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Antoine Lilti, *Figures publiques. L'invention de la célébrité (1750-1850)*. Paris: Fayard, 2014. 430 p. Notes, index. \$35.94 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-2-213-68238-9.

Review essay by Jay Smith, University of North Carolina

Any investigation of the nature of “celebrity” must begin with a simple question, notes Antoine Lilti in the introduction to *Figures publiques*, his engrossing book on the subject. “Quelle est la nature de cette curiosité qui nous porte à nous intéresser à la vie de certains de nos contemporains que nous n’avons jamais rencontrés?” (p. 15). The question, deceptive in its simplicity, calls forth a reflexive response: “Celebrities are interesting, whether we’ve met them or not.” But Lilti knows there is nothing natural, nothing axiomatic about the hold on our imaginations that celebrities exercise in the modern world. Seeing an opening for thoughtful historical inquiry—“D’où viennent ces vedettes qui colonisent nos écrans et nos imaginaires?” (p. 9)—Lilti has offered the first true exploration of the origins of “the celebrity” and of celebrity culture.

Celebrity—and, importantly, its discontents—formed out of the novel publicity apparatus that appeared in Britain, France, and other western states between roughly the 1730s and the 1780s. That publicity apparatus, in circulating news and images of the famous in an endless loop, forged new expressions of subjectivity and created new relationships between publics and the “stars” who entertained and fascinated them. From the 1740s to today a fundamental ambivalence has characterized the process of celebrity-making. Since the age of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, celebrity has been a symbol of success and prestige but also a tenuous form of elevated status subject to the scorn and derision of critics and celebrities themselves. This paradoxical character of celebrity, Lilti convincingly argues, aligns with the basic ambivalence about “la valeur des opinions collectives dans les sociétés démocratiques” (p. 16). The history of celebrity, Lilti illustrates, is entwined with the history of democratic politics, mass consumer culture, and the new and sometimes vexing power of the people in the modern era. In writing this careful genealogical history of celebrity, Lilti has provided a fresh lens for understanding modernity itself.

One of the most important revelations of *Figures publiques* involves the self-conscious awareness of the new phenomenon of celebrity in the eighteenth century. Of course, individuals had enjoyed honor, reputation, renown, or glory long before the eighteenth century. But what emerged in the age of the Enlightenment was a new form of personal notoriety predicated, first, on the separation of image from reality and, second, on the public’s ability to consume, appropriate, remake, and disfigure the image of the celebrity on its own authority and for its own reasons. The term celebrity took on its modern connotation only in the course of the eighteenth century (it had earlier implied “solemnity” in rituals associated with the court), and readers will enjoy Lilti’s cataloguing of the new mechanisms that incited and propelled “cette curiosité” that lay behind the creation of “figures publiques.” The proliferation of theaters (stage actors were the

first real “stars”); the rise of the sentimental novel that encouraged identification with fictive personalities; a media revolution that included the appearance of an early tabloid press (notably the *Mémoires secrets* in France) focused on intimate details about famous individuals; the centrality of portrait painting and the easy availability of engravings bearing the personal likenesses of the well known (Louis-Sébastien Mercier mocked the new mania for collecting these images); a profusion of biographies and necrologies that lavished attention on people famous not for some singular achievement or talent but for the fact of being famous. All of these “nouvelles configurations de la publicité”—recognizable to twenty-first eyes as forming the basic infrastructure of celebrity—reached critical mass in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Also present at the inception of celebrity culture, and forming a common thread linking the eighteenth century to today’s saturated media environment, was a gnawing suspicion about the entire process that created and sustained celebrity. Some of the most illuminating pages of *Figures publiques* share Lilti’s close reading of eighteenth-century texts that betray a new anxiety about fame, explore the enervating effects of participation in the public arena, question the trustworthiness of public judgment, and examine the distancing and alienation fostered by the creation of public identities distinct from and opposed to individuals’ innermost personal identities. Samuel Johnson wrote insightfully on the changing nature of literary fame, lamenting that the “sudden caprice” of the public and an excessive appetite for novelty could now determine a writer’s reputation and chances for success (p. 139). Charles Pinot Duclos’s underappreciated *Considérations sur les moeurs de ce siècle* (1751) offered thoughtful ruminations on the mechanisms of “opinion” at mid-century; later editions of the text, beginning in 1764, assigned “célébrité” its own category of notoriety, one that entailed the complete loss of control over one’s own image and reputation (p. 138). In his treatment of the brilliant and exemplary career of Rousseau, and especially through his virtuosic reading of the Genevan’s *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* (1780-82), Lilti probes at the core of the newly disorienting experience of engaging an appreciative but fickle and irrational public. Rousseau acknowledged his own desire for public acceptance and approval—his insistence on his unique authenticity was, at least in part, a justification for his claim on public attention—but in his imitable style Rousseau also followed to its logical limits the sacrifice of self that a craving for, and even the enjoyment of, public approval ultimately brought. In both his excessive self-regard and in his culturally induced paranoia, Rousseau exposed “célébrité vécue comme fardeau, aliénation, défiguration....Le cauchemar que décrit Rousseau est celui où un individu...devient le spectateur impuissant du spectacle qu’il est devenu” (p. 219).

