

The Fault is Not in Our “Stars”, but in Ourselves

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Before we start to lament the triumph of celebrity culture over the most basic civic literacy, we might ask if things were truly better in the past. Antoine Lilti’s brilliant book shows that modern celebrity culture had its origins in the age of revolutions, when selfhood and personal authenticity emerged as new notions.

Review of Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques. L’invention de la célébrité, 1750-1850*, [Public Figures. The Invention of Celebrity, 1750-1850]. Paris, Fayard, 2014.

In a [recent undergraduate journalism project at Texas Tech University](#), hardly any of the students interviewed on camera knew which side had won the American Civil War, which country the United States had gained its independence from, or the name of the current Vice-President. The same students, however, had no trouble remembering Brad Pitt’s current and former wives, or identifying the show on which the American reality television star “Snooki” appeared.

The spectacle is depressing. Yet before we start to lament the triumph of celebrity culture over even the most basic civic literacy, we might ask if things were truly better in the past. After reading Antoine Lilti’s *Figures publiques*, it has become easier for me to imagine an English university student of the 1760’s unable to identify the Chancellor of the Exchequer, or to know which king had united the thrones of England and Scotland a century and a half before, but who could discuss in detail the love-life of David Garrick, the leading actor of the day.

One of the principal arguments Lilti makes in this sweeping, fluidly-written and thoroughly engaging work of history is to show that modern celebrity culture had its origins in the middle of the eighteenth century. The new forms of “publicity” that emerged at this time may have helped to promote rational public discussion and critique, as Jürgen Habermas famous argued fifty years ago.¹ But they did just as much, if not more to feed a public fixation on the personalities and private lives of a new class of individuals who, while not simply “famous for

¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989).

being famous” (in the phrase coined by Daniel Boorstin²) were famous in new and unprecedented ways.

Lilti relies heavily on case studies, and in one sense the book amounts to a great parade of past celebrities. Some of them have mostly faded from popular memory, like the eighteenth-century castrato Farinelli, or the nineteenth-century Swedish singer Jenny Lind. But many others remain celebrities of a sort even today: Rousseau, Marie-Antoinette, Franklin, Washington, Bonaparte, Byron. One can only shudder at the sheer quantity of biographical material Lilti had to scale in the course of his research. Celebrity culture, with its generation and repetition of endless masses of trivial information, actively impedes its own analysis. But by taking carefully-directed soundings in the ocean of his material, Lilti has successfully mapped out its key features, concentrating on Britain, France, and the early United States.

An intimate relationship

Readers of Lilti’s first book, *Le monde des salons* (soon to appear in English translation) will not be surprised to find that this successor to Daniel Roche grounds his study in meticulous social history.³ A key chapter entitled “A First Media Revolution” (“Une première révolution médiatique”) explores how, in the mid-eighteenth century, ways of representing individuals in public media proliferated enormously. Newspapers, including scandal-sheets interested principally in personalities, multiplied, and found large new audiences. Technical innovations allowed printed engravings to circulate in unprecedented numbers, with the result that by 1789, 60% of Parisian households possessed a print of some sort, most often a portrait. Wax museums opened, displaying life-size statues of celebrities, and ceramics manufacturers like Wedgwood successfully marked colored figurines. Expanding book markets in the Western world favored the genres of the biography and the memoir, while scandalous exposés of “Private Lives” rivaled them for sales.

But it was not just the volume and variety of representations that differentiated “celebrity” from the older phenomena of fame, glory, renown, notoriety and “reputation.” Equally important was the new sort of relationship that members of the public imagined between themselves and celebrities: an affective, intimate relationship. Readers and spectators longed for a glimpse of the unguarded, “real” people behind the public façade, thinking of them as friends they could talk about – and even talk to – in a familiar, informal manner. This aspect of celebrity culture will come as no surprise to anyone who has ever overheard a conversation about where Brad and Angelina should really have gone on their honeymoon, but Lilti convincingly traces its genealogy back to the eighteenth century, bolstering his general argument that we should see celebrity as “a characteristic trait of modern societies” (“un trait caractéristique des sociétés modernes” – p. 21). Lilti casts this imagined intimacy as a reaction to the theatricality of the early modern “société du spectacle,” which, whether at the court, theater, opera, urban fairs, or even artistic exhibitions, cast members of the public as mere passive spectators of highly stylized artistic productions and social rituals. Celebrities, unlike other famous figures, did not have spectators. They had “fans,” an anachronistic word that Lilti deliberately uses to highlight their

² Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1961).

