Antoine Lilti

THE INVENTION OF

CELEBRITY
THE INVENTION OF CELEBRITY
THE INVENTION OF CELEBRITY

1750–1850

ANTOINE LILTI

Translated by Lynn Jeffress

polity
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments 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
- *Ami* Jean-Jacques 117
- Eccentricity, Exemplarity, Celebrity 128
- The Burden of Celebrity 133
- *Rousseau Judge of Jean-Jacques* 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

**Postface** 276

**Notes** 284

**Illustration Credits** 340

**Index** 341
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.
“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. 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. 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. 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. 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.
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. 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. 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 fanatic 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. 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. 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 contemporaneousness 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
very different spheres of activity. During the sometimes short period of their notoriety, actors and politicians, writers and the protagonists of fleeting news items are treated on the same level, like the stars of a media spectacle.

A second characteristic distinguishes celebrity from reputation: the curiosity it arouses carries with it a particularly lively interest in the private life of famous people who become the object of collective interest. The extension of the notoriety well beyond close family and peers does not translate, as one might think, into a distant relationship, timid and vaguely curious, but, on the contrary, by a sometimes very emotional attachment, often very powerful, and for which the figure of the fan is the incarnation. This attachment is inseparable from an intimate, personal bond, even if it is most often a distant intimacy, fictitious and unilateral, whose workings must be understood. Between reputation and celebrity, as between glory and celebrity, the distinction is not just quantitative, not simply a matter of the number of people who know a person.

Even so, it would be absurd to plead for an absolute division between reputation, celebrity, and glory. It is essential, instead, to identify a group of issues: why is it that certain people, actors, writers, politicians, or even “celebrities of the moment,” accidental heroes of some newsworthy event, arouse so much curiosity, in some ways independent of their merit or their actions? How does this curiosity transform the conventional forms of recognition established in specific worlds, such as the worlds of culture and that of politics? Why has celebrity always been treated with suspicion and disdain, including among those who avidly seek it? All research into celebrity must begin with the question: what is the nature of this curiosity which makes us interested in the lives of certain of our contemporaries whom we have never met?

In order to answer this, we must understand the first manifestations of this curiosity. Celebrity appeared during the eighteenth century, at a time of profound change in the public sphere and when leisure was first being commercialized. Since that time, celebrity has undergone considerable change proportional to the expansion of the media sphere. But the principal mechanisms that characterize it were already perfectly identifiable at the end of the eighteenth century. Many authors have written detailed descriptions of it, seeking to understand the new social being, the celebrity, who could not be viewed as a known quantity, nor as a hero – and yet in the process of being reborn with the traits of a great man of genius – nor a good and honest man with an excellent reputation, nor an artist recognized by his peers. The development of specific mechanisms of celebrity was thus accompanied by the topic of celebrity. I include in this the discourse, anecdotes, and stories which, although not forming a unified body of knowledge, testify to a collective effort to
think about a new phenomenon and provide the foundations, narrative or linguistic, with which individuals tried to navigate the strangeness of the social world. Not only did the word “celebrity” in its original meaning appear in the eighteenth century, but the practices it designated aroused a flood of observations aimed at recognizing the phenomenon and making sense of it.

To study celebrity in its infancy, so to speak, when its expression was not yet manifest in all the various cultural institutions (magazines, television programs, fan clubs, etc.), allows one to better show the ambivalences which characterize it: a symbol of social success, sought after for the advantages which seemed associated with it, celebrity was never really legitimate. Always suspected of being ephemeral, superficial, indeed excessive, it was the subject of endless criticism, endless ironies. This paradox associated with celebrity, both sought after, as a modern form of social prestige, and decried as a media artifice, corresponds to the ambivalence of collective opinions found in democratic societies. To understand it, one must undertake to describe the practices and the behaviors which shape this celebrity culture, as well as the discourse which tirelessly makes them an object of study.

