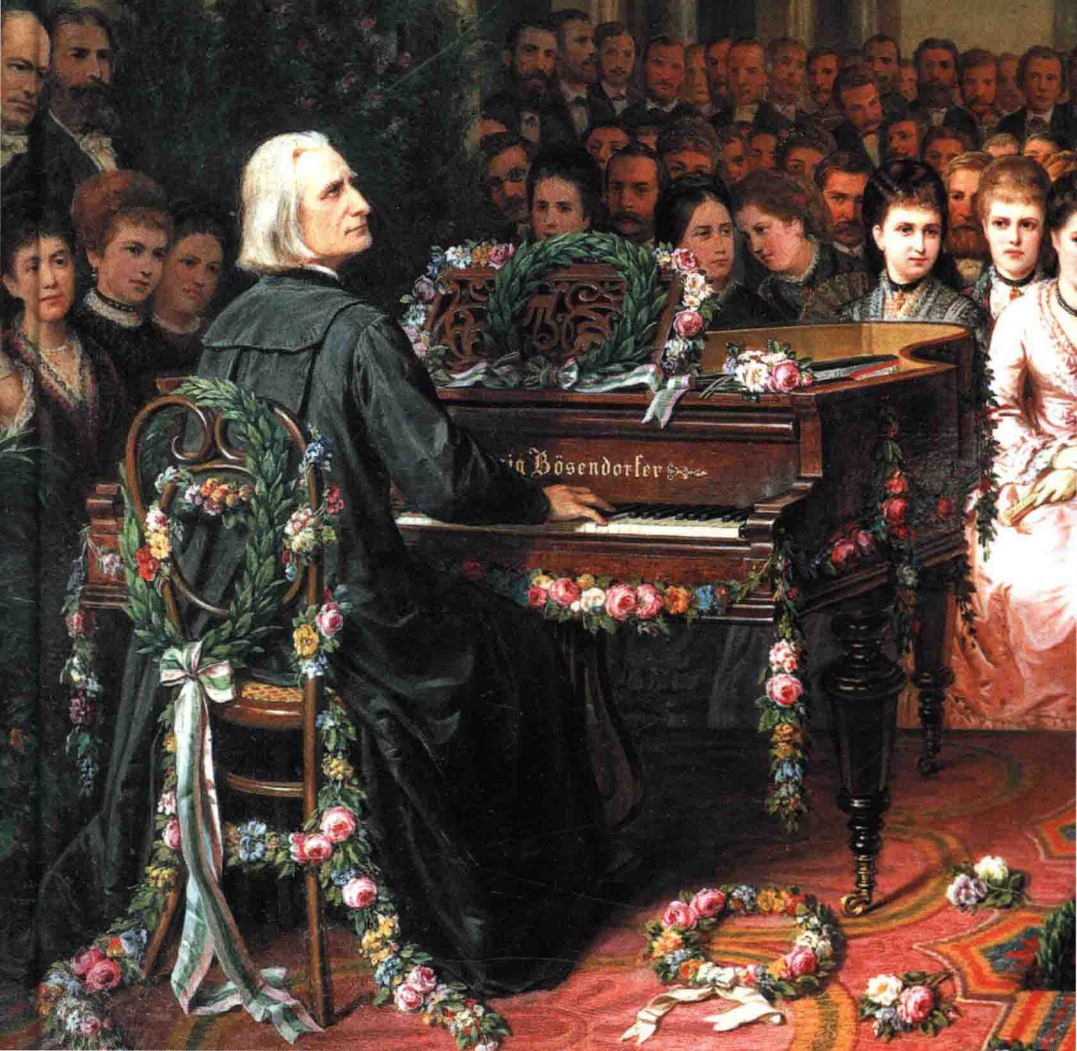


Antoine Lilti

THE INVENTION OF
CELEBRITY



"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."