³ Antoine Lilti, *Le monde des salons: Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005). English translation to appear as *The World of the Salons* (Oxford University Press).

active participation in celebrity culture (as leading examples of the revolutionary-era “fan,” he cites Samuel Johnson’s biographer James Boswell, and Napoleon’s chronicler Emmanuel de Las Cases).

Lilti’s most brilliant chapter gives his story an additional, highly significant twist. Unlike the other chapters, “The Solitude of the Famous Man” (“La solitude de l’homme célèbre”) analyzes a single public figure, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and shows quite dazzlingly how the mechanisms of modern celebrity can also become mechanisms of tragedy. Rousseau, more than any other author of his day, deliberately invited the sort of intimate, prying attention that Lilti calls central to celebrity culture. Unlike most other leading authors of the French Enlightenment, Rousseau did not publish his books anonymously. Indeed, he not only claimed authorship, but insisted on the direct connection between his works and his own personality. He of course wrote the first great modern example of autobiography, the hugely intimate and revealing (if not always truthful) *Confessions*, and many other works that promised glimpses into the depths of his character. And his massively successful novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* elicited an intense public reaction centered as much on Rousseau the author as on his fictional characters. It is no accident that he became known to his adoring readers as “friend Jean-Jacques” (“l’ami Jean-Jacques”).

But Rousseau himself increasingly experienced this public adulation as a form of oppression. Far from enjoying his status as arguably the most popular author in European history, Rousseau felt that the public did not understand him, and had developed a false representation of his authentic self. This sense of falsity, as well as the ceaseless personal demands Rousseau received, tortured him, and fed the paranoia that became painfully visible in the later books of the *Confessions*, and in the strange, haunting work entitled *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques (Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques)*, in which he appeared to suspect even God of joining a conspiracy against him. Rousseau thus expressed, in piercingly radical form, a traumatic experience common to celebrities then and since. But unlike most other celebrities, he transformed his suffering into insight, imagining a new sort of genuinely authentic “self” independent of all social representations – one that has become central to modern conceptions of selfhood.

Celebrity also had political significance from the start. In England, the radical Whig campaigner for parliamentary reform and press freedom John Wilkes made use of precisely the mechanisms of celebrity that Lilti describes to advance his causes. As John Brewer observed many years ago, Wilkes’s enthusiastic supporters wrote to him and about him in exactly the same sort of intimate, familiar terms that fans used with celebrity actors and writers (Lilti could easily have written an entire chapter on Wilkes). And in America and France, the revolutionary overthrow of traditional authority and the birth of new, tumultuous forms of electoral politics gave celebrity literal, not just figurative power. In a chapter on these revolutions, Lilti points to the paradox of movements carried out in the name of the general will and the common man investing power in a handful of mostly elite representatives. He suggests that the mechanisms of celebrity that had developed in the literary sphere, which allowed ordinary readers and spectators to feel an imagined intimate connection with famous figures, provided representative democracy with a crucial form of legitimation. Referring to what the French today derisively term the “peopolisation” of politics, Lilti argues that “far from being a regrettable deviation that tarnishes

the public weal, under the pernicious influence of the ‘society of the spectacle,’ it shows that the democratic public sphere and the public sphere of the media are bound indissolubly to one another” (“Loin que celle-ci soit une dérive regrettable, entachant la noblesse de la chose publique sous l’influence pernicieuse de la société du spectacle, elle révèle que l’espace public démocratique et l’espace public médiatique sont indissociablement liés” – pp. 292-93). To be sure, the forms of political celebrity could vary enormously, as Lilti shows by using four very different political figures to exemplify the revolutionary changes: Marie-Antoinette, the French orator Mirabeau, George Washington, and Napoleon Bonaparte.

Figures publiques ends on a somewhat ambivalent note. On the one hand, an informative chapter on “Romanticism and Celebrity” (“Romantisme et célébrité”) asserts that with the advent of mass culture in the second half of the nineteenth century, celebrity culture underwent fundamental changes. Yet the book’s conclusion, in line with the logic of the earlier chapters, insists on the continuities between the eighteenth century and the present day. “Phenomena that we are used to seeing as the result of recent technological and cultural revolutions, indeed as lamentable symbols of our postmodern vacuity, in reality have roots that reach back deeply into the heart of modernity, to a period two centuries before the invention of television” (“des phénomènes que nous sommes habitués à considérer comme le résultat de révolutions technologiques et culturelles récentes, voire comme de fâcheux symboles de notre vacuité postmoderne, plongent en réalité leurs racines au cœur de la modernité, deux siècles avant la naissance de la télévision” – p. 366). These lines offer a striking challenge to those strains of contemporary cultural criticism which tend precisely to see celebrity worship as a recent pathology (one thinks, for instance, of Christopher Lasch’s *Culture of Narcissism*), rather than as a constituent feature of modernity itself.⁴