Therefore, the image of the public sphere during the Enlightenment is itself transformed. Since the work of Jürgen Habermas, it has been thought of as a sphere of critical and rational discussion where private individuals make public use of their reason. For Habermas, the public sphere of the eighteenth century, middle-class, enlightened, and broad-minded, was built on the ruins of the public sphere of representation, where each individual was defined by a social status and political communication extended only unilaterally, from those in power to their subjects. But this critical public sphere, identified as the legacy of the Enlightenment, entered into crisis during the nineteenth century and disappeared in the twentieth century, as a result of two effects: mass media and the commodification of society, leaving room for the public sphere to be dominated by political propaganda, the culture industry, and marketing. Public opinion from then on was no longer a tribunal of criticism carrying with it the ideal of freedom, but a passive entity easily manipulated. Even the concept of “publicity” was totally subverted. It no longer related to a demand for the submission of the secrets of power to a collective critical discussion; it became another name for “advertising,” a way to condition minds to accept commercial products or politicians. Whether or not they agreed with the proposition, numerous authors shared the idea that there was a golden age of the public sphere. It allows the denunciation of alleged vulgarity and emptiness in our age, dominated by spectacles and merchandise, by political storytelling and the invention of ephemeral stars. The opposition between publicity thought
of as a requirement for the critical use of reason and publicity understood as commercial media manipulation is normative rather than historical fact. It is entirely based on a political ideal, that of public deliberation, projected on to the golden age of the Enlightenment in order to better analyze everything in our modern world that has diverged from such an ideal. It completely idealizes the eighteenth century, but above all, and more seriously, it creates an obstacle to our understanding of what a public entity is.

Studying the mechanisms of celebrity reveals that the public is not solely an instance of literary, artistic, or political judgment; it is rather an entire group of anonymous readers who all read the same books and, more and more in the eighteenth century, the same newspapers. The public is defined not by rational arguments, but by sharing the same curiosity and the same beliefs, by being interested in the same things at the same time and by being aware of this simultaneity. From this arises the ambiguity of the public, interested in political debates as well as the private life of celebrities and rarely reaching the expectations placed on it by political philosophers and ethicists. Most of the authors we will look at in this study were convinced of this. The success of Habermas's reexamination of the Kantian definition of the public hides an important fact: throughout this period, numerous definitions of the public emerged, some more sensitive to its ambiguities. Starting in the second half of the eighteenth century, the idea of the public was always seen to be a problem, of which public opinion was only one aspect. This question of the public was inseparable from the theory of communication as it was understood a century after Immanuel Kant by the sociologist Gabriel Tarde, author of the theory of social imitation. It was the “sensation of being in” – the realization and the pleasure of being interested in the same things as one’s contemporaries – that created the unity and the force of the public, thought of as “a dispersion of individuals who are physically separated and whose cohesion is entirely mental.” This cohesion, due primarily to periodicals, but also to the fashion world or to literary triumphs, is based on the effect of collective imitation, individuals influenced from a distance by the realization that they make up a public, which means they are interested in the same thing at the same time.

One understands, then, that publicity is inherently ambivalent, if one means by publicity that audiences are always created by the distribution of discourse and images thanks to printed matter and other forms of media. It appears fundamentally democratic, in the sense that it opposes secrecy, the control of information by small groups, and seems to favor a bigger, more egalitarian broadcasting of political discussion and cultural works. But in the eyes of the elite, publicity is often marked by vulgarity because it clashes with their categories of cultural distinction and their
introduction: celebrity and modernity

conviction that they possess political expertise. Publicity carries with it sudden mass infatuations, sometimes ephemeral, which seem irrational (the success of bestsellers, popularity maintained by opinion polls, celebrity cults), the result of the mechanism of long-distance imitation, collective hypnosis, which stems from the very essence of the public itself. This is not simply a matter of discourse; emotions are also involved. The result is that publicity is a means for exercising collective criticism, an instrument for market capitalism, and the basis of mass culture. This plural conception, an alternative to Habermas’s rationalist construct, enables us to avoid the narrative of degeneration, a facile resort of conventional criticism, and to insist instead on the essential ambivalence of publicity as a practice.