David A. Bell, Princeton University

"With *The Invention of Celebrity*, Antoine Lilti has established himself as one of the most significant and talented historians of eighteenth-century France ... It is an imaginative study, at once audacious and theoretically grounded, that establishes celebrity as an object of historical analysis and lays the groundwork for further studies of the phenomenon."

Colin Jones, Queen Mary University of London

Frequently perceived as a characteristic of modern culture, the phenomenon of celebrity has much older roots. In this book Antoine Lilti shows that the mechanisms of celebrity were developed in Europe during the Enlightenment, well before films, yellow journalism, and television, and then flourished during the Romantic period on both sides of the Atlantic. Figures from across the arts like Voltaire, Garrick, and Liszt were all veritable celebrities in their time, arousing curiosity and passionate loyalty from their "fans." The rise of the press, new advertising techniques, and the marketing of leisure brought a profound transformation in the visibility of celebrities: private lives were now very much on public show. Nor was politics spared this cultural upheaval: Marie-Antoinette, George Washington, and Napoleon all experienced a political world transformed by the new demands of celebrity. And when the people suddenly appeared on the revolutionary scene, it was no longer enough to be legitimate; it was crucial to be popular too.

Lilti retraces the profound social upheaval precipitated by the rise of celebrity and explores the ambivalence felt toward this new phenomenon. Both sought after and denounced, celebrity evolved as the modern form of personal prestige, assuming the role that glory played in the aristocratic world in a new age of democracy and evolving forms of media. While uncovering the birth of celebrity in the eighteenth century, Lilti's perceptive history at the same time shines light on the continuing importance of this phenomenon in today's world.

Antoine Lilti is Professor of History at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, and former editor-in-chief of the journal *Annales*.

polity

www.politybooks.com

COVER IMAGE: DEA /
A. DAGLI ORTI / CONTRIBUTOR
COVER DESIGN BY
ANDREW CORBETT
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN



9 781509 508730 >

THE INVENTION OF CEREBRITY

polity

THE INVENTION OF CELEBRITY

1750–1850

ANTOINE LILTI

Translated by Lynn Jeffress

polity

First published in French as *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité. 1750–1850*, © Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2015

This English edition © Polity Press, 2017

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-0873-0

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-0874-7 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10 on 11.5 pt Sabon by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

THE INVENTION OF CELEBRITY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been a work in progress for almost ten years, and since its first formulation I have had time to accumulate numerous debts, which I here have the pleasure of acknowledging. Many of my colleagues and friends had the patience to listen to me or read me, discuss my hypotheses, suggest examples or readings. This permanent dialogue that allows one to avoid the stumbling blocks one encounters when working alone is an essential aspect of the constant pleasure I find in doing research.

There were several drafts of this work on celebrity, the first focusing on the issue of Rousseau, and then by progressively enlarging on the questions in several seminars and symposiums. I had the good fortune to be invited to the Maison Française d'Oxford and the following universities: Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Berkeley, Stanford, Bordeaux III, Cambridge, Peking, Grenoble, Créteil, Geneva, and Montreal, including several seminars at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). I want to thank everyone who made these meetings possible as well as all the participants. I owe much, also, to those in my own seminars at the École Normale Supérieure and then at EHESS who patiently listened to me construct the principal chapters of this book. I must admit I often tested ideas on them first and they sometimes convinced me of their point of view.

Among the many colleagues whom I have the pleasure of thanking, I want to acknowledge Romain Bertrand, Florent Brayard, Caroline Callard, Jean-Luc Chappey, Christophe Charle, Roger Chartier, Yves Citton, Dan Edelstein, Darrin McMahon, Robert Darnton, Pierre-Antoine Fabre, Carla Hesse, Steve Kaplan, Bruno Karsenti, Cyril Lemieux, Tony La Vopa, Rahul Markovits, Renaud Morieux, Robert Morrissey, Ourida Mostefai, Nicolas Offenstadt, Michel Porret, Daniel Roche, Steve Sawyer, Anne Simonin, Céline Spector, and Mélanie Traversier. The following

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

showed great benevolence, or friendship, in reading whole chapters, sometimes even the entire book, and helped me avoid many errors: Étienne Anheim, David Bell, Barbara Carnevali, Charlotte Guichard, Jacques Revel, Silvia Sebastiani, Valérie Theis, and Stéphane Van Damme. I thank each of them.

