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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.

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This year's events have brought the eighteenth century back to the front page in intriguing ways. Last January, Voltaire was transformed into a "Je suis Charlie" protester on posters created after the terrorist attacks in Paris; and a few months later, the glamour of *libertinage* returned, at least in the rhetoric of Dominique Strauss-Kahn defending his sexual excesses in court. These examples confirm some essential points of Antoine Lilti's illuminating book *Figures publiques: L'invention de la célébrité (1750-1850)*. First, people can capture the public's attention for very different reasons, ranging from the need for an inspiring hero figure in times of crisis to voyeuristic interest in a well-known person's private life. Second, the mechanisms of celebrity have a leveling effect in that they draw attention in equal measure to illustrious persons and to those who gain fame for less lofty reasons. Celebrity operates more or less the same way for scandalous politicians as it does for authors, artists, movie stars, or professional soccer players.

We are not, of course, lacking in celebrity studies *per se*. Antoine Lilti acknowledges the abundant literature that has been devoted to the subject since the 1950s and 1960s, when critics such as Edgar Morin, Roland Barthes, and Daniel Boorstin analyzed the role of visibility, media hype, and myth-making in determining who gets more than Andy Warhol's proverbial fifteen minutes of fame. What *Figures publiques* offers is a deeper historical perspective that locates the roots of modern celebrity culture in the mid-eighteenth century and traces its development over the hundred years that followed. It argues that far from being a twentieth-century creation tied to the rise of movies and television, that culture was invented in the Enlightenment and further shaped during the Romantic era.

Although often separated in historical accounts, these two periods contributed jointly to the factors that underpinned the rise of celebrity as we know it today. Some were technical, like the expansion of print media and the development of techniques for reproducing visual images on a mass scale (Lilti's narrative is capped by the invention of photography in the 1850s). Others were cultural: Lilti singles out sentimental fiction, which fostered a mix of curiosity and empathy that transferred easily from fictional characters to people in the news; a new conception of the self that stressed individual authenticity; and the increasing powers wielded by the public—or, more precisely, the publics created through publicity, which were broader, more democratic, and less rational than the idealized public sphere stressed by Jürgen Habermas and likeminded historians of the Enlightenment.

One goal of *Figures publiques* is to show that celebrity culture surpassed the eighteenth century's so-called "cult" of great men and the nineteenth century's veneration for brooding poetic geniuses. It affected not just those who were lionized as intellectual and literary heroes

but also entertainers, artistic virtuosi, and political leaders. The book also reflects Lilti's keen interest in the complicated case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he calls the first true European celebrity, the first person to describe the experience of celebrity as a burden and alienation. Rousseau's face, framed by the distinctive fur hat he wore for his portrait by Allan Ramsay (1766), adorns the book cover in a diminutive cameo, boxed in dramatically by large white borders.

It is, however, Rousseau's nemesis Voltaire who launches the book. In chapter one, Lilti examines the tale of Voltaire's spectacular return to Paris in 1778, when the octogenarian philosophe was received with great fanfare, culminating in his ceremonial crowning at the Comédie Française after a performance of his tragedy *Irène*. This episode, often described as a triumphant moment of recognition for Voltaire's genius and status, appears more ambiguous in Lilti's account. Drawing on contemporary commentaries such as those Louis-Sébastien Mercier made in his *Tableau de Paris*, Lilti emphasizes the almost farcical theatricality of Voltaire's Parisian visit—and the degree to which the enthusiasm that greeted him depended on intense public curiosity that had built up over decades, thanks to the display of Voltaire's name and face in newspaper stories, paintings, and sculptures. Moreover, Voltaire wasn't the only name and face to make a sensation in 1778: a few weeks after fêting Voltaire, the Parisian public was abuzz over the prodigious success of the comic actor Volange in the role of the bouffon Janot. In fact, Janot was also transformed into a porcelain figurine, just like Voltaire.

Lilti uses this episode to demonstrate that celebrity is distinct both from the reputation a person may gain for a particular body of work and from glory, which is generally bestowed posthumously—as it would be soon upon Voltaire (interred in the Pantheon three years later). Celebrity is determined by the rhythms of contemporary events, and its main driving force is not admiration but curiosity for a person judged to be singular in some way. As a social condition, it comes with burdens as well as perquisites: for example, the difficulty of escaping from inquisitive observers or from the maneuvers of merchants eager to cash in on a star's fame.