Considering celebrity from the point of view of publicity allows its most important characteristics to be recognized, which are often left unexplained or appear contradictory. Thus, attachment to famous people is experienced in a much more personal and subjective way when it is shared by many people. The more a star is famous, the more his or her fans are easily convinced that they have an intimate relationship with that star. Publicity both encourages and rejects individuation: the individual is most singularized at the very moment that he or she becomes part of a public. These are the paradoxical workings of mass culture. But there is also an inversion of private and public which is operational in the culture of celebrity. The most private aspects of the celebrity’s life, the most intimate aspects, are subject to the curiosity of the public. The very dynamics of celebrity imply the exposure of private facts about the celebrity and reveal the star to be unique, but also weak and fragile. This dynamic is one of the most complex aspects of the curiosity aroused by stars, as well as the empathy that is awakened. A public figure is both great by way of his or her celebrity and also similar to common mortals in his or her weaknesses and imperfections.

This mixture of curiosity and empathy in the eighteenth century was found in a fast-growing literary genre, the novel, and in particular the love story, whose success accompanied the nascent culture of celebrity. Readers learned, in Pamela or in La Nouvelle Héloïse, to be excited by the life of characters who resembled them, who recounted in detail their daily life and their emotional ups and downs. At the same time, the most celebrated individuals of the period became true public persons whose lives were recounted like serialized novels. In both cases, admiration and pity, these traditional passions, were supplanted by curiosity and sympathy, two profound bases of identification when social conditions are such that each person, for better or worse, can identify with others. The modern moi, the self, was curious and sensitive. It recognized in others, in spite of social distance, a fellow creature. Thus the rise of
celebrity in the eighteenth century was linked to these two phenomena: the development of publicity and a new concept of self. Far from being opposite, these two evolutions constituted the two sides of modernity.

But can one still seriously entertain the notion of modernity? After being a central idea in the social sciences in the twentieth century, the idea today is greatly suspect. It is accused, pell-mell, of implying a teleological concept of history, one entirely oriented toward the present, promoting an occidental perception of history, naïvely progressive or cynically polysemous, dealing only with blurred and normative content, in short being from another age when historians or sociologists felt they were authorized to contrast the moderns, that is, themselves, with everybody else: ancients, medievalists, primitives, all ensconced in their traditions and their beliefs. It is, however, difficult to ignore the notion, but it is helpful to be precise about its usage. By modernity, I mean two things. First, a group of profound transformations that affected European societies, varying in timing and method, whose epicenter, at least for occidental Europe, was between the middle of the eighteenth century and the start of the twentieth. The principal traits are known, prioritized according to personal interpretation: urbanization and industrialization; division of labour; the increased political role of the people and erasure of judicial inequalities – creating other forms of inequality, however; affirmation of instrumental rationality; and “disenchantment with the world.” These developments have often been the subject of detailed discourse called democratization, the industrial revolution, the end of civilization, secularization. We could discuss and critique these forever. It is difficult to totally reject them. Given the framework of this book, two elements less often mentioned will be focused on: the development of long-distance communication techniques, from the printing press to radio and television; and the ideal of the authentic individual, the apotheosis of which was Romanticism. The development of “media communication” had profound social and cultural consequences in the way it favored new forms of social interaction, very different from traditional face-to-face societies, and the spread of cultural property that became merchandise.\textsuperscript{13} If telecommunications in the twentieth century accelerated this change, its origins go back to the invention of the printing press and the intensification of its use in the eighteenth century. News reports, exposés, and images circulated among a public that was more and more indeterminate, potentially unlimited; this phenomenon profoundly transformed the way an individual could be known by contemporaries. The ideal of an authentic self, in opposition to all these social representations which made up the public face of an individual, was in large part, as we will see in the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a reaction to this new media environment.
But modernity is also a relationship to the times, a narrative that moderns invent about themselves, the confirmation of a specificity, the conviction of having broken with the past, an ever-growing worry about clichéd responses. Historiography as we have known it for the last two centuries is entirely dependent on this modern relationship to the contemporary moment, allowing the present to seize upon the past as an object of knowledge in order to either keep it at a distance or allow it to point out what we owe it and what about it concerns us. For my part, I do not conceive of the past as a different world, peopled with astonishing inhabitants, insisting on the differences which separate them from us moderns. I discover in the past familiar practices and beliefs, even though they are dealt with differently; I recognize the environment in which contradictions develop and which we continue to discuss. To the ethnographic principle which increases the distance between cultures, I prefer a genealogical principle, not in order to claim reassuring origins or to trace a linear continuity, but in order to grasp what is at stake for modernity at the precise moment the issues arise.