From the Canal Saint-Martin to the hill of the Pincio and back again, Charlotte was always there, and this book owes more to her than I can ever say. Juliette and Zoé will perhaps read it in a few years, remembering that I was not always available as much as they would have liked. Or maybe not.

I am very glad that my book has now been issued in English, and I would like to heartily thank John Thompson for making this publication possible. Many thanks, too, to the whole editorial team at Polity, especially Paul Young and Justin Dyer. I am grateful, finally, to Lynn Jeffress, who had the patience to translate my French prose into English.

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vii
Introduction: Celebrity and Modernity	1
1 Voltaire in Paris	14
“The Most Famous Man in Europe”	16
Voltaire and Janot	20
2 Society of the Spectacle	24
The Birth of Stars: The Economics of Celebrity	26
Scandal at the Opera	32
“Something Idolatrous”	36
A European Celebrity	39
The Invention of the Fan(atic)	43
3 A First Media Revolution	50
The Visual Culture of Celebrity	52
Public Figurines	57
Idols and Puppets	62
“Heroes of the Hour”	67
Private Lives, Public Figures	73

CONTENTS

4 From Glory to Celebrity	86
Trumpeting Fame	87
Conceptualizing Celebrity	92
Celebrity	102
“Chastisement for Merit”	105
5 Loneliness of the Celebrity	109
“The Celebrity of Misfortune”	109
<i>Ami Jean-Jacques</i>	117
Eccentricity, Exemplarity, Celebrity	128
The Burden of Celebrity	133
<i>Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques</i>	143
The Disfiguration	150
6 The Power of Celebrity	160
A Fashion Victim?	164
Revolutionary Popularity	177
The President is a Great Man	193
Sunset Island	206
7 Romanticism and Celebrity	217
Byromania	219
Prestige and Obligations	223
Women Seduced and Public Women	228
Virtuosos	233
Celebrity in America	241
Democratic Popularity and Popular Sovereignty	245
“Celebrities of the Hour”	254
Toward a New Age of Celebrity	257
Conclusion	267
<i>Postface</i>	276
<i>Notes</i>	284
<i>Illustration Credits</i>	340
<i>Index</i>	341

INTRODUCTION

Celebrity and Modernity

“Marie-Antoinette is Lady Di!” On the set where his daughter Sofia was making her film on the French queen, Francis Ford Coppola was struck by the parallel between the two women’s destinies.¹ This comparison is strongly suggested by the anachronistic angle taken by the film: Sofia Coppola presents Marie-Antoinette as a young woman today, torn between her thirst for freedom and the constraints imposed by her royal station.

The film’s music, which mixes baroque works, 1980s rock groups, and more recent electronic pieces, deliberately emphasizes this interpretation. After the enigmatic and melancholy young women of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Lost in Translation*, Marie-Antoinette at first appears to be a new incarnation of the eternal adolescent girl. Then another theme emerges that Sofia Coppola took up overtly in her following films: celebrities’ way of life. Like the actor of *Somewhere*, holed up in his luxury hotel, where he is dying of boredom but does not envisage leaving, Marie-Antoinette is confronted by the obligations associated with her status as a public figure. She can have anything she wants, except perhaps what she really wants most: to escape the exigencies of court society, which appears as a prefiguration of the “society of the spectacle” (Guy Debord). One scene in the film shows the young crown princess’s astonishment and embarrassment when, having awakened after moving into her quarters at Versailles, she finds herself surrounded by courtiers staring at her like modern paparazzi scrutinize the private lives of celebrities. Rejecting the choice between condemning and rehabilitating the queen, Sofia Coppola presents a futile young woman whose historical role seems to consist in a long series of luxurious parties. Filming Marie-Antoinette’s life at Versailles as if she were filming the amusements of Hollywood stars, the director foresees a world in which the royal family is no different from that of show business stars.