As Lilti stresses, the culture of celebrity opened up a new space of practices and discourses that were fueled by factors such as the commercialization of leisure in the cities of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and America. In chapter two, he examines the evolving economics of theater and the birth of stage stars such as Sarah Siddons, David Garrick, and the castrato Guisto Fernandino Tenducci, whose mysterious virility caused as much of a stir in the press as his singing voice. Also featured is François Joseph Talma, an internationally celebrated actor whose career was closely associated with the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Empire—yet whose fame survived Napoleon's fall and whose death in 1826 provoked an outpouring of grief throughout Europe. Chapter two also explores early versions of fan mail and snooty fans, like the high-born lady who snuck into Sarah Siddon's home to get a look at her.

Chapter three reviews the ways in which written anecdotes on public figures were supplemented by visual modes of publicity like portraits, wax sculptures, busts, statuettes, and cameos including the Wedgewood company's "Heads of Illustrious Moderns." There was a risible side to this proliferation of celebrity images, as Benjamin Franklin acknowledged in 1779 when he punned that he had been veritably "i-doll-ized" during his stay to France by the number of dolls and trinkets that bore his likeness (this is illustrated by seven figures reproduced at the center of

Figures publiques). Celebrities were satirized in caricatures and puppet shows, and various publications recounted the doings of the “heroes of the day.” One was the *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l’histoire de la République des lettres*, which put literary news on the same level as political scandals and anecdotes about life in worldly society. Another was the “private lives” genre of biography, whose subjects ranged from Samuel Johnson to the famous criminal Cartouche. Underlying these developments was an evolution in the very notions of public and private: even the most humble person could have a public life if s/he were the protagonist of a news story or the subject of a portrait. Conversely, state figures like the king and queen now claimed the right to have a private life shielded from the public eye. The case of Marie-Antoinette, impatient with court etiquette and eager to enjoy the private pleasures of a young aristocrat, is a particularly poignant example (chapter six).

Chapter four focuses on definitions and critiques of celebrity, including the *Considérations sur les mœurs de ce siècle*, where Duclos discussed the rise of celebrity as a distinct way of gaining social distinction; Johnson’s observations in the *Rambler* on the psychology of being a celebrity; and the jaundiced commentaries of Nicolas Chamfort and Mercier, who bemoaned the importance of having a recognizable name and the aggressive drive to reduce an author to his persona. It also provides some intriguing Ngram lexical graphs that map the number of occurrences of the words *célebrité* and “celebrity” in French and English publications, respectively. These and related words (such as Johnson’s “celebriousness”) clearly enjoyed what Lilti calls a “linguistic effervescence” between 1750 and 1850.

By far the longest chapter in *Figures publiques* is chapter five, devoted to Rousseau, whom Lilti presents as both an exemplary and exceptional case in the history of modern celebrity. Rousseau first made a name for himself through his prize-winning, deliberately provocative *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* (1750) and then fanned the flames of his celebrity even while regarding it as a malediction. As a public persona, his every act and gesture was reported in the press: newspapers from Paris to London broadcast both his unconventional behavior and garb (for example, his famous Armenian costume) and his apparent taste for publicity. By the time he returned to Paris in 1770, after seeking refuge abroad from the political controversies created by *Emile* and *Le Contrat social*, he was a walking one-man spectacle, so much so that the Parisian authorities asked him to be more discreet about his public appearances. By that point, the name “Jean-Jacques” had become an empty word, detached not only from Rousseau’s work but also from his person. So many people sought to gain admission into his company that the “visit to Jean-Jacques” became a veritable literary genre. However, Rousseau was often suspicious of those who sought him out, and he grew obsessed to the point of complete paranoia by the threat of seeing his name and image defigured in public.

Lilti takes pains to distinguish between the phenomenon of Rousseau’s celebrity as it unfolded during his lifetime and Rousseauism, or the posthumous construction of Rousseau as a great man, which, in its Romantic inflection, portrayed him as a genius who sought happiness in solitude. That depiction obscures the fact that Rousseau was avid for public recognition: that desire structured both his life and his philosophy. To show this, Lilti analyzes the successive phases in Rousseau’s career. The 1750s Rousseau was a polemicist: after denouncing the arts and sciences as morally corrupt and corrupting, he launched attacks on French music, theater, and finally his old Encyclopedist friends. His celebrity took on a new dimension in the 1760s

when he became “l’ami Jean-Jacques” in the wake of his runaway hit novel *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), which turned him into the “master of sensibility” in the minds of many readers. From the beginning, Rousseau broke with the existing conventions of the intelligentsia by signing his name to his works and refusing all gifts from benefactors; such gestures were central to his self-fashioning as a courageous, transparent truth-teller. By the time he undertook his *Confessions* in the mid-1760s, he was regarded as an absolutely singular, original man by detractors and admirers alike. In the early 1770s, Rousseau renounced all literary activities: embittered by the muted reception he got after reading portions of the *Confessions* in selected Parisian salons, he turned to writing only for himself. In his final works, *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* and the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, he reflected bitterly upon the pain his celebrity had caused him, blaming much of his predicament on erstwhile friends like Jean d’Alembert and Denis Diderot, whom he accused of participating in a plot to manipulate the popular press so as to make its readers believe that Jean-Jacques was as strange as a two-headed monster (p. 204).