Thus, the thesis of this book is the following: celebrity is not something new that has arisen in the twentieth century, which proves the decline of culture and the public sphere, or even the forgotten promises of freedom that modernity sets forth; celebrity is a characteristic trait of modern societies, a form of greatness that corresponds to them, an almost impossible greatness, always threatened with illegitimacy. To show this, I will attempt to describe the first age of celebrity, whose initial signs appeared in Paris and London in the middle of the eighteenth century, took shape in the course of the century, and reached a zenith in Western Europe and the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. This chronology, which unites the Enlightenment and Romanticism, is not familiar to historians because it casually crosses the sacrosanct line of the French Revolution. It does, however, correspond to a slow and cohesive transformation in Western European societies. Crisis in the social order, the first developments of a market and cultural economy, at least in theory, and the principle of popular sovereignty: these principal traits of modernity are put in place. Two important historical aspects of celebrity include the appearance of public opinion, as a principle and as a reality, and the new ideal of self, based on the demands of individual authenticity. Such a history as this obviously does not lend itself to strict dates. Nevertheless, the appearance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the public scene in 1751 and the spectacular concert tours of Franz Liszt around 1844, which created a veritable Lisztomania from Paris to Berlin, offer convenient points of reference. From the one to the other, the lines which cross are much more numerous than one would ordinarily imagine.
INTRODUCTION: CELEBRITY AND MODERNITY

Rousseau rightly occupies a place of importance in this book, since he was at the center of my desire to write it. In certain ways, The Invention of Celebrity was conceived in the beginning as a long detour in order to resolve certain contradictions in his work, contradictions which appeared insoluble given that celebrity has never been accepted as a veritable subject of historical study with all its concurrent weight and ambiguities. As the first real European celebrity, Rousseau is also and above all the first to describe the experience of celebrity as a burden and alienation. An entire chapter will be dedicated to him, but before that we will plunge into the heart of the celebrity mechanism. We will discover that many of the characteristics of our hypermedia societies began in the eighteenth century: big money focused on a few stars; advertising mechanisms; the business of celebrity images; scandal sheets; fan mail. We will begin the study with an event of great symbolic importance: the crowning of Voltaire at the Comédie-Française in 1778, which had a much more ambiguous meaning than historians normally give it. Far from being the apotheosis of a great man, the ceremony made clear to contemporaries the ambivalence of celebrity (chapter 1). Thus immune to unequivocal interpretations, we will begin a discovery of the world of spectacle that produced the first public figures, actresses, singers, and dancers (chapter 2), and we will see the main vectors of celebrity, the reproduction of images, the new uses of biography, and the role of scandal. It is the public sphere which will be the center of this analysis (chapter 3). It is important to understand how these new mechanisms were described and analyzed, creating a veritable interrogation of the new forms of publicity (chapter 4).

