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New Directions in the History of Celebrity: Case Studies and Critical Perspectives

Nicola Vinovrški & Robert van Krieken*

Abstract: »*Einleitung: Neue Richtungen in der Geschichte der Berühmtheit. Fallbeispiele und kritische Perspektiven*«. This paper provides an introduction and overview for this special issue's collection of important new work in the history of celebrity. It sets the scene by explaining the main difficulties that have beset the development of a historiography of the very contemporaneous phenomenon of celebrity. A key issue is how one understands the historical emergence of the "public sphere," and how confident one should be that the historical narrative concerning the public sphere and celebrity should begin in the 18th century, rather than in earlier periods. It outlines what is particularly significant and innovative about the contributions to this special issue, and draws out their implications for the ever-expanding scope of the history of celebrity.

Keywords: Celebrity, history, 16th century, 18th century, 19th century, public sphere, theatre.

1. Introduction

In 1957, C. Wright Mills observed that celebrities "often seem to have celebrity and nothing else." Instead of "being celebrated because they occupy positions of prestige," wrote Mills, "they occupy positions of prestige because they are celebrated" (Mills 1957, 74). It was, however, Daniel Boorstin's formulation, "the celebrity is a person who is known for his well-known-ness" (1962, 67) five years later – popularised as "famous for being famous" – which dominated much of the subsequent thinking about celebrity. One of the effects of Boorstin's prominence in the literature on celebrity has been that the more sociologically and historically interesting aspects of Mills' approach were also buried underneath Boorstin's catchphrase and his "from hero to celebrity" cultural pessimism. That pessimism pervaded much of the work in relation to celebrity for decades to follow and is still felt in critical and popular discourse.

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Leo Braudy's (1986) detailed examination of the history of fame, *The Frenzy of Renown*, then established itself as the benchmark for all historical considerations of celebrity. Braudy himself, however, muddied the waters somewhat by focusing on the term 'fame' rather than 'celebrity,' thereby constructing the question of the history of celebrity as one of a transition from fame to celebrity, with ensuing discussions about where that transition point should be located and how it should be explained. This might explain why Lucy Riall felt that "the history of celebrity has still to be written" (2007, 41). Although Simon Morgan (2011) has more recently noted the growth in reference to celebrity in historical writing across a number of fields, he nonetheless thought that it remains an important task for scholars working in the field of celebrity studies to move more decisively beyond the restriction of their field of vision to the twentieth century. The problem is to avoid mistaking as unique those characteristics of celebrity that actually have much longer genealogies, which would make it possible to develop different conceptions of how celebrity should be connected with different aspects of the broader social, political, and economic context.

Historians have, for some time, been pushing back against the limits imposed upon celebrity's existence by those from other fields, notably film and media studies. A growing body of work has been done over the last 10 years which responds to the call to "historicize celebrity," including Tom Mole's (2009) edited collection *Romanticism and Celebrity Culture*, Fred Inglis's (2010) *A Short History of Celebrity*, Georges Minois's (2012) *Histoire de la célébrité*, Antoine Lilti's (2017) *The Invention of Celebrity* (originally *Figures Publiques*, 2014), and there has been extensive work by a range of historians specializing in theatre and literature addressing the question of the celebrity status of their period or their particular case studies (for an overview, see van Krieken 2018). There are several historical contexts which this body of work has demonstrated as significant to the history of celebrity. Firstly, many consider the explosion of the press and the advent of photography in the mid-nineteenth century as a primary driving force for the rise of celebrity (e.g., Boorstin 1962). Secondly, many believe that a recognisable public sphere emerged during the mid-eighteenth century and figures such as Rousseau, Voltaire, and David Garrick were the first celebrities to dominate it (Tillyard 2005; Ingis 2010; Lilti 2017).

It is important to keep in view, however, that there are also arguments that this public sphere emerged earlier, during the seventeenth or even sixteenth centuries (Lake and Pincus 2006; 2012; Schaich 2008), and that there was an appreciable number of celebrities with similar characteristics during this time, during which there were developments in printing technologies and an early-modern culture and society (Holl 2019, in this volume; Cowan 2019, in this volume). Scholars in this latter group, as the examples above suggest, draw their data mostly from the milieu of the theatre and literature. Still others have looked at social life in the twelfth century and onwards (Roach 2005, 16-17;

Kleinberg 2011; Minois 2012) and argue that in the cult of saints we can find the origins of celebrity and the core elements of the relationship which it describes. The different approaches to the analysis may focus either on the cultural production of celebrity, celebrity's social function, or the analysis of a particular celebrity as text which then can encompass all aspects of that celebrity's production, consumption, and place within their historical context. Perhaps surprisingly, it is often the case study of one particular celebrity which provides the most broad ranging analysis of that celebrity's impact, and consequently the significance of celebrity itself, being a manageable entrée to the consideration of a wide range of cultural, social, political, and economic effects. It is clear that more than anachronistic links can be drawn between Kim Kardashian and figures from earlier historical periods who occupied a similar position of influence in society. Writing celebrity's history is almost an exercise in connecting the dots, avoiding the temptation to define celebrity so broadly that it becomes both ubiquitous and meaningless, but also ensuring one does not focus so narrowly on the present ways in which it is produced and consumed that celebrity becomes defined only by those ways.

