How to Become a Celebrity

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One of the most famous first lines among modern novels—“The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,” (L. P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, 1953)—has migrated from literature to history and now serves as an article of faith among professional historians. It means: avoid anachronism.

The first line in Antoine Lilti’s historical study of celebrity flies in the face of that injunction: “Marie-Antoinette is Lady Di!” This remark, made by Francis Ford Copolla as he watched the filming of *Marie Antoinette* (2006), written and directed by his daughter, Sofia Copolla, was splendidly anachronistic. So was the film, which contrasted the youthful freshness of the queen, played as if she were an American adolescent by Kirsten Dunst, with the suffocating protocol of Louis XVI’s court, captured in sumptuous detail by cameras positioned in Versailles itself. Instead of dismissing *Marie Antoinette* as a failed attempt to reconstruct the past, Lilti celebrates it as an expression of what he calls “the culture of celebrity,” a long-term, trans-Atlantic phenomenon that first took root in Paris and London around 1750 and now has spread everywhere in the world—even, it seems, in North Korea, where Hollywood’s version of the cult surrounding Kim Jong-un in *The Interview* produced a combustible confusion between image and reality similar in some ways to the predicament of the French queen.

Not that Lilti himself embraces anachronism. He construes celebrity as a historical subject, and he works it over with all the rigor and originality that he deployed in his earlier book, *Le monde des salons. Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (2005). But he takes Copolla’s remark seriously. Not only does an affinity exist between Marie-Antoinette and Princess Diana, he argues, but Voltaire and Rousseau have something in common with Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. That something, Lilti argues, is celebrity. But what exactly is it?

Lilti situates celebrity between two older notions: on the one hand, reputation, a judgment attached to a person by others in relatively close contact with him or her, and glory, a renown earned by great deeds which extends far beyond the range of individual contacts and outlasts the life of the celebrated
person. Like reputation, celebrity tends to be ephemeral. Like glory, it reaches many people, moving in one direction: a celebrity is known to a broad public, but he or she does not know them. The knowledge, however, is superficial. It is attached to an image of the person conveyed by the media, whether printed pamphlets and crude woodcuts or films and Facebook. Also, celebrity tends to be double-edged. It may be desirable, but once achieved, it can produce painful after-effects, such as a sense of imprisonment within one’s public self while suffering damage to one’s true self.

This notion may seem familiar, because celebrity has become a favorite topic among sociologists and cultural critics as well as journalists. To follow variations on the theme, one can consult a convenient anthology, The Celebrity Culture Reader (2006). Lilti makes use of this literature, but he raises the subject to another level by revealing its history, and he challenges his readers by pushing his argument to the edge of anachronism, without falling over.

Among the case studies he presents is Nicolas Chamfort, a famous writer and wit in eighteenth-century Paris, who defined “célébrité” sardonically when the word began to be used widely in French: “Celebrity is the advantage of being known by those who do not know you.” As Lilti points out, the quotation is often misconstrued as: “…the advantage of being known by those whom you do not know.” In its correct form, Chamfort’s remark referred to something more insidious than disequilibrium in knowledge. It evoked a new kind of public, one that fastened on to the images of famous writers that were created by literary reviews, café gossip, and cheap engravings hawked in the streets by peddlers.

In its hunger for information, this ravenous public tried to penetrate into the writers’ private lives, while the writers struggled to keep for themselves whatever self remained—and that could be little, for Chamfort’s use of “advantage” was ironic. In another witticism he remarked, “Celebrity is the chastisement of merit and the punishment of talent.” After becoming a celebrity himself, he found the cost too dear. He ceased publishing and withdrew from public life until the Revolution promised to transform the relation between writer and public. But it failed to keep its promise, and in the depth of disillusionment, when faced with arrest during the Terror, Chamfort tried to commit suicide and ultimately died from his self-inflicted wounds.
Chamfort’s case may seem too dramatic to represent the tensions inherent in the early experience of celebrity, to say nothing of the life of celebrities today. Yet Lilti argues that today’s mass media increase the pressure on public figures, magnifying the disparity between their private and their public selves in such a way that the loss of the sense of the inner self can lead to the loss of life. After a long discussion of this problem in Rousseau, he cites the deaths of Marilyn Monroe and Kurt Cobain. Should the parallels be dismissed as anachronistic?