After the pages dedicated to Rousseau (chapter 5), we will return to the consequences of this new culture of celebrity in the political domain. We will look at Marie-Antoinette again, and also see how new figures of democratic power such as George Washington and Mirabeau had to contend with the imperatives of popularity and how Napoleon’s prestige fused the traditional mechanisms of glory and of celebrity. And we will investigate the growing celebrity culture as it is introduced into political life, seeing that perhaps far from being a sign of contemporary depoliticization and pervasive vulgarity, it might be the concession of charisma to modernity (chapter 6). Finally, a last chapter will show the full development of the mechanisms of celebrity in the Romantic era, incarnated by the figure of Lord Byron, but also by others less well known today, like Jenny Lind, who crossed the whole of the United States during a triumphant tour (chapter 7). This will lead us to the beginning of a new phase in the history of celebrity, one marked by photography, the cinema, and the pulp press, for which the tools of mass reproduction of images play a more and more important role.
In February 1778 Voltaire, then eighty-five, returned to Paris after a thirty-year absence. This visit created enormous excitement. Any Parisian considered to be a writer made an effort to celebrate the Ferney patriarch, while the elite class outdid itself in finding clever ways to catch a glimpse of the man whose name was on people’s lips all over Europe. Visitors in greater and greater numbers flocked to the home of the Marquis de Villette, where Voltaire was staying. The Académie Française received him with great pomp. Benjamin Franklin solemnly asked him to bless his grandson. These tributes culminated in an improvised ceremony at the Comédie-Française where Voltaire attended the production of his tragedy *Irène* and in front of a wildly excited audience his bust was crowned with laurels, while an actor recited poetry in his honor. This is generally cited as the symbolic sanctification of the writer, the moment when Enlightenment philosophers gained social and cultural prestige, liberating them from their traditional role and giving them instead secular and spiritual power that reached its zenith in the age of Romanticism.  

The crowning of Voltaire’s bust seems to prefigure the official ceremony in 1791 that accompanied the transfer of Voltaire’s remains to the Panthéon, the first celebration of its kind, a public tribute to a great man. And this is the way that literary historians have interpreted the episode, as a “triumph” and an “apotheosis.”

But is this interpretation so absolutely obvious? The scene is almost too good to be true. And in fact, the canonical story repeated for the last two and a half centuries has inspired writings by Voltaire admirers who have given the episode a flattering appearance. However, some witnesses to the event mocked it. Adversaries of the Enlightenment philosophers, annoyed by the success of their old enemy, were vocal in
their anger. Other members of French cultural life, although they did not have religious or political motives, were still skeptical and sarcastic, even openly hostile. Louis Sébastien Mercier, a distinguished connoisseur of theater life, wrote in his *Tableau de Paris*: “This famous coronation was simply a farce in the eyes of anyone with good sense.” Far from being impressed by the show, he saw only its clownish aspect, orchestrated by enthusiastic fans, which dimmed Voltaire’s prestige by throwing him pell-mell into the limelight. “An epidemic curiosity made people rush to catch sight of Voltaire’s face, as if the soul of a writer were no longer in his writings but in the way he looked.” Instead of an apotheosis or triumph, Mercier only saw vaguely grotesque buffoonery during which the great writer was overwhelmed with frantic applause and signs of unseemly familiarity. What most displeased Mercier was not the tribute rendered Voltaire but the form it took, reducing the author of *Oedipe* to the level of a public curiosity, celebrated like an actor with much more excitement than true admiration.

Indeed, the theater might appear to be an ambivalent setting for an apotheosis. If it was the place par excellence where the glory of heroes was represented in tragedies, of which Voltaire was the uncontested master and had been for decades, the theater was also the place where reputations of actors and authors were made and unmade by public acceptance or rejection, depending on how good the intriguing partisan claqués were or how loud the derisive catcalls. The theater was as much a social gathering place for the rich as it was a place of merrymaking for the common people, so much so that the police had to be on their toes to keep order. And above all, theaters were the principal arena for the new culture of celebrity, where actors were the main protagonists, despite their lack of social status. Far from being an official, solemn ceremony, the performance on March 30, 1778 was very much an exuberant party, almost a kind of costume ball, and it is not known if Voltaire particularly enjoyed himself. It appears that he was conscious of the potentially ridiculous nature of the situation; despite the applause, he immediately took off the crown of laurels that the Marquis de Villette had placed on his head, questioning, perhaps, if it were really appropriate to be celebrated in this way while still alive?