In general, historians don't like anachronisms. However, it is worth considering this image of Marie-Antoinette as a celebrity *avant la lettre* who is forced to live constantly under the eyes of others, deprived of all privacy, hobbled in her quest for authentic communication with her contemporaries. It is true that this parallel leaves out an essential element: the court ceremonial. This ceremonial placed sovereigns under the permanent observation of the courtiers and was very different from the modern mechanisms of celebrity. It was not the result of a vast audience's curiosity about the private life of famous people, but instead fulfilled a political function following from the theory of royal representation. Whereas the culture of celebrity is based on the distinction between an inversion of the private and the public (private life being made public by the media), monarchical representation presupposed their identity. In the time of Louis XIV, the *lever du roi* was not that of a private individual, but rather that of a wholly public person who incarnated the state. Between the political rituals of monarchical representation and the media and commercial apparatuses of celebrity, a profound change made the former obsolete and the latter possible: the conjoint invention of private life and publicity.

Nonetheless, there is something singularly right in Sofia Coppola's view of the queen's condition. At the end of the eighteenth century, Versailles was no longer the isolated space of monarchical representation. The court henceforth lived in Paris's orbit, and it was deeply affected by the changes in the public sphere, the multiplication of newspapers and images, the development of fashion, shows, and the commercialization of leisure activities. Under Louis XIV, protocol placed the monarch's whole life before the public and made manifest the radical separation between the sovereign's grandeur and his subjects, but this protocol was completely controlled by the king. In the course of the eighteenth century, it was gradually emptied of its meaning; courtiers, preferring the amusements of the capital, reduced their stays at Versailles to the strict minimum; sovereigns themselves gradually ceased to play a game in which they no longer really believed and developed a private life separate from the ceremonial; in the end, this privacy was intensely scrutinized and exposed. Whereas Louis XIV was attacked for his politics, Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were attacked for their sex lives, supposed or real.

Granted, by projecting her favorite themes and no doubt part of her personal experience onto Marie-Antoinette, Sofia Coppola was not claiming to do the work of a historian, but she makes clear the changes that were then affecting court society and the status of the queen under the impact of the nascent culture of celebrity. In the course of the

eighteenth century, something happened that has to be accounted for. This is where the rights of the historian come into play.

But the historian has to exercise these rights. Whereas today celebrity is a characteristic trait of most societies, historians hesitate to take an interest in it. Stars are everywhere, in the periodicals devoted to them and in the general media, on movie screens and on television, on radio and on the internet. Specialists in the media and popular culture have devoted numerous studies to them, dealing with their audiences, their fates, and the meaning of the fascination they exercise. There is a semiology and a sociology of celebrity, and even, more recently, an economics of celebrity – a sign that the theme is beginning to gain legitimacy.² But historians have shown little interest in the origins of this phenomenon. Where did they come from, these stars who colonize our screens and our imaginations?