This issue of *Historical Social Research* engages with and develops many of the themes that have emerged in this literature and extends its reach to some historical figures which have been given little or no critical attention. This inter-disciplinary collection explores particular instances of celebrity dating from the sixteenth century onwards, as well as some of the characteristics and functions of celebrity itself. Contributors come from the fields of sociology, social history, cultural history, literature, and media studies, demonstrating the potentially broad interdisciplinary scope for a mode of enquiry into celebrity's history which is *longue-duree*, complex and wide-ranging in all possible senses.

The contributors to this *HSR Supplement* are experts in different fields and different facets of historical celebrity. Some papers discuss periods more widely recognised as significant to the history of celebrity such as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, there are also two papers included whose subjects span the sixteenth century. In many ways, an investigation of celebrity is a study of particular personalities and so that study must begin through the lives of individual celebrities who can act as exemplars of particular celebrity types, the wider significance of celebrity, and its impact upon society. As the papers presented here, there is a huge variety of available subjects. This in itself is indicative of the pervasive nature of celebrity.

2. Contributions to this HSR Supplement

In an interview with *Alice Le Goff*, *Antoine Lilti* presents his work on the “invention of celebrity” and discusses its contribution to the study of the logic of

social esteem. Le Goff and Lilti discuss some of the core themes of Lilti's earlier work on salons as well as his latest book on celebrity, *The Invention of Celebrity*, and, in the interview, Le Goff poses a number of important questions [Le Goff poses a number of important questions going to the heart of Lilti's important contribution to the history of celebrity. Lilti outlines his emphasis on the importance of the eighteenth century in celebrity's history, the concept of the public sphere, the significance of Gabriel Tarde's (1903) sociology of imitation as well as Norbert Elias's (2006) analysis of court society, how 'celebrity' should be distinguished from 'glory,' the volatility and ambiguity of celebrity, the core dimensions of the mechanisms of celebrity as illustrated by case studies such as Voltaire and Rousseau, and the future types of studies for which Lilti's book lays the foundations.

Chris Rojek, whose multi-faceted analyses of celebrity (Rojek 2001; 2012; 2013; 2014) will be familiar to readers, moves in a new direction by considering the ascribed celebrity of King Henry VIII and the ideological separation of the king's mortal and immortal bodies. From Medieval to Tudor times, the doctrine of the "King's Two Bodies" was fundamental in government and the reproduction of social order. Rojek argues that this doctrine survives, albeit transposed and transformed, in separation of the achieved celebrity's two bodies, one biological and one mediated. Drawing on the political thought of Carl Schmitt and Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, Rojek examines the role of achieved celebrity in a Liberal, Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy.

Taking the early stage clown Richard Tarlton as a case study, *Jennifer Holl* draws on her PhD thesis (Holl 2013) to offer a historical inquiry into the dynamics of theatrical celebrity in early modern London. She argues that in early modern England, the multivalent term 'wonder' encapsulated the modern concept of celebrity and that Tarlton's assignation as "the wonder of his time" spoke not only to his own remarkable celebrity, but to a robust culture of celebrity emanating from the era's theatres. This discussion centres on three gradually expansive sites of wonder – theatre, print and spoken discourse, and market relations – that correspond to three crucial elements of celebrity culture: identification, dissemination, and commoditization. This essay argues that despite current trends in celebrity studies that locate the birth of celebrity in the eighteenth century, the dynamics of theatrical exchange, the theatre's disseminating reach into other segments of the public, and the market relations of a proto-capitalist credit culture spurred an active trade in celebrity in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Brian Cowan reflects on the tendency to regard the eighteenth century as the origin of modern celebrity by considering the political history of celebrity which, he argues, has its origins in traditional forms of charisma and public devotion to famous figures. The history of celebrity has been revised in recent years. Particular claims have been made for the invention of a recognizably modern form of celebrity at various points in the 'long eighteenth century.'