The crown of laurels recalled another famous episode in literary history very much on the minds of Enlightenment philosophers: the coronation of Petrarch on the grounds of the Capitoline in Rome in 1341. But Petrarch had been crowned by Robert of Naples, the king’s representative, one of the most powerful patrons of his time. This alliance between the glory of a sovereign ruler and the renown of a poet, powerfully manifested throughout European courts up until the reign of Louis XIV, was now in crisis. And Voltaire knew this better than anyone. Could the
excited public at the Comédie-Française really substitute for a prince? Didn’t public homage risk discrediting the author? Wasn’t this parody of a coronation more like the tributes paid to actresses and singers than the consecration of a great poet?

What happened on that particular day had to do with the difficult alignment of various aspects of Voltaire’s personality: highly respected author of the *Henriade* and *Oedipe*; a celebrated writer exiled to Ferney whose comings and goings were known throughout Europe; and the great man he already was for his admirers and the classical author he would become. Because Voltaire embodies for us a great writer of the Enlightenment, the first author admitted into the Panthéon, we see in this episode simply the first step towards posthumous glory. But for his contemporaries and for Voltaire himself, the stakes were more ambiguous. Was it possible to transform the intense public scrutiny focused on his person into an anticipation of his glory? This process was more complicated than it might seem in hindsight because it supposed a solution to the thorny problem of how the fame an individual enjoys while alive relates to the image that posterity eventually receives, the one image that alone assures eternal glory.

“The Most Famous Man in Europe”

Voltaire’s celebrity in 1778 was unchallenged. It had largely surpassed the narrow framework of the literary world, the recognition that came from peers and critics. Even those who had never read his books had heard his name. Newspapers detailed his activities. In the *Mémoires secrets de la République des lettres*, a popular chronicle of cultural life, his name appeared over and over again. Voltaire knew like nobody else how to keep his name in the news through literary polemics and political engagement, through his wit and his brilliance. He had for some time been not only an admired writer but also a public figure who excited curiosity. Beginning writers and those less well known looked for ways to profit from his fame, and as early as 1759 a young Irish writer, Oliver Goldsmith, published the fake *Mémoires de M. de Voltaire*, playing on the curiosity of the public in order to launch his own career with a stock of anecdotes that were more or less true and others that were totally invented. The lawyer Jean-Henri Marchand amused himself for over thirty years parodying and publishing works such as the *Testament politique de M. de V*** (1770) and the *Confession publique de M. de Voltaire* (1771).

Voltaire did not need anyone to orchestrate his celebrity. A trip to visit him, exiled now and living in Ferney, became obligatory for all travelers.
It was not enough to read his work; one had to see this great figure of contemporary Europe in person. Voltaire greatly enjoyed these visits and jubilantly welcomed visitors with a ceremony, a cross between theater and court ritual, encouraging visitors to spread picturesque anecdotes about the life of the great writer they had just seen. Nonetheless, these visits were also a constant source of embarrassment, a waste of time and energy, and he never hesitated to dismiss importunate people who came to see him out of curiosity and from whom he had nothing to gain. Charles Burney reports on the bad treatment received by some English visitors who were asked by Voltaire: “Well, gentlemen, you now see me, and did you take me to be a wild beast or a Monster that was fit only to be stared at, as a show.” There was not a lot of difference between a celebrity and a circus animal. This was a comparison that would be encountered in the work of other writers as well, a common thread, but suffice it here to underscore the ambiguities of public curiosity. Curiosity for a celebrity was both a resource and a menace: at any moment it could transform the famous man into a simple object on display.