In the absence of genuine historical works on celebrity, two opposed interpretations share the market of received ideas. The first asserts that celebrity is a universal phenomenon, which is found in all societies and periods. Leo Braudy provided a persuasive illustration of this view in a massive general study, *The Frenzy of Renown*, which traces the history of celebrity and the desire for fame from Alexander the Great down to our own time.³ As is often the case with such an undertaking, one can admire the effort taken to produce a synthesis or the accuracy of certain analyses while remaining skeptical about the result: what is the use of such a broad conception of celebrity, one that lumps together in a single word phenomena as disparate as the glory of the Roman emperors and the celebrity of contemporary actresses? Inversely, a second interpretation of celebrity sees it as a very recent phenomenon connected with the rise of mass culture, with “the society of the spectacle,” and the omnipresence of audiovisual media.⁴ This kind of celebrity is defined by its most extreme manifestations: the fans’ hysteria; the endless multiplication of celebrity images; the stars’ exponentially increasing incomes; their eccentricities; TV reality shows; and the success of the celebrity press. These two interpretations are strangely compatible. They feed a critical, conservative, and now very conventional discourse that goes more or less this way: there have always been very well-known people; they used to owe their notoriety to their adventures, their talents, and their deeds, whereas now they are famous only in proportion to their exposure in the media, and they have no other “claim to fame.” Celebrity is supposed to be only a degenerate form of glory, a tautological media phenomenon, whose formula was defined by the American historian Daniel Boorstin: celebrity designates people “well-known for their well-knownness,” individuals without talent and without achievements, whose sole merit is to be on television.⁵

These interpretations are not satisfactory. They are based on definitions of celebrity that are too broad or too reductive, and they do not allow us to understand either its origins or its meaning. When they extend to all forms of fame, it prevents an examination of the specificity of the phenomenon's contemporary mechanisms. Conversely, when they reduce celebrity to the current excesses of the star-system, they fail to see that the phenomenon has its roots in the very heart of modernity, in forms of public recognition that appeared, as we shall see, during the Enlightenment. So it is not surprising that studies of contemporary celebrity struggle to escape these confusions. Celebrity is presented sometimes as the foundation of a new elite endowed with a capital of visibility and benefiting from privileges, and sometimes as a mechanism of alienation that binds famous people to the desire of an all-powerful public. In some authors, it appears as a modern substitute for religious beliefs and myths: the "cult of the stars" is supposed to be an anthropological variant of the cult of saints and heroes, a modern idolatry. "Worshipped as heroes, divinized, the stars are more than objects of admiration. They are also subjects of a cult. A religion in embryo has formed around them," Edgar Morin wrote in 1957, in one of the first essays devoted to movie stars.⁶ This hypothesis, which at that time had the merit of being new, has now become a commonplace. For other writers, celebrity is, on the contrary, a completely secularized consequence of the economy of the spectacle and the culture industry, whose peculiar logic consists in concentrating prestige and income on a few individuals. Celebrity, disenchanted, is now simply a question of marketing.

Coincidentally, all these elements are fused in a disconcerting whole, as in Chris Rojek's book *Celebrity*, published in the United States in 2001 and accompanied in the French edition with a preface by Frédéric Beigbeder, a French novelist and TV host.⁷ The latter, both a protagonist and an observer of the culture of celebrity, and in that respect in a position to talk about it, manages to juxtapose in two pages all the apparently incompatible clichés. Celebrities are a caste of privileged, rich, and arrogant people who get the best tables in restaurants and live in palaces, but they are also the victims of fanatical admirers who make their lives impossible by subjecting them to permanent surveillance. This contradiction results in the expected unveiling of a kind of merchandise omnipotence, the motto of inoffensive criticism: "Celebrity, like publicity, is a dream that serves only one end: selling." Let's be honest: these contradictions themselves have a long history. They lead us toward a difficult question: why is celebrity such an ambivalent and contested value?

I propose to start from a definition of celebrity that cannot be reduced to the simple fact of being very well known. There are too many ways of

being well known. If we want to make the notion of celebrity analytically effective on the sociological and historical level, we have to distinguish it from other forms of notoriety, such as glory and reputation. Glory designates notoriety acquired by someone who is judged to be extraordinary because of his or her achievements, whether these are acts of bravery, or artistic or literary works. It is essentially a posthumous designation and flourishes through the commemoration of the hero in the collective memory. Reputation, for its part, corresponds to the judgment that the members of a group or a community make collectively regarding one of their own: is he or she a good spouse, a good citizen, competent and honorable? It results from the socialization of opinions by way of conversations and rumors. It can be completely informal or more formalized. If glory is reserved for a few individuals considered to be exceptional, every individual, by the simple fact of living in society, is the object of the judgment of others and thus has a reputation, which varies depending on the places and the groups concerned.