This putative rise of modern celebrity has been linked with the rise of a modern public sphere, and in many ways is understood as an offshoot of it. Furthermore, modern celebrity is often presented as a commercial enterprise and perhaps another aspect of the equally popular claim that the eighteenth century witnessed a ‘consumer revolution.’ The pre-modern histories of monarchy and sainthood are not irrelevant to the history of modern celebrity and these perspectives can and should be incorporated into any understanding of how celebrity emerged as a form of public notoriety and influence in the long eighteenth century.

Nicola Vinovrški uses a case study of Giacomo Casanova to argue for expanding the boundaries of celebrity both temporally and into different contexts, the aristocratic, theatrical and literary celebrities among his contemporaries having already been given some attention. Historical studies of celebrity, or particular instances of it, focus on figures who had fame which could be tied to a particular achievement or ascribed status, for example writers, politicians, actors, artists, composers, musicians, and monarchs. These studies suggest that there were certain shifts which occurred during the eighteenth century which allowed celebrity to develop, that there were many theatrical and literary celebrities during this period and that the phenomenon really gained traction in the Romantic era. These studies put paid to the idea that celebrity is a very recent phenomenon, the product of technological developments (though many still do make the claim). What they have not adequately done is test the edges of the phenomenon of celebrity. Casanova’s well-knownness has been given no critical attention either by scholars of Casanova or of historical celebrity. However, he was a celebrity and in ways so similar to the most recent permutations of celebrity in the way that he courted and managed his celebrity, that this study calls into question many of the perceived historical limits within which celebrity is so often confined.

David Worrall examines theatrical celebrity in early nineteenth-century England with particular reference to the actor Edmund Kean (1787-1833) and his first season at Drury Lane, 1813-1814. Kean’s innovative interpretation of Shylock in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* brought him spectacular overnight success. Using Manuel DeLanda’s assemblage theory as its main predictive model, outlined in more detail in his 2013 book, *Celebrity, Performance, Reception: British Georgian Theatre as Social Assemblage*, Worrall’s essay argues that celebrity is a category conferred by audience density. Archival records of Drury Lane’s financial receipts, pay rates for actors and actresses, and names of individual occupants of box seat (including the novelist Jane Austen) all provide sets of economic data which can chart financial aspects of celebrity. In short, in that first season Kean was only a middle to upper ranking employee as far as his remuneration was concerned. Furthermore, due to an over-extended season to capitalize on his celebrity, Drury Lane’s receipts were eight per cent down on the previous year. This case study demonstrates the rich

potential for an empirical analysis of historical data in order to better understand the market forces at play.

Jeffrey Kahan revisits Bettymania, following his 2010 book on the subject, *Bettymania and the Birth of Celebrity Culture*. According to Kahan, the present era is not “celebrity-driven.” He recognises that such an argument may seem odd when one considers the apparent ubiquity of reality TV, YouTubers, and the fact that social media has placed in the hands of the masses the means of becoming an expert on personal branding and self-promotion. Kahan contrasts the historical period in which he says celebrity culture was born (1804-1874) to the Trump administration, the election of Trump marketing the death of ‘celebrity culture.’ He argues that what is meant by ‘Celebrity Culture’ and the rules that we affixed to it, no longer apply.

Simon Morgan develops his earlier work on the history of celebrity (2011), explores the relationship between the ‘hero’ and the celebrity in the nineteenth-century United States of America. He argues that, by the 1820s, the activities of print media and entrepreneurial manufacturers meant that individuals widely recognised and worshipped as ‘heroes’ almost inevitably became part of the nascent celebrity culture of the age, while some actively courted this connection to pursue their own political or financial agendas. Studying the receptions of three foreign heroes, the Marquis de Lafayette, Lajos Kossuth, and John Bright, Morgan contends that we can still make valid distinctions between the two states through the analysis of cultural practice and discourse. In turn, by conceptualising ‘hero’ and ‘celebrity’ as two axes on the graph of fame, it is possible to use such analysis to assess more accurately a given individual’s public reputation.