Curiosity did not concern only the elite, nor simply newspaper readers. Voltaire’s name was a publicity strategy that fanned the greed of publishers and encouraged forgeries. The philosopher was well aware of this and played a complex and crafty game with the world of publishing, denouncing publishers who pirated his works while at the same time using their services. He openly invoked the consequences of his “unhappy fame,” for example, in order to complain that someone had just published a phony collection of letters written in his name: “There will always be some copies that escape. What can you do? It’s the sacrifice one has to make for this unhappy celebrity, which it would be so nice to exchange for peaceful obscurity.” There was no doubt a tongue-in-cheek element in this disdain he claimed to have for his celebrity, and that he actually kept alive through being the great publicity agent that he was. Nonetheless, the attitude became broadly shared and his correspondents fell in line. When François Marin suggested that Voltaire put together a volume of his private letters in order to get even with the “cursed booksellers” in Holland who published anything bearing his name, he immediately said as if it were a commonplace: “That is one of the misfortunes attached to being a celebrity.” This wasn’t just a simple matter of one’s reputation, but a social condition with all its servitude, which included the watchful eye of the curious, the nosiness of printers, and the maneuvers of unscrupulous publishers. Already in 1753, even though Voltaire was not yet the patriarch of literature crowned at the Comédie-Française, he was the most celebrated writer of his time, whose complex relationship with Frederick II helped pay for the writing he was publishing. His niece, Madame Denis, wrote to Georges Keith: “It is sad that my uncle’s
fame means he cannot lift a finger without having all of Europe watching. He definitely has decided to find a retirement area far away and so forgotten that perhaps they will let him die in peace.”

Fame is both greatness and enslavement, given that it makes of the famous person a public figure, imposing obligations such as being exemplary and having to justify oneself publicly. According to Jean Robert Tronchin, Voltaire had to be ready to defend himself against accusations of impiety: “The more celebrated a person, the more he must show great delicacy when attacked in such a sensitive area.”

Clearly what distinguished Voltaire from other great writers was the fact he was not just a famous name; he was also a famous face. There were numerous portraits of him, as well as busts and engravings, and they had increased since 1760. One artist in particular specialized in images of Voltaire: Jean Huber, a master of découpage, a technique consisting of representing the silhouette or the face of someone by cutting it out of fabric. After having painted many portraits of Voltaire and having represented him in a number of découpages, in 1772 Huber created a series of small paintings showing him doing everyday things: drinking coffee, playing chess, taking walks around Ferney. The journal La Correspondance littéraire mentioned the success of these paintings “representing diverse scenes in the private life of the most famous man in Europe,” and reported that Voltaire criticized Huber for coming too close to caricature. When one painting showed him getting up in the morning and clumsily pulling on his pants, all the while dictating to his secretary (Fig. 1), and then the painting was copied and engraved and put up for sale by all the engraving merchants in Paris and London, Voltaire got angry. Huber cleverly retorted that the very essence of celebrity was an invitation to play with a subject’s public image, introducing “a bit of ridicule” in order to excite public interest, without for all that tarnishing his prestige. “The fervor of your idolatrous Public for everything that represents you, well or badly, forces me to vex you constantly. I feed the public’s idolatry through my images, and my Voltairianism is incurable.” This was a valuable insight because it came from an artist who was particularly sensitive to the changes in visual culture.

Images of a famous person geared to public curiosity about that person’s private life, including its most commonplace aspects, distinguished celebrity images from representations of glorious sovereigns or even great writers. Voltaire was not represented as a writer in the midst of all the symbols of his intellectual activity, as in traditional images of writers who were surrounded by books and paper and pen and ink. He is shown in a very “domestic scene,” whose interest lies in seeing what constitutes the life of a writer when he is not writing, when he is being
an individual like other individuals. The appeal of this image is less in an admiring distance than a desire for intimacy at a distance, curiosity about the famous man as a special individual, both different from others because of his fame and at the same time familiar. A bit of the ridiculous is not bad, either; in fact, it humanizes the public man, making him more accessible.

