Ramel's vision to increase the 'televisionality' of the Nobel Banquet:

Every word, every motion was designed for the camera. No more was the glittering festival a self-conscious performance with television's cameras guiltily watching what they could. Oscar has broken the twenty-five-year shroud of dignity, dullness, and routines for its sprightly marriage partner, television. (Levy 2003, p. 32)

There are many more similarities of form and content between the Nobel Banquet and the Oscar show. In his comprehensive book on the Oscars, Emanuel Levy (2003) highlights numerous characteristics of the Academy awards that are similar to the Nobel Banquet. Much like the Oscars, the banquet represents an annual symbolic ritual that is rooted in a country's culture and aims to celebrate something that the country is proud of. Both award ceremonies include an element of surprise. For the Oscars, the element of surprise pertains to who will receive the statuettes, whereas for the banquet the event's entertainment and food are kept secret until the last moment. Both events take up a large space in the TV schedule, speaking to the symbolic importance of each. Both events are also more or less fashion shows at which women's dresses are commented on in detail. As the Oscars commentator Randy Tomans noticed in 1997, 'Second only in interest to the Oscars themselves is what the ladies are wearing' (Levy 2003, p. 22).

Celebrities are also an important component of both the Oscars and the Nobel Banquet. In the case of the Nobel Banquet, celebrities are mainly members of the cultural and social elite and are not from the sphere of popular culture, which the Oscars is more associated with. However, elites are also important to the Oscars. Levy argues that, 'From the beginning, it has been an important issue to bestow prestige on the event by including dignitaries from the cultural and political milieu' (2003, p. 25). While celebrities from popular culture are not invited to the Nobel festivities in Stockholm, they are invited to the Nobel Peace Prize awards in Oslo, which hosts many famous individuals, especially those from the American film and popular music industry. There are, however, certain limitations to these invitations. The celebrities must be 'serious' character actors or musicians

that are free of past scandals. The prize show genre utilises celebrities as their protagonists, working to make publically known individuals even more well known via celebrity-spotting opportunities. Because it is expected that viewers will be interested in famous faces, the event's commentators put considerable energy into knowing everything about them. The importance of the award event is measured by the number of celebrities its gala can gather.

Both the Academy Awards and the Nobel Prize are global events that are covered by the mass media worldwide. Furthermore, while most Oscar winners are white men, so are the Nobel Laureates. An Oscar means financial gain both for the Oscar-winning actor and the movie he or she stars in (Levy 2003, p. 298). Similarly, a Nobel Prize facilitates the acquisition of new large grants, more books sold, and better jobs with higher positions (Zuckerman 1977, English 2005). In an interview with a reporter at the Nobel Banquet in 2013, Stephen Chu, the 1997 Nobel Laureate in Physics, stated that he would probably not have been offered a job as Obama's energy minister if he had not become a Nobel Laureate. While Nobel Laureates often speak of the importance of curiosity-driven research in their acceptance speeches, at the same time they do not hide the fact that their research can be applied. For example, the discoveries of two 2013 Nobel Laureates in Medicine led to the production of Botox.

It is the argument of this article that the Nobel Banquet has gone through the same development as the Academy Awards in terms of its ever-increasing focus on aspects of entertainment throughout the end of the twentieth century. This gradual change has not only been questioned in editorials such as that cited earlier, but also the scientific community itself. The fusion of science with glamour has provoked ambivalence in the community, as the mix of 'serious' science communication discourse and the 'feminised' popular culture⁴ threatens to devalue the status of the scientist, and thus his research and results, as well as the status of science overall. At the same time, as Peter Weingart (1998) predicted nearly two decades ago, the creation of new audiences and venues for the dissemination of knowledge has become a necessary part of the scientific fields' self-promotion efforts, in order to motivate the existence of science as an independent actor who is at the same time heavily tax-funded part of society. An unsolvable dilemma for the scientific community, it seems.

The scientist as celebrity

In the late 1970s, the Nobel Banquet took an interesting turn in terms of its expressed attitude towards scientists. This began with increased elements of entertainment and extended air time, both of which cater to celebrity culture. Today, much like the actors of the Academy Awards, a scientist can become a celebrity through the televised mediation of the Nobel festivities. Such a representation of the scientist is a co-construction of both the Nobel Foundation and the media, both of which, as already mentioned, face resistance and criticism from the scientific community at large for this very reason.