The last two chapters of Lilti’s long book, focused on the Revolutionary and Romantic generations, seem less essential than the eye-opening and subtle exploration of the emerging mechanisms of celebrity provided in the first five chapters. The later figures Lilti examines—Mirabeau, Napoleon, Lord Byron, Franz Liszt, Jenny Lind—represent variations on a theme already well established by 1790. In any case, in the rush to connect the experiences of the eighteenth century to the Romantics’ lionization of the individual genius, Lilti comes close to overplaying one of his principal arguments about celebrity culture *tout court*. He insists that the modern phenomenon of celebrity involves public obsession over the private lives of the stars whose images feed the maw of publicity. Publics develop an affective relationship with their celebrities, he writes, one that “repose sur le désir et parfois la conviction d’accéder à une intimité à distance” (p. 65). He develops this theme throughout the book, noting the invasion of

private spaces by ever more demanding publics. Rousseau was an early exemplar of the phenomenon, since his readers enjoyed an “intimité amicale fantasmé” with their singular hero (p. 169), but Rousseau was not unique. The early tabloids commodified the rumored sexual exploits of the stars of stage and opera. Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) achieved its extraordinary success precisely because it sought “avant tout à rendre compte de la personnalité de Johnson, sans dissimuler ses zones d’ombre” (p. 110). The secretary of celebrated naturalist Georges-Louis Le Clerc, comte de Buffon, published a *Vie privée du comte de Buffon* (1788) shortly after the great man’s death, and the author promised readers, “c’est de sa vie privée seulement que j’ose ici vous occuper: ses moeurs, ses habitudes, sa conduite et ses principes domestiques” (p. 118). To become a “public figure” surely meant, in some cases, that one’s private life became an object of voyeuristic curiosity.

But this was clearly not true in all cases, and by viewing the eighteenth-century terrain too often through the lens of contemporary realities (the book abounds with references to Marilyn Monroe, Kurt Cobain, Johnny Hallyday, Sofia Coppola, and so on), Lilti misses an opportunity to compare the different manifestations of celebrity during the “première révolution médiatique” (a chapter title). The public craved intimacy with some celebrities—particularly those who made their purported singularity a feature of their public persona. But Lilti’s own evidence makes it clear that there were multiple pathways toward celebrity status. Some celebrities, flashes in the pan, owed their notoriety to their involvement in momentary *fait divers*. Others, such as Voltaire, enjoyed celebrity because of extraordinary talent, prodigious output, or a compelling personality. Others were made famous by scandal. Still others—Rousseau is the prime example—seemed to embody or project the dominant values of the moment and were cherished as cultural icons. What united these forms of celebrity was not the public’s insatiable curiosity about the private affairs of the celebrated—some celebrities were compared to freaks at the fair, after all—but the disposable nature of the celebrity-as-commodity. Not all celebrities generated fanatical devotion or a yearning for intimacy, but all were possessed, re-circulated, and eventually set aside by a public indulging a new taste for a new form of entertainment: the consumption of “public figures” of the moment. A thorough excavation of that eighteenth-century invention, with more careful differentiation of the forms of celebrity and their own distinct lineages, could reveal much about how individuals actually experienced the forging of real and metaphorical public spaces in the century of the Enlightenment. More attention to the demand side of the celebrity production cycle might also help to uncover newly consumerist understandings of both time and space at the dawn of the modern era.

Asking for more is, however, a most ungenerous reaction to the reading of Antoine Lilti’s rich and exhilarating book. The eighteenth century can now lay claim to yet another invention. And students of the period will discover that there is no finer introduction to the phenomenon of celebrity than *Figures publiques*.

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