Public clamor for images showing Voltaire in his private life at Ferney was all the more surprising because this series of paintings had initially been commissioned by Catherine II. But infatuation with Voltaire was such that art merchants, smelling success, had the images engraved. Other scenes painted by Huber were also reproduced in quantity, notably Voltaire Playing Chess, Voltaire Receiving a Visitor, or Voltaire Whipping a Rearing Horse, making the gaunt face of the patriarch of Ferney a familiar image, partly smiling, partly grimacing. It was neither a classic look nor a true caricature. Huber’s series of paintings fed the feeling of paradoxical intimacy which the public desired to have with Voltaire, keeping a distance because of his prestige, his age, and his exile, and at the same time intimate because the public could see him doing ordinary things like getting up, getting dressed, eating, and exercising.

The success of the Lever de Voltaire was in large part due to the spontaneous nature of the sketches, which appeared to take him by surprise, as if the viewer had the power to surreptitiously step into the bedroom with the great writer.

Intimate images of a famous man, stolen and then reproduced by unscrupulous merchants for a curious and passionate public whose idolatry was confined to voyeurism: there is no need to push this description any further to see a familiar mechanism at work today. Add to this Voltaire’s anger and Huber’s reaction to his anger and one can see that the effects were intriguing. Did circulation of these kinds of images improve the standing of the Ferney philosopher or did it tarnish his reputation? Two well-known engravings from the Lever de Voltaire, one French, one English, include ironic verses, giving the impression that the images were interpreted as caricatures. However, the same images were sought after by both the fans of Voltaire and those who wanted to make fun of him. Above all, people were interested in them mostly because of the illusion they gave that through these images the viewer could gain access to and observe the philosopher’s most intimate moments. Huber wanted to make money from this market demand and encouraged his English correspondents to announce that the engravings were “the only way to see the real Voltaire in every possible aspect.” The public didn’t want stereotyped images that could be interchanged with similar ones; they wanted images of Voltaire that allowed them to see a unique individual.
Voltaire and Janot

This two-sided aspect of celebrity, curiosity and admiration, was prevalent at the time of Voltaire’s visit to Paris. He was recognized at the gates of Paris the minute he arrived: “My God! It’s Monsieur de Voltaire,” one guard apparently shouted. Once it was known he was in Paris, his presence created a sensation. “The appearance of a prophet or an apostle could not have caused more surprise and admiration than the arrival of Monsieur de Voltaire. For a short while, nothing else was of interest except this new prodigy,” wrote the Correspondance littéraire, entirely won over by him. The Journal de Paris, the first French daily, created the year before, described the sensation caused by the presence of Voltaire in the capital: “In cafés, at plays, in society, he was the only one talked about. Have you seen him? Have you heard him?” Provincial newspapers avidly reported the tiniest details and witticisms of his Parisian visit. Taking advantage of this general curiosity, François de Neufchâteau publicly boasted of having spent a wonderful hour with Voltaire, while, in the name of a discretion too often abused, refusing to divulge any secrets. “Celebrity has the disadvantage of creating around the famous person a kind of spying on his words, his thoughts,” Neufchâteau wrote in a tone that seemed to chastise the publishers of the Journal de Paris, showing that celebrity had become a cause to be debated. Madame du Deffand noted with irony that “all of Parnassus, from the gutter to its exalted heights,” was hurrying to see Voltaire. She herself could not resist the desire to see him again.

Voltaire incited unanimous but also ambiguous curiosity. The coronation at the Comédie-Française had created a new model, the glorification of a great man. The ceremony sought to produce a consensual posthumous image among Voltaire’s contemporaries, as if they could see posterity’s view of him, as though he were already dead. “They want me to die,” Voltaire allegedly said, focusing on all the excessive honors given the living while at the same time seeing a dangerous proximity of these same honors to posthumous glory. Jean-François Ducis said something similar but with more solemnity when he succeeded to Voltaire’s chair at the Académie Française the following year: “Alive, he witnessed his own immortality. His century paid in advance the debt that centuries to come would owe him.” In a way this was also the meaning of the nude statue Pigalle sculpted of Voltaire a few years earlier. Public opinion was shocked, but this nudity clearly expressed a singular message: the emaciated body of the writer anticipated his death and authorized the portrayal of him as an ancient hero. Voltaire was already a great man,