Reading is a central theme of chapter five, starting with the extraordinary readerly response to *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. As Lilti describes it, that reaction redefined the affective tie which the individuals making up a certain public could form with a famous contemporary: the novel’s many fans identified not only with its characters but also with its author, whom they regarded as a guide and virtual friend. Hundreds of people wrote effusive letters to Rousseau expressing their emotion and their wish to meet him—a phenomenon that, Lilti insists (in a corrective to the well-known interpretation Robert Darnton proposed in *The Great Cat Massacre*), was based not on a naïve confusion between fiction and reality, but something far more thoughtful. Moreover, some Rousseau enthusiasts were so devoted that they rose in unconditional defense of him during his famous quarrel with David Hume in 1766, when Rousseau refused the royal pension from George III which Hume had obtained for him and wrote a virulent letter breaking off their friendship. The quarrel and its aftermath reinforced Rousseau’s singular position in the literary world. Because public opinion sided with him rather than with Hume and his Parisian friends (who tried to smear Rousseau’s reputation by painting him as an ingrate and delirious lunatic), he became all the more famous for defying the norms—in this case, the reliance of men of letters on the support of the rich and powerful. Rousseau’s celebrity, Lilti emphasizes, directly affected the outcome of this quarrel: his defenders formed an “elective community” that closed ranks around him (p. 176).

Reading is, however, a tricky matter in regard to Rousseau. Lilti acknowledges this when he discusses the tautological circle at the heart of Rousseau’s sentimental conception of reading: “good” readers, as he defined them, read his books with their hearts and emotions—and became, by reading, more virtuous and sensitive because they empathized with the virtue, sensibility and authentic goodness of the author (p. 193). Those who read his works critically, with an eye to their difficulties and contradictions, were banned from the circle of “good” readers. As Lilti notes, Rousseau made this rhetorical argument repeatedly in the dialogues *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques*. It is worth adding that he had already deployed it in the “Seconde préface de Julie,” a theoretical dialogue published before the novel in order to stir up public curiosity.[1] Rousseau specified there that the novel’s ideal readers were a pair of married peasants who, upon reading the book together on a long winter’s night, would be touched in unison by the charming tableau of a loveless but edifying conjugal union (an allusion to the Wolmars’s marriage) and the austere pleasures of a simple life lived close to nature.[2] As the “Seconde préface” makes clear,

Rousseau's model of reading is highly controlled and restrictive. Indeed, it is as contrived and artificial, in its way, as Julie's highly domesticated "wild" garden sanctuary at Clarens. It also excludes many potential real-life readers from the inner circle. That was not standard practice among promoters of sentimental fiction, who generally allowed more people into the ranks of the edifiable and who did not rule out the benefits of critical reading.

It thus strikes me as problematic to describe Rousseau as a champion of "cette immédiateté du rapport intersubjectif que la lecture est censée permettre" (p. 195). That was, certainly, the sort of relationship that he himself felt with certain books, like Plutarch's *Lives* and *Robinson Crusoe*. However, to cite an argument that has been made by various scholars, Rousseau's self-positioning in relation to society was narcissistic: while he yearned to receive *reconnaissance* (a term that translates into English as both recognition and gratitude), he was averse to showing it, as he stressed in texts like the 1762 *Lettres à Malesherbes*.^[3] He transformed all of his projects in his own mind into "unique and exceptional events," worthy of everyone's attention, but he wanted no human allies in real life because his ethos and political philosophy made real-life human society negative by definition.^[4] Rousseau's solution was to create imaginary friends and disciples—Julie, Saint-Preux, Emile—who liberated him from his obsessive need for recognition by allowing him to dispense with reality. The increasingly suspicious remarks on the public which Lilti draws out of Rousseau's autobiographical works confirm this interpretation. The public, according to the *Dialogues*, was a universally hostile entity, poised to defigure and defame Jean-Jacques at its pleasure, and the *Dialogues* and *Rêveries* allowed for no inner circle of readers beyond Rousseau's me, myself, and I. Ultimately, Rousseau's self-definition as different, singular was so extreme that it shut out all possibility of intersubjective recognition—making it somewhat difficult, as Lilti grants in chapter five's conclusion, to say just how comparable his experience of celebrity was to that of the other historical figures discussed in the book.