Finally, *Neil Washbourne* investigates the achieved celebrity of W.G. Grace, the nineteenth-century gentleman amateur English cricketer. As a result of intense media coverage, Washbourne observes how sport, society, and the media became increasingly interdependent through the 1870s and 1880s in England. Cricket was increasingly understood in a civilising framework and Grace was seen to uphold the prestige of the leading groups of aristocrats who were cricket’s patrons and leaders. Grace also became a cultural celebrity as both his family life and cricket skills were seen to embody those civilizing values and attracted attention. In 1895, this led to the juxtaposition of his manliness and exceptional skills with Oscar Wilde’s scandalous persona. Media reporting on the multiple celebrations of Grace’s cricketing prowess helped address and resolve some of the anxieties that the Wilde affair so sharply raised about the feared decadence of British society. This is a fascinating insight into the operation of the media and sporting celebrity in the later part of the nineteenth century. It also demonstrates the celebrity as a vehicle for different ideologies, the contrast between Grace as the embodiment of noble English values and Wilde’s scandalous notoriety being particularly stark. Washbourne explains how society and the media used these two historical celebrities as a

means of negotiating a perceived problematic decline in English society. Beginning with Boorstin, the supposed rise of celebrity in the twentieth century is often perceived as a cause of a decline in society, the idea that the celebrity is the hero's contemporary poor relation.

3. The Significance of this Collection

How celebrity's history is constructed plays a central role in how its contemporary character and dynamics are understood and analysed. For example, if one sees celebrity as primarily a mass media phenomenon, this leads the analysis in particular directions, whereas if one sees celebrity as a characteristic of all social networks of varying degrees and types of complexity, using the concept 'celebrity society,' then generates quite different analytical conclusions.

What is clear from the papers presented here is that celebrity has played a central role in the development of the public sphere, national identities, economics, and politics such that these topics cannot be fully understood without an understanding of historical celebrity. Celebrity clearly has a diverse genealogy and multiple iterations and lack of care with the definition of the precise issue which is under discussion (e.g., particular celebrity figure, period of celebrity's history) has led to sweeping statements – such as “there was no such thing as celebrity prior to the beginning of the twentieth century” (Schickel 1985, 23) – which have not aged well, as well as some confusion as to terminology and analytical approach. Questions of the definition of the particular iteration of celebrity which is under consideration have not always been approached with the rigour they deserve, and the papers collected here make important contributions to developing that rigour.

Just as we should be wary of describing historical figures as 'the first celebrity' (a trend most notable in commercial biographies), we should be similarly reticent in talking of the 'birth of celebrity.' That is because there is a good chance that experts in previous historical periods will be able to identify an earlier example with significant affinities to the figure or process which has been described as unique. Indeed, the contributors to this issue who choose to approach the study of celebrity through the prism of culture disagree as to the origin of that celebrity culture. A phenomenon as complex, multi-faceted, and prevalent as celebrity has had a long history, and any endeavour to pinpoint origins is fraught with historiographical danger.

4. Where to Next

While this collection demonstrates the ever-expanding scope of the history of celebrity and the increasing rigour applied in its exploration, there are many

chapters which remain to be written. Precisely because celebrity has a history, it is possible to identify particular periods when the surrounding societal changes were accompanied by connected changes in the character and dynamics of celebrity. The Enlightenment and the eighteenth century have been given considerable attention, as have the nineteenth century from the introduction of photography and the worlds of literary and theatrical celebrity. As the example of Casanova in this issue demonstrates, there were historical celebrities who were never propelled into superstardom by the established market forces at play in the worlds of politics, literature, theatre, or the milieu of eighteenth-century salons and the Court. Further, there remains in this field a concentration of attention on a relatively small number of countries – England, France, the United States. A more detailed global picture of celebrity is yet to be created. The particular historical celebrities and case studies discussed in the papers included in this collection may be regarded as skirmishes in the above mentioned war of attrition on the boundaries placed upon the existence of celebrity by popular and also much academic discourse. However, it is our hope that they are something more.

In order to write the history of celebrity, we need to do so in a way which recognises its social, political, and economic significance as all of our contributors clearly do. To approach the analysis in a way which posits celebrity as the by-product of particular technologies (such as photography, printing, digital imagery, and social media) or even industries (such as theatre or film) necessarily dictates the extent of its historical and geographical at the outset, drawing the edges of the map before one has even begun to explore the territory. For example, Braudy describes the spread of photography from 1840 as taking “the art of imaging out of the hands of those skilled enough to paint or engrave as well as those rich enough to and place it at the disposal of virtually everyone” (Braudy 1986, 492). As Jeffrey Kahan notes in his article, social media has placed the power of promotion and online branding in the hands of everyone, not just Hollywood press agents.

Even though theorists since the 1950s and popular discourse for at least many hundreds of years in relation to celebrity has been overwhelmingly presentist, this work presents a marked departure from that tradition. That same body of work/discourse has also been overwhelmingly negative. In discovering celebrity’s antiquity, we are at once demonstrating that it is nothing to fear. While novelty, the state of being apparently unprecedented, is often the hallmark of the individual celebrity, celebrity as a phenomenon and the discursive themes surrounding it are anything but new, and its history remains an important and exciting field of innovative scholarship.

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