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Brain Cells 'Recognize' Famous People

By MALCOLM RITTER

The Associated Press

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NEW YORK -- Halle Berry? Jennifer Aniston? Everybody knows them. And now a surprising study finds that even individual cells in your brain act as if they recognize them.

The work could help shed light on how the brain stores information, an expert said.

When scientists sampled brain cell activity in people who were scrutinizing dozens of pictures, they found some individual cells that reacted to a particular celebrity, landmark, animal or object.

In one case, a single cell was activated by different photos of Berry, including some in her "Catwoman" costume, a drawing of her and even the words, "Halle Berry."

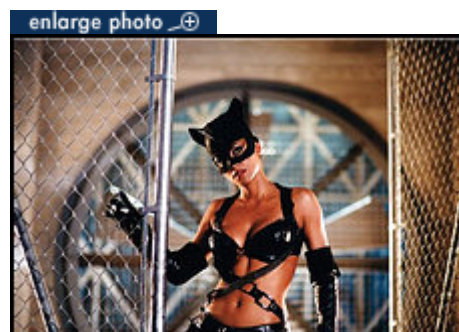
The findings appear in a part of the brain that transforms what people perceive into what they'll eventually remember, said Dr. Itzhak Fried of the University of California, Los Angeles, a senior investigator on the project.

The findings do not mean that a particular person or object is recognized and remembered by only one brain cell, Fried said. "There is not only one cell that codes for Jennifer Aniston. That would be impossible," Fried said.

Nor do they mean that a given brain cell will react to only one person or object, he said, because the study participants were tested with only a relatively limited number of pictures. In fact, some cells were found to respond to more than one person, or to a person and an object.

What the study does suggest, Fried and colleagues say in Thursday's issue of the journal *Nature*, is that the brain appears to use relatively few cells to record something it sees. That's in contrast to the idea that it uses a huge network of brain cells instead.

It's surprising that an individual neuron would react so specifically to a given person, said the study's other senior investigator, Christof Koch of the California Institute of Technology. "It's much more specific than people used to think."



This promotional photo provided by Warner Home Video shows actress Halle Berry in a scene from "Catwoman." Even a casual reader of fan magazines can recognize pictures of Halle Berry or Jennifer Aniston, no matter how the stars are dressed or wearing their hair. Now a surprising study suggests that individual brain cells can do the same thing. (AP Photo/Warner Home Video) (AP)

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Charles Connor, who studies how the brain processes visual information but who didn't participate in the new study, called the results striking.

Nobody would have predicted that conceptual information relating to Aniston, for example, would be signaled so clearly by single cells, said Connor, who works at Johns Hopkins University.

The "really dramatic finding," he said, is that a single brain cell can respond so consistently to completely different pictures of a given person. "That will surprise everybody," Connor said.

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