Consider the omnipresence of celebrity today. The word appears every day in every newspaper and it is everywhere on the Internet. An issue of The New York Times on December 20, 2014 featured a story on the “celebrity guests” who feted Stephen Colbert during the final episode of “The Colbert Report,” and it asked a question about the nature of the self among such personages: How would Colbert manage “once he drops his Comedy Central mask and has to be himself on the “Late Show”?” It answered reassuringly, “Actually, he won’t have to be his real self onstage any more than Mr. Letterman or Jimmy Kimmel or Seth Meyers has to. Talk shows are acting jobs, except the hosts play themselves rather than fictional characters. They maintain public personas that very often have little to do with the people they are privately.”

The point may seem obvious today, but the experience was new in the eighteenth century, when the media acquired unprecedented power and the notion of celebrity first took shape. Although the word existed earlier, it originally had a different meaning. Derived from the Latin celebritas, “célébrité” denoted a solemn official ceremony in the seventeenth century. Lilti shows how the modern usage began to appear in dictionaries around 1720 and became widespread after 1750, as can be demonstrated by statistics drawn from data sets studied by Google’s Ngram viewer. (“Celebrity” evolved in the same way in English, but its usage was complicated by the related term, “fame.”) Yet the word did not correspond exactly to an idea, and the phenomenon cannot be captured by the usual methods of intellectual history. Celebrity belonged to what the French call “the collective imaginary.” It was a new element in the mental landscape shared by an entire population, an original category in the way of thinking among ordinary people as they sorted out the experiences of everyday life.
Lilti shows how those experiences came together in such a way as to open up a new conceptual space in eighteenth-century Paris and London. The factors have long been studied by social historians: urbanization, increased wealth, a growing economy of consumption, and an expansion of the culture industries, especially in the print media. Books, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, engravings, and posters appeared everywhere—for sale in shop windows and store shelves, displayed on the packs of peddlers and pasted on the facades of buildings, passed around in coffee houses and rented out in cafés—within easy sight wherever the public gathered.

The concepts of a public, public space and public opinion undergird Lilti’s argument. They can be found in a great deal of current social science, and Lilti draws on the work of the usual suspects among sociologists: Jürgen Habermas, Edgar Morin, and Pierre Bourdieu, among others. But he also takes cues from Gabriel Tarde, the nineteenth-century sociologist, whose ideas were overshadowed by those of his rival, Emile Durkheim, but are currently undergoing a revival, thanks in large part to the work of Elihu Katz and Bruno Latour. Tarde related the development of collective consciousness to the experience of reading, especially reading newspapers. While perusing the day’s news, he argued, readers are aware of others doing the same thing at the same time. They develop a sense of community, even though they do not know the other readers; and as the news becomes amplified in conversations, especially in cafés, the readership develops into a public, which expresses itself as public opinion.

“Names make news”—that adage has a place in Lilti’s argument, although he does not make use of it. News crystalizes around personages, especially in sectors of journalism marked off by gossip and scandal. John Brewer’s discussion of popular journalism in A Sentimental Murder (2004) includes an account of “Têtes-à-Têtes,” a feature in the Town and Country Magazine from the 1760s that showed facing silhouettes of prominent persons above reports about their scandalous love affairs. In the 1770s, Henry Bate, known as “the Reverend Bruiser,” and William Jackson, or “Dr. Viper,” made the London Morning Post and the Morning Herald into best-selling scandal sheets, far more libelous than the tabloid press today. Paris did not develop a comparable brand of journalism, but the genre of scandalous biographies known as “vies privées” circulated widely in the underground book trade. Private lives became fodder for public consumption.
as the press stamped the collective imagination of eighteenth-century readers. By turning the private/public distinction inside out, the media made celebrity into a torture for many persons who suffered in the same way as modern movie stars.