What, one might ask, does this imply about the involvement of Rousseau's fans in the fame that he enjoyed (or endured) during his lifetime? First, it suggests that those who enthusiastically identified with the fictional characters of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* or *Emile* may have been following scripts provided in prefatory works like the "Seconde préface à Julie." Second, they may have been driven by a wish to see themselves as singular—or at least, part of an exclusive crowd of sensitive souls who "got" Rousseau and were similarly disenchanted with some aspect of real life. In his analysis of the letters Rousseau received from fans during the 1760s, Jean Starobinski notes that many of them used symbolic filial rhetoric to describe the relationship they imagined having with the author (a curious thing, given that they were writing to a man who had abandoned his own children to an orphanage), and Starobinski describes their enthusiasm as a cult, by which he means "la reconnaissance d'une autorité supérieure à toutes les autres [...]. L'on fait appel à l'autorité de Rousseau contre celle d'une famille décevante, ou contre celle de l'église établie."^[5]

Lilti, for his part, dismisses the idea that there was something cultish about Rousseau's fandom because it involved no mystical or quasi-mystical abandon of the self (p. 169). Mystical abandon was not, however, the only sort of cultishness that existed during the period under study in *Figures publiques*. A comparison of entries for the term *culte* in the 1762 and 1835 editions of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* shows a marked evolution from a strictly religious use

denoting the act of honoring God, toward the more secular understanding of “une grande admiration, une vénération profonde” directed toward an exceptional being or set of beings—like one’s mother, one’s lover, or the Ancients.[6] The related term *fanatique* likewise evolved in the *DAF* from a carefully restricted religious definition in 1762 (“Fou, extravagant, aliéné d’esprit, qui croit avoir des apparitions, des inspirations. Il ne se dit guère qu’en fait de Religion”) to something more expansive that included this in 1798: “celui qui se passionne à l’excès pour un parti, pour une opinion, pour un Auteur, etc.”[7] Moreover, according to the *Dictionnaire vivant de la langue française*, “fanatique” enjoyed its own linguistic effervescence between 1750 and 1850, with a dramatic spike in occurrences happening around 1780.[8]

The fanatical quality of Rousseau and his followers was a common theme in critiques made by those outside of his fan set. Friedrich-Melchior Grimm, for example, enjoyed making joking comparisons between Rousseau and the austere religious reformer Jean Calvin.[9] Lilti does cite some of the skeptical, at times sarcastic, remarks which Grimm and others made about Rousseau’s fame. However, he makes only passing mention of Diderot, who was one of Rousseau’s closest friends until 1758, when they had a bitter rupture that arguably haunted both of them for the rest of their lives. Although Diderot refrained for decades from writing anything critical in public about Rousseau, he made this comment in the 1782 *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et de Néron* (perhaps in reaction to *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques*, published in London in 1780): “Jean-Jacques eût été chef de secte il y a deux cents ans; en tout temps démagogue dans sa patrie.”[10] Diderot attributed the sway Rousseau held over the minds of his admirers to several factors: the *antiphilosophie* tone he had abruptly assumed after being one of the philosophes for twenty years; his aversion for moralists, which appealed to worldly people who had forgotten his treatise on the inequality of conditions; and his ardent depictions of love, which seduced a good number of young women readers. Although it was clearly personal and subjective, Diderot’s perspective on the sources of Rousseau’s influence over his fans would be worth including in an account of his celebrity—all the more given that Diderot also made some of the period’s most trenchant observations on the dark side of celebrity in his satire *Le Neveu de Rameau*, a text that Antoine Lilti does not mention in *Figures publiques*.

Those are, of course, the comments of a literary critic (who freely admits to finding “les amis de Denis” more congenial than those of Jean-Jacques). *Figures publiques* opens up all sorts of interesting questions about the sociology, economics, and psychology involved in becoming famous from 1750 to 1850 and about the public(s) whose enthusiasm or curiosity turned certain people into celebrities. Chapters six and seven offer some fascinating considerations on how celebrity seeped into the political arena, using a diverse set of case studies that include Marie Antoinette, Mirabeau, George Washington, Napoleon, Queen Victoria, and Guiseppe Garibaldi. These chapters also document the increasing role played by media coverage and self-promotion in cultural life, while also showing the various ways in which the principles of Romanticism shaped the evolution of modern celebrity culture. These include the Romantic aesthetic that made pleasing the public a supreme value; the glamour attached to rebellious, melancholic, “bad boy” poets like Lord Byron; the vexed situation of the woman celebrity in the nineteenth century, a time when seeking fame went against the grain of the ideology of modesty and domestic devotion which women were expected to embrace; and the rise of the musical virtuoso, a figure that sometimes (as in the case of Franz Liszt) embodied the Romantic association between genius and madness. Lilti brings his history into the modern age by returning at the end of

chapter seven to theater via the examples of Sarah Bernhardt and Jenny Lind and by dealing briefly but incisively with films about celebrity (such as Eli Kazan's *A Face in the Crowd*) in his conclusion.