The opposition between these two forms of notoriety, glory and reputation, is a long-standing aspect of European history, sometimes masked by the great range of vocabulary available for naming these phenomena. In French, for example, there are the words *renom*, *renommée*, *estime*, and *reconnaissance*. Every language obviously contains a large number of such terms. In English, “fame” has, as we shall see, many different meanings that overlap with those of “reputation” and “glory.” The use I make of the terms “glory” and “reputation” is first of all analytic: it provides us with tools for distinguishing different social and cultural configurations. Glory concerns heroes, saints, illustrious men – all the figures whose glorification has played a major role in Western culture, including their modern avatar, the “great man” – *grand homme* – dear to Enlightenment philosophers; reputation belongs to local mechanisms of social judgment, of *fama* and honor. Because they have not distinguished between these two forms of notoriety, most historians, taken in by the imprecision of the vocabulary, confuse them, even though they are based on very different social mechanisms. Today, the difference between the two forms of notoriety is still manifest. On the one hand, the glory of great heads of state, artists, scientists, and even sports champions: Charles de Gaulle, Pablo Picasso, Marcel Proust, Marie Curie, Pelé, to mention a few. On the other hand, an individual’s reputation based on qualities, private or professional, evaluated by those who know and spend time with him or her. One can be a reputable physician in one’s city or a scientist well known to his or her peers without claiming to have achieved glory. And who does not know that Vincent Van Gogh, whose posthumous glory has been so great, was known to only a few people during his lifetime?

But the specificity of modern societies has to do with the appearance of a third form of notoriety: celebrity. At first sight, the latter takes the form of a very extensive reputation. The celebrated individual is not known simply to his family, his colleagues, his neighbors, his peers, or his customers, but to a vast group of people with whom he has no direct contact, who have never met him and will never meet him, but who frequently encounter his public image, a whole set of images and discourses associated with his name.⁸ In other words, a celebrated person is one known by people who are not directly involved in making a judgment regarding his personality or his competencies. The celebrity of a singer begins when his name and his face are known to those who do not listen to his songs; that of a soccer player when he is recognized by those who never watch soccer games. As a celebrity, he is no longer concerned with colleagues, admirers, customers, or neighbors, but rather with an audience.

Are we now getting close to glory? Isn't celebrity only a stage on a continuum of notorieties that stretches from (local) reputation to (universal) glory by way of (extended) celebrity? This hypothesis has been advanced in the form of concentric "circles of recognition" that lead in the worlds of culture, for example, from the judgment of peers to that of fans and critics, and then to the public at large.⁹ This model, however, underestimates the differences between reputation, glory, and celebrity. Glory is essentially posthumous (even if it may be sought after), and concerns posterity, whereas celebrity is based on the contemporaneity of a person and an audience. Celebrity is not commemorative; instead, it espouses the rapid rhythm of current events. Whereas glory designates a community's admiration for an individual considered to be exemplary, a dead hero who incarnates certain intellectual, physical, or moral virtues, the source of celebrity is quite different: it is the curiosity elicited among contemporaries by a singular personality. This curiosity is not always admiring and rarely unanimous: there are celebrated criminals and scandalous or controversial celebrities.

At the other end of the spectrum, despite appearances, celebrity is not simply an extended reputation. By enlarging to the extreme the circles of recognition, the mechanisms of publicity open onto a specific reality. First of all, celebrity becomes autonomous with regard to the criteria that govern reputations. When a writer, an actor, or a criminal becomes celebrated, the curiosity they elicit is no longer evaluated by a standard of criteria specific to their original activity. They have become public figures who are no longer judged solely with respect to their competencies, but rather with respect to their ability to capture and maintain curiosity on the part of the audience. This explains the salient characteristic of the culture of celebrity: it levels out the status of those who have come from