Lilti does not hesitate to apply the term “star” to eighteenth-century personages and “fan” to their followers. He does so, no doubt, for the shock effect, to disturb schematized views of the past, which have hardened into orthodoxy. Where other historians locate breaking points, he sees continuity, and he spreads his argument over an unusual time period, 1750-1850 with forays into the twentieth century, as if the French Revolution did not produce a decisive transformation of collective consciousness. He therefore treats Mirabeau and Napoleon as celebrities, caught up in the same cycle of adulation and ambiguity as Rousseau before them and Sarah Bernhardt afterward.

Extravagant as it may sound, the argument has much to be said for it. Lilti does not dispute standard interpretations of revolution—neither the revolution of 1789, nor 1830, nor 1848—and he does not attempt to write a full history of celebrity. Instead, he studies its "mechanism,” showing how the basic elements came together soon after 1750 and have remained together right up to the present. Samuel Johnson, he explains, understood how the desire for fame could overcome a writer and then, if realized, could cut him off from other humans and deprive him of his original self, now transformed into a public commodity. Even Benjamin Franklin had a canny sense of how the personality cult that he carefully cultivated in Paris—the plain-spoken Quaker, the intrepid scientist, the man-of-the-people and “cher Papa,” whose image appeared in countless engravings, statuettes, and bric-a-brac—could make him look ridiculous, reduced to the level of a doll or a toby jug.

Even Voltaire worried about how his public image—notably Jean Huber’s sketches of him in the setting of his private life at Ferney—could expose him to ridicule, the force he dreaded most. Voltaire does not, in fact, fit well into Lilti’s model of celebrity, but Rousseau epitomizes it, for his sudden conquest of fame with the publication of his Discourse on the Sciences and Arts in 1750 inflicted such suffering on him that his last writings, especially the Confessions and Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques, can be understood as an attempt to exorcise the curse.
It is quite a feat to sustain an original interpretation of Rousseau’s life and works after they have been subjected to so much study over so many years. But Lilti makes a convincing case. He does not dispute that Rousseau’s obsession with conspiracies can be viewed as paranoia, but he shows that it also expresses a sentiment of alienation from the self in response to over-exposure to the public. The waves of fan mail, the multiple reproductions of his portrait, the endless reprinting of his books, every contact with the outside world proved to Rousseau that the public had taken over Jean-Jacques (he was the only celebrity at the time, except le Grand Thomas, the famous tooth-puller of the Pont Neuf, to be known by his first name—in anticipation of Elvis and Marilyn). He attempted to rescue his authentic self, “Rousseau,” by escaping from the public, but he found no refuge, not when he fled to Switzerland, not when he sought shelter with Hume, not even when he attempted to live in obscurity by copying music among the anonymous masses of Paris. At every turn, he found enemies hidden behind the masks of benefactors and tormentors who pretended to be moved by his writing and used the transparency it offered as a way to invade his soul.

An extreme case? Certainly, but Lilti detects in it the same elements that existed in other cases—from Marie-Antoinette and Mirabeau to Chateaubriand, Byron, Liszt, Queen Victoria, Garibaldi, and, across the ocean, George Washington and Andrew Jackson. One could come up with counter-examples and dispute the selectivity, but it would be wiser to enjoy the grand tour of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for what it is: a way of presenting familiar territory in unfamiliar light. Vaut le voyage.

Robert Darnton

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1 See Latour, The Science of Passionate Interests: An Introduction to Gabriel Tarde’s Economic Anthropology (2010). Tarde’s ideas have a great deal in common with those developed by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities (1983), although Anderson does not refer to them.