Celebrity and political charisma

While *Figures publiques* makes an exceptionally important contribution to our understanding of the century 1750-1850, this larger argument about modernity invites debate. When Lilti discusses this early period, he gives due and fascinating attention to the role of entrepreneurs in promoting celebrities. But when he turns to mass culture at the end of the book, he tends to stress the cultural and technological changes that brought it about (with particular attention to photography and cinema), rather than the economic ones. But what makes the celebrity culture of the present-day so radically different from that of the eighteenth century is not just new technologies and new cultural norms, but the power exercised by large corporations that use highly sophisticated advertising and marketing techniques to create and control celebrity images in a way that the press barons of the eighteenth century could only dream of. In some cases, individual corporations (Fox, Comcast/NBC/Universal) control almost every aspect of the process, from the initial works or events that turn people into celebrities, to the news reports about them, to the advertising that promotes them, to the very wires over which the resulting “content” makes its way into consumers’ homes.

I wonder if Lilti, even while criticizing Jürgen Habermas, might have developed his argument in a manner more structurally similar to the German philosopher’s. Habermas postulated that the eighteenth century saw the emergence of forms of “publicity” (*Öffentlichkeit*)

⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978).

that allowed for genuinely rational, critical public debate. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, the economic transformation of mass communications and media undermined and corrupted these older practices. Similarly, Lilti's analysis suggests a possible contrast between two different forms of celebrity culture, with one serving as the basis for an immanent critique of the other. In the earlier one, celebrity culture, while often trivializing, and easily abused, nonetheless served important purposes. In particular, it created mechanisms by which ordinary citizens learned to feel sympathy and trust for elected representatives whom they did not know personally, and might not have voted for, thereby providing crucial popular legitimation for new and untried democratic systems. In our own day, however, the transformation of celebrity culture into part of a vast news and entertainment industry that operates according to its own profit-seeking logics has arguably corrupted and undermined this already highly imperfect process of legitimation.

The twentieth-century political uses of celebrity raise other questions about the long-term continuities. Arguably, the cults of personality in twentieth-century totalitarian systems also built on the mechanisms of celebrity that Lilti describes, but took them in new and sinister directions. Nazi propaganda, for instance, did not simply portray Adolf Hitler as a superman, but also took care to show him in supposedly unguarded moments chatting in a familiar manner with ordinary Germans. Where Lilti sees celebrity culture paradoxically helping to generate belief in an autonomous, authentic "self," the totalitarian systems deliberately exploited a sense of intimate, personal connection with a public figure so as to dissolve the "self" of the ordinary person into the mass.

Even in the period Lilti studies, what began as "political celebrity" could sometimes change into something very different. In his short, fascinating section on Napoleon Bonaparte, Lilti looks particularly at the years of exile, and the quasi-memoir composed by Napoleon's aide Las Cases, *The Memorial of Saint-Helena*. This book, Lilti writes lyrically, "allows us to hear, behind the organ music of the Napoleonic legend, the soft melody of celebrity" ("il nous permet d'entendre, derrière les grandes orgues de la légende napoléonienne, la petite musique de la célébrité" – p. 281). Las Cases brilliantly juxtaposed Napoleon's own reminiscences of glory with first-person, intimate accounts of his petty struggles with his British captors, to produce a work of enormous pathos which indeed deserves to stand in the first rank of celebrity literature. But Napoleon also made use of Europe's emerging celebrity culture at the beginning of his career, when his propagandists cast him as the providential man of genius, sent to save the French nation, and simultaneously as the accessible "little corporal" who could joke on familiar terms with his soldiers. Under the Empire, this political celebrity developed into something approaching a cult of personality, especially in the army, with soldiers now expected to join together into a single, undifferentiated mass and to sacrifice their lives willingly for the Emperor.⁵ Lilti generally avoids discussing the relationship between celebrity and the potent phenomenon of political charisma, and the way that the transformation of the one into the other potentially threatens the very existence of the system that the former can also help to legitimate.

⁵ See on this point Hervé Drévilion, *L'individu et la guerre: Du chevalier Bayard au soldat inconnu* (Paris: Belin, 2013).

Figures publiques will undoubtedly provoke many other questions, but that is precisely the mark of an important, wide-ranging book of this sort. Overall, Lilti's achievement is highly impressive. He provides a new perspective on the transformations of Western culture in the age of revolutions, and on the genesis of modern notions of selfhood and personal authenticity. And he reminds us that even as we laugh at contemporary celebrity culture, we need to take it seriously, and not merely as an excrescence or a pathology, but as a constituent element of political and cultural modernity.

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