Television media require not only performance but also a person. Furthermore, according to the logic of TV broadcasters, a person needs to be a personality (Langer 1981); that is, possessing a set of qualities that make a person distinct from other people. The creation of a personality requires a kind of intimacy that TV media provides to viewers. Although such intimacy is what Thompson (1995, p. 258) calls a non-reciprocal intimacy (since it is non-dialogical), the Banquet broadcasts, for example, nonetheless give viewers close access to a category of people that most would not otherwise come into contact with; namely, scientists.

At the Nobel Banquet, the scientists are presented as personalities. In his book on his experience as a TV host of the Nobel Banquet, Niklas Lindblad points out that he was not able to ask questions about complex scientific processes, nor was it deemed ‘interesting, either for the audience or the interviewee, to discuss the discovery that led to the prize. Facts about it had already filled the newspapers for weeks ...’ (Flavo and Lindblad 2000, p. 120; my translation). However, Lindblad wanted to find out the ‘man behind the scientist’. He points out that TV coverage of the Nobel Banquet is primarily interested in the guests at the head table and letting ‘individuals come forward with their qualities and interests’ (2000, p. 87).

Note that Lindblad uses the word ‘man’ in the singular, which is used in descriptions of many of the event’s prized discoveries. According to these descriptions, it is the scientist who reaches the solution to a problem through a heroic and often life-long effort filled with strenuous setbacks. This narrative rests on the notion of an individualised hero. However, an individual hero cannot exist without some sort of community to support him and bring him forth. The awarded scientists are aware of this fact and, especially in their later acceptance speeches, often read out long lists of people (both colleagues and family members) who have been important to their research.⁵ Television commentators despair when these enumerations are heard, because they consider them very boring and contradictory to the idea of a solitary hero whose research is the result of equal parts of inspiration and dedication.

Another way of constructing a ‘personality’ on TV can be found during the presentations of winners, when the camera pans over the banquet’s main table. When the camera focuses on the table’s guests, a TV host details the personal attributes and interests of the laureates. They are, for example, charming, funny, sullen, nice, reserved, kind, and extroverted, among other characteristics. Furthermore, viewers learn that one scientist plays the piano, while others are wine connoisseurs, anglers, skiers, mountain climbers, connoisseurs of Tibetan Art, collectors of beetles, or take drugs, just to give a few examples.⁶ The interviews with the prize winners on site remain strictly focused on childhood and adolescence, schooling, and parents. Camilla Hyltén Cavallius, who became the first CEO of Nobel Media in 2004, states that the selection of scientists for individual interviews during the Banquet evening is part of a joint discussion between SVT and Nobel Media. Interviews are selected based on who has ‘interesting things to say, who is a media personality’ (interview, 11 November 2013). While Cavallius does not expand on what she means by a ‘media personality’, this conforms with Bennett and Holmes’s (2010, pp. 72–73) definition of a TV personality: ‘those who master the techniques necessary to create an intimate, spontaneous, immediate performance style’. Relevant questions in these interviews, according to the programme’s hosts and interviewers, cover such things as what it is like to wear a tail coat for the first time, what a scientist wants to do with their prize money, and what they think of the party that evening.

The pre-recorded interviews of the 2000s are almost always recorded in the laureates’ homes and work environments. In these reports, research is briefly presented accompanied by pictures of a laureate’s workplace (e.g. the images of a lab with individuals in white overalls performing things with pipettes and test tubes). In watching these reports, colleagues of the laureates witness, often enthusiastically, the personal characteristics of their colleagues. The rest of these reports commonly focus on the hobbies of laureates, such as running, growing vines, or kayaking.

In terms of aesthetics, the TV medium itself allows viewers the opportunity for greater intimacy. In discussing TV close-up shots, Niklas Lindblad points out that viewers thereby feel closer to the distinguished guests than those who are actually present at the

banquet: ‘Which of the guests in the Blue Hall can count on a placement that so quickly switches between a birds-eye-view and the intimacy of a close-up?’ (Flavo and Lindblad 2000, p. 72; my translation).

Each of these examples speaks to TV’s ability to transform a public figure into a celebrity. As Graham Turner states:

We can map the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity. It occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievement in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their private lives. (Turner 2004, p. 8)

The specific type of celebrity represented at the Nobel Banquet is worth noting. It has been earned (achieved, according to Rojek’s categorisation) through the exceptional work of an exceptionally talented individual: a genius. It is not the type of celebrity commonly found throughout popular culture, such as a *Big Brother* participant, but a celebrity of high status within which specific intersectional dimensions of class, age, gender, and ‘race’ intersect with one another. The power dimensions of, for example, class and ‘race’ are underlined by the other guests at the banquet, who are commonly a homogeneous crowd of white elites.

