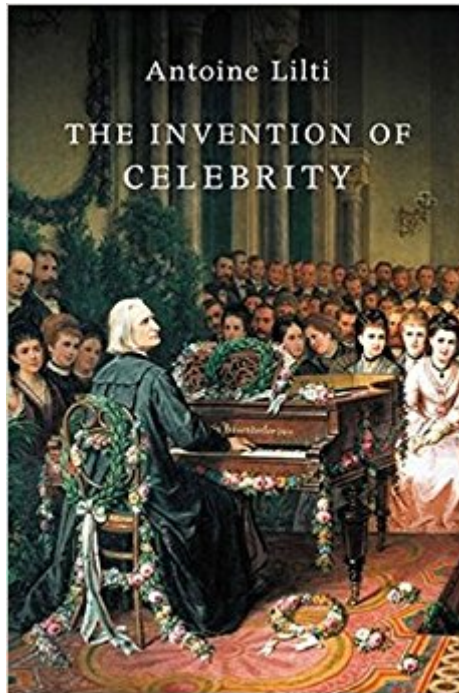




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The Invention Of Celebrity



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

“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

“Exhaustively researched, with in-depth analysis, this book is not a light read, but is definitely an interesting read for those who have more than a passing curiosity for the history behind the rise of ‘celebrity.’”

Feathered Quill Book Reviews

Literary Review

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*.

As social animals, people have always been fascinated in other people. Today’s unrelenting monopoly by people, many who are not known for accomplishment or talent, is something new, the author would argue that it is simply the evolution of a concept that dates back in time. This is a scholarly take on the concept of celebrity. Focusing on 1750-1850, the author examines individuals who were simultaneously blessed and cursed by celebrity. Although the bulk of the book is centered on Europe, primarily France and England, he does cross the pond to look at luminaries such as Washington and Franklin. He opens with a chapter on Voltaire but also includes Rousseau, Samuel Johnson, Byron, Chateaubriand and Lizst as well as lesser known subjects from the theater and elsewhere. Some of the stories are entertaining. He addresses the impact the development of celebrity especially in terms of economics. There is a generous Notes section. I most enjoyed the photos in this book. They certainly enlivened the rather dry text. I suppose one with a burning interest in the subject would find this book more compelling than I. I do appreciate the research and ambition but wonder whether less is more. That being said it does provide an interesting perspective both on the history and development of celebrity and the challenges the earliest ones confronted. It is not a light and easy read but worth it for those with a strong interest in historical underpinnings of celebrity culture.

Voltaire was the first superstar of modernity. Thus he rightly comes first in this book. However, Lilti's assessment of Voltaire's importance in what he calls the "invention of celebrity" fails to mention his battle against l'infamie or his defense of Calas and other victims of intolerance. Voltaire had a life-long thirst for fame – or, if you will, celebrity – but the enduring measure of both that Voltaire earned as the Patriarche de Ferney rests in large part on his defense of religious freedom and the right to speak one's mind. He was, as Auden put it, "one of the greatest fighters for democracy." Lilti favors Voltaire's neurotic hâte noire, Rousseau, which is fair enough. But the broader picture the author paints is all the poorer for that bias. ... Also, as a minor factual note: the Genevan artist Jean Huber produced many cut-out silhouettes of Voltaire, clipped out of playing cards or paper, but never "out of fabric," as Lilti mistakenly states.

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