Figures publiques is, in sum, an impressive achievement. Antoine Lilti brings extraordinary erudition and rigor to his history of celebrity, while also managing to keep his discussion lively and entertaining. I have found it interesting to read his study in tandem with two other recent books: Darrin M. McMahon's *Divine Fury* and Kathleen Kete's *Making Way for Genius*. The three books feature concepts—celebrity, genius, and the “aspiring self”—that are, in many ways, pieces of the same historical construct; and they also complement each other by emphasizing the continuities between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[11] Kete raises a question about Napoleon that could well be asked of some of the celebrity figures featured in Lilti's *Figures publiques* (including Rousseau): what drew ordinary people into “identifying their own selves with that of Napoleon?”[12] The answer she proposes is that Napoleon was “read” rather like the character in a novel—a process that can, in some instances, lead fans to lose themselves in their fantasy identification with a celebrity to the point of endangering their lives or that of the famous person they admire (Kete cites the case of John Lennon). It's an ominous note on which to end this review, but also a way to suggest another line of inquiry that could be opened up by these books: obscurity studies, or an inquiry into the anti-fame thread of discourse that coexisted with the promotion of celebrity, as attested by works that range from the *Encyclopédie* to Balzac's *Etudes philosophiques*. Obscurity is certainly not as engaging as celebrity, but, if we are to believe Balzac, it is the secret to longevity.

Notes

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, éditions de la Pléiade, 1959-), vol. II, pp. 1342-43.

[2] Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 23.

[3] “Tout bienfait exige reconnaissance; et je me sens le coeur ingrat par cela seul que la reconnaissance est un devoir” [“Any gift demands recognition/gratitude, and I feel that my heart is ungrateful simply because gratitude is a duty”]; Rousseau, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I, p. 1132.

[4] The passage cited is from Josué Harari, *Scenarios of the Imaginary, Theorizing the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 48-49. I am also alluding here to a point made by Jean Starobinski in the chapter “La solitude” of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), pp. 51-53. See also François Roustang, “L'interlocuteur du solitaire” in Claudette Delhez-Sarlet and Maurizio Catani, eds., *Individualisme et autobiographie en Occident* (Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1982), pp. 163-75.

[5] “The recognition of an authority superior to all others [...] They appeal to the authority of Rousseau against that of a disappointing family, or against that of the established church”; Starobinski, *Accuser et séduire: Essais sur Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), p. 23.

[6] “Culte” in *Dictionnaires d’autrefois*, accessed October 11, 2015, <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdicolook.pl?strippedhw=culte>.

[7]. “Crazy, extravagant, mentally alienated, who believes s/he has apparitions, inspiration. The term is mostly used only in the context of Religion”; “a person who is excessively impassioned for a party, an opinion, an Author, etc”; “Fanatique” in *Dictionnaires d’autrefois*, accessed October 11, 2015, <http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dicos/pubdicolook.pl?strippedhw=fanatique>.

[8] See <http://dvlf.uchicago.edu/mot/fanatique>.

[9] Jean Fabre cites Grimm’s jokes about Rousseau’s fanaticism in “Deux Frères ennemis: Diderot et Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” *Diderot Studies* 3 (1961): 155-213, citations in n. 4, pp. 191-92.

[10] “Jean-Jacques would have been the head of a sect two hundred years ago; in any age, he’d be a demagogue in his homeland,” in *Essai sur les règnes de Claude et Néron*, in Diderot, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris : Hermann, 1975-), vol. 25, p. 126. Studies of Diderot’s remarks on Rousseau in and beyond the *Essai* include Fabre (op. cit.) and Yves Citton, “Retour sur la misérable querelle Rousseau-Diderot : position, conséquence, spectacle et sphère publique,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 36 (2004): 57-95.

[11] The notes and acknowledgements suggest that McMahon is the critical link joining the three books: *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Basic Books, 2013). Kathleen Kete, *Making Way for Genius: The Aspiring Self from the Old Regime to the New* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[12] Kete, *Making Way for Genius*, p. 166.

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