The representation of the scientist as a celebrity thus operates in tandem with an older representation of the scientist as genius. What the TV broadcast achieves is not a transformation of the scientist into a celebrity, but into a special kind of celebrity-scientist who is also a genius (not to mention, a man). In what follows, this article will examine the connection between masculinity and genius in relation to representations of scientific celebrity and their connection to power.

The scientist as genius

From the earliest broadcasts up to today, a word commonly used in the Nobel context to signify a successful scientist is ‘genius’. In the examined material of this article, it is the most common epithet to be found from 1959 and onwards. In 2001, at the beginning of the Nobel Banquet broadcast, the science journalist Victoria Dyring proclaimed, ‘Welcome to the Oscar show of geniuses!’ In what follows, I will examine how the notion of genius affects representations of scientists as well as how this notion plays a part in the ‘celebrification’ of the scientist.

If the celebrity-scientist is a co-construction of the Nobel Foundation and TV media, the representation of Nobel Laureates as geniuses is a joint effort of the scientific community and TV media. The conceptualisation of the scientist as a genius is deeply rooted in western culture, with the term acquiring its modern sense in the eighteenth century; that is, a person with extraordinary mental skills in combination with originality, and above all creativity (Battersby 1989, Murray 1989). A commonly used example of genius is the physicist and Nobel Laureate Albert Einstein, whose brain was considered by literary critic Roland Barthes as a machine of genius that produced magic (Barthes 2000, p. 69).

Many scholars have confirmed this notion of scientific genius to be strongly linked to gender. For example, Leslie *et al.* (2015) note a strong connection between emphasis on brilliance and the number of women completing a doctorate in a discipline: the greater the emphasis on brilliance in a discipline, the fewer women will graduate. The philosopher Christine Battersby (1989) scrutinises the link between genius and the male gender in

Gender and Genius. One of the starting points of her study was when she, at a certain stage of her life, realised that she did not regard herself as a female academic. Her inability to connect her biological sex with her academic critical thinking skills led her to examine the idea of genius from the Greeks to the present from a critical gender perspective utilising, for example, Kant's influential 1781 work *Critique of Pure Reason*. In this work, Kant argues that women who speak Greek or understand mechanics could just as well grow beards (Battersby 1989, p. 77). In other words, an intelligent woman cannot be a real woman. Only men, who are perceived to be creative and active, can achieve sublime brilliance, of which women, as passive and uncreative, can only imitate. If not an impossibility, a brilliant woman is an anomaly.⁷

The notion that a brilliant woman is not a 'real woman' but something other has provoked discomfort over the years. Such discomfort might be understood in terms of the French literary scholar and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva's concept of 'the abject', which refers to that which 'does not respect borders, places, rules. That is in between, the ambiguous, the mixed' (Kristeva 1982, p. 28). The uncertainty that the abject provokes often results in a social environment's effort to reassign what is perceived as abject to that which is safe and familiar. Such a process can be seen in the TV interviews with female Nobel laureates, in which the female genius, through various strategies, is positioned into contexts that are considered to be 'normal' and feminine.

For example, in 1977 Rosalyn Sussman Yalow received a Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine (along with Andrew Schally and Roger Guillemin). She received the award for the development of radioimmunoassays of peptide hormones. At the banquet, an interview was conducted with Yalow that showed her with her husband, Aaron, and their children, Ben and Iliana. In the interview, the reporter compliments her dress, which was designed by a New York fashion house, stating that she is fit to be depicted in *Vanity Fair*. After a few brief words about her scientific discovery, the reporter asks Yalow's son whether his mother is a good cook. He then asks Yalow if she has time to take care of her family when she works so much. Finally, the formerly relaxed Yalow loses her patience with the reporter and begins talking about what she has on her mind; namely, gender equality, especially in the scientific community. Somewhat confused, the reporter then asks, 'Do you think we have come a long way in terms of gender equality here in this country?' In a placid tone, Yalow responds that, of the 15 members of the Nobel Committee for Medicine, not one of them is a woman.

It is clear that the interviewer tries to represent the Nobel Laureate as a 'normal', feminine woman who is interested in clothes, cooking, and a heterosexually defined family. Yalow's ground-breaking research is neglected by the interviewer. The female genius must be hidden in favour of presenting a respectable femininity and a focus on the domestic sphere. Of course, the male Nobel Laureates do not receive questions about their clothes, whether they cook good food, or whether they manage to take care of their families. They are asked questions of a private nature, but most often these are concerning their hobbies, such as wine making, ice skating, running, or music.

Barbara McClintock received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1983. She was the first woman in history to be awarded a Nobel Prize for medicine with no other winners. It is possible to assert that practically all of today's research in genetics on the functions of genes is based on McClintock's findings. In the recording of the 1983 Nobel Banquet broadcast, however, she is presented by the commentator (as the camera's focus wanders along the central table) as 'a tough old girl'. Her award-winning research on the transposon is mentioned, but along with the fact that she lives alone, carrying out her research as a lone 'mystic'. In an interview conducted in English with McClintock, the

reporter asks her about her alleged ‘mysticism’. She answers brusquely that it is a rumour, but that she always knows or has a feeling when her experiments are going in the right direction – a reasonable assumption for an experienced and highly skilled scientist. In his translation into Swedish, however, the reporter continues to say that McClintock indeed is a mystic.

In this case, a different strategy is used in order to make the female genius appear more ‘normal’ feminine. Drawing on the theme of the heteronormative family is not possible for the reporter in McClintock’s case, as she lives by herself. Therefore, she is instead represented as an eccentric spinster, ‘a tough old girl’ who uses her feminine intuition in research. Thus, her hard work in the laboratory is reduced to impulses and feelings – things that women are supposedly good at – rather than the intellectual, systematic work that it is.

While it may be possible to interpret the above-mentioned interviews as the product of an unusually narrow-minded reporter, to do so would overlook the broader patriarchal ideology at work in these situations. Dorothy Nelkin (1995) testifies to the same treatment of female Nobel Laureates in the US. American articles on female Nobel Prize winners commonly describe their appearance and focus on winners as (heterosexual) mothers and housewives (Nelkin 1995, p. 18). Even today, there appears to be a deep-rooted mode of thought in western culture wherein only men can be accepted as geniuses without discussion, while brilliant women must somehow be positioned into a cultural norm.

In 2009, five out of 12 Nobel Laureates were women: Ada Yonath (chemistry), Elizabeth Blackburn and Carol W. Greider (medicine), Hertha Müller (literature), and Elinor Ostrom (economics). One of the pre-recorded interviews from the Nobel Banquet broadcast in this year was related to Blackburn and Greider’s collaboration. As viewers witnessed pictures of the Nobel Prize winners’ workplaces, a reporter states that they ‘both have young children, which they combine with their great discoveries’. Images of Greider’s home are shown in which her 10-year-old children are seen playing, during which time the laureates claim that ‘it’s possible to be both a mom and a Nobel laureate’. Carol Greider further states: ‘To combine career and family is difficult for a woman, but worth the effort.’ The rest of the report focuses on the arrangements that the two award winners have made at their laboratories to facilitate and encourage their female employees. The report quickly develops into one of practical gender equality work within the academy, which differs from the unsympathetic portrayals of female Nobel Laureates in the past. However, the narrative of the report nonetheless maintains the presumption that women have a stronger connection to the home and family than men do. No commentary from the evening questions whether it is possible for a man to manage an academic career with his home-life and children.

While the ‘celebrification’ process’s focus on the private life amplifies the already existent tendency to reduce the thought of women as geniuses by connecting them with traditional gender roles, from a different perspective the cult of genius has a degree of benefit for women. That is, women are not sexualised, which appears inescapable in popular science contexts (see Chimba and Kitzinger 2010, Attenborough 2013). This can be explained in two ways. First, the Nobel Banquet is a high-prestige event in which a too distinct sexualisation of women would be deemed vulgar. Second, female laureates are typically not young, and therefore not plausible as sexual objects. Rosalyn Yalow, for example, was 56 years old when she received the prize. Therefore, for female Nobel Laureates, connections to motherhood and family are reinforced instead of sexualisation.

The celebrification process affects the representations of men in another way. The idea of the male genius is undermined by the fact that celebrity status can be seen as a feminisation and vulgarisation of the scientist due to its close connection with popular culture. But even if the idea of the male genius has been shaken to its very foundations, it still remains. That is, although the private lives of male laureates are components of the celebrification process, they are represented as exceptionally talented individuals (and geniuses) of high status and a specific sex. An important component in this process is how the private lives of laureates are depicted: women are (i.e. their sex, mothers), while men do (i.e. hobbies, science).

Conclusion

This article has examined the representation of scientists in one of the world's most prestigious events in a scientific context. The TV broadcast of the Nobel Banquet is a programme that, both in form and content, combines two TV genres: science communication and award show. The banquet has come to resemble the American Oscars in its function as a symbolic ritual and global event with elements of surprise, fashion, and celebrities. The focus of the reporters at the event in the private lives of the scientists contributes to the representation of the scientist as a celebrity.

It is clear that the interwoven representations of science and celebrity cause irritation in the scientific community. While the scientist is admired for his achievements, a celebrity today can be almost anyone, even a person who has become famous simply for being famous (Smart 2005). Thus, such a mixture of the 'serious' scientific genius and the scientist as a celebrity threatens to devalue the scientist's status, including his research and results, as well as the status of science in general. This threat is reflected in the scientific community's ambivalent attitude towards the Nobel Banquet. On the one hand, the celebrity-scientist is able to spread knowledge of science's important social function, but on the other, the near mystical aura of seriousness and exclusivity in the field of science to which Barthes (2000, p. 69) refers may be lost.

Descriptions of science in society often describe it as both free from society and utterly tied to it. Arguments of autonomy serve to suggest that scientific facts are free from cultural or ideological conditions, yet the social relevance of research must always be proven. This paradoxical position puts the spokespeople of science in a difficult situation, not least in relation to the media. On the one hand, they must argue for science as a form of knowledge that is elevated above common political and economic interests, yet on the other, they must work to promote the social acceptance and understanding of science.

In this article, I have shown how scientists can be constructed as celebrities within a high-status context such as the Nobel Banquet. Fundamental to this representation is the science-media coupling characteristic of late modernity. Such representations throughout history, however, have varied widely. Around 1900, the scientist was portrayed as a hero in the press, with heroic deeds warranting a Nobel Prize (Källstrand 2012, p. 255). Later, the brilliant mind of the scientist was emphasised. Today, the celebrity-scientist has been increasingly in focus. These representations of the scientist do not speak to a linear development, but form a layer of interlocking depictions.

As representations of female scientists commonly differ from representations of male scientists, it is important to examine how the celebrification of the scientist affects the representation of the scientist from a gender perspective. The celebrification process reinforces the image of female scientists as essentially different from male scientists,

with female scientists commonly emphasised as mother-figures, and male scientists discussed in terms of their hobbies. Both the scientific community and the media, I argue, actively co-construct these gender representations at the Nobel Banquet.

It is no great discovery to suggest that science has been historically linked to masculinity (see, for example, Merchant 1980, Schiebinger 1989). However, this article has attempted to show that media emphasis on the private lives of scientists, which plays a central role in the construction of the celebrity-scientist, can further disadvantage women. It is therefore important for both the media and the scientific community to accept responsibility for their respective depiction of the scientist and carefully consider the effects of these depictions. In this analysis, gender must be considered to resolve issues concerning the status of science in society and culture.

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Notes

1. The prizes in Literature and Peace are not scientific ones, focusing primarily on fiction and activities for peace and brotherhood, in accordance with the will of Alfred Nobel. Television broadcasts of the Nobel Banquet are not aired in their entirety in any other country. However, smaller parts of the Banquet are usually shown in the countries from which the laureates come. The US and Japan are especially interested.
2. Rojek's concept of achieved celebrity is close to Boorstein's definition of a hero: '... a human figure – real or imaginary or both – who has shown greatness in some achievement. He is a man or woman of great deeds' (Boorstein 2006, p. 74).
3. The coronation could also be called a consecration, Bourdieu's term for cultural honours or awards. The role of a Nobel Prize in the scientific society could more generally be analysed in terms of cultural production, habitus, field, and academic capital, applying a more sociological approach in the spirit of Bourdieu (1993). However, this study instead focuses on the work of cultural representations and meaning-making processes.
4. Andreas Huyssen (1987) shows, in his classic text, how mass culture/popular culture since the seventh century has been associated with women. The new, popular novel was considered to be so feminised that Huyssen interprets the counter-reaction of modernism as distinctly masculine and elitist. It is possible to read the ambivalence of the scientific community towards the televised Nobel Banquet in the same way: too much glamour and entertainment threatens to emasculate science into a feminine popular culture.
5. Mulkay (1984) sees these enumerations as a way to reassign the praise to some third party. In fact, it is the most common way to respond to the compliments in his study of 39 lectures and 20 short Banquet speeches in the Nobel context, 1978–81.
6. Leo Lowenthal (1961) found that the press was interested in the hobbies of the famous persons he studied. The articles also often used superlatives when describing the hero's character. The result from his study is largely still valid today.
7. Implicit in these theories of men as creative and generative is also the idea of which gender is the active or passive part in reproduction. Battersby (1989, pp. 61–70) scrutinises the notion that genius is related to sperm, an idea that turns out to date back to the Roman empire. Even in the Nobel context there is an idea of the creative and producing sperm, at least in the story of the North American sperm bank with Nobel Laureates as donors (Plotz 2005).

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