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**The Self in Multiple:
The Lithographic Portraits of *L'Artiste* (1832-34)**

Sean DeLouche – MACAA, Detroit 2012

In the 1830s, Delphine de Girardin launched what may be described as one of the first society gossip columns in history. In her weekly articles chronicling the goings-on of modern French high society, she noted that people who did not have inherited titles or high-born connections were enjoying the same status in the new social order as those who did. She recognized the arrival on the scene of a new type of distinguished person—celebrities—internationally renowned figures from the worlds of literature, theater, music, and art. Also, Girardin aptly identified the power of the burgeoning mass media in this new social order to, as she worded it, “bestow renown, consecrate virtue, impose genius, and sell popularity.”

Though on the surface it may seem to deal only with the superficial world of high-society gossip and celebrity, Girardin’s weekly column reveals the mechanics of identity production during the early modern period: that one’s identity was determined not by age-old social rank but by *perceptions* that were constantly in flux, perceptions that could be molded by and through the mass-media (her column included). My talk today examines the mass-media celebrity consumer culture emerging at this time in France through the case study of a suite of printed portraits and biographies of famous people. I argue that this collection of portraits from the journal *L'Artiste* beginning in 1832 reveal the fundamentally malleable nature of modern selfhood, namely the collective, cumulative construction of identity through imaginative processes of projection and identification.

The point of departure for my study will be an examination of the shifting notion

of selfhood during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Michael Marrinan has recently asserted that the “cultural landscape” of early nineteenth-century Paris undid traditional framing structures for identity formation, leading to the emergence of new modes for both the conceptualization and presentation of the self. He argues that in the wake of the French Revolution, France experienced a blurring of the traditionally rigid divisions that had characterized the conventional social and cultural hierarchies of the pre-modern world. Marrinan examines the ‘social space’ of early modern Paris, a space whose meaning is continuously produced by its inhabitants through lived experience, and is thereby something fluid and unfixed. Within this context, personal identity likewise becomes unhinged—revealed to be a matter not so much of individual essence but of an increasingly complex network of perceptions and representations.

This condition is perhaps best studied in its most extreme manifestation: the modern “celebrity,” the origins of which scholars have traditionally traced back to the Romantic period. The identities of celebrities are in perpetual flux, being determined not so much by the particular characteristics of the “self” in question but rather by an “image” that is the product of the collaboration of a number of talented individuals, entrepreneurs, and audience members. Celebrities, in short, serve as spectacles of subjectivity, discursive sites where society renegotiates understandings of the self. The role played in the process by the reproducible portrait, which first arose in France during the 1830s, is the subject of this paper.

Scholars have long agreed that modern mass-media celebrity culture emerged during the Romantic period, particularly in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century. France lagged behind Britain in the development of a celebrity culture, waiting until the

1830s following delays in industrial technologies, capitalist structures, and mass-media systems. The industrial revolution, in its infancy in France at this time, brought mass-produced goods to a market of consumers becoming rapidly more urbanized and diverse. In particular, innovation in printing led to the exponential proliferation of newspapers, periodicals, and books, which could now easily be illustrated. Perhaps the most important of these technical innovations for this study was lithography, the invention and commercial exploitation of which allowed for editions of images in the thousands. A political revolution in 1830 immediately outlawed old censorship laws, facilitating an explosion of printed words and images, and a law of 1833 providing free primary education for the entire country raised the literacy level of the French population to the highest in Europe. Thus, by the 1830s both the technological means and a growing audience of consumers were in place to support an ever-expanding supply of mass-produced images—portraits included.

One of the hundreds of journals to take advantage of new technologies of printing and lithography and the freedom of the press after 1830 was *L'Artiste*. Founded in 1831, *L'Artiste* was one of the first illustrated periodicals dedicated to the arts. It reviewed art exhibitions and theatrical shows, published short stories and serialized novels, and provided news on all aspects of the art world. Within a year of its founding, *L'Artiste* began printing a collection of visual and textual portraits of the luminaries of the world on which it reported. The first three installments of this collection, which featured actors, garnered enough interest from readers that the editor of *L'Artiste*, who attributed the “success” largely to Léon Noël’s beautiful lithographic portraits, was “determined to follow up the gallery of those of our most celebrated contemporaries in the arts and

literature.” *L’Artiste* was most active in publishing the celebrity portrait during its initial year; in 1832 alone, it produced sixteen celebrity portraits. After that, the number dropped to an average of two per year. During this active first stage of 1832-34, *L’Artiste* published twenty-two portraits of cultural celebrities. Less than half of these represent celebrities of the stage, like the actress Marie Dorval or the actor Frédéric Lemaître. Five depict visual artists, such as the painter Eugène Delacroix and the sculptor Antonin Moine. And finally, there are four from the world of literature, including the writers Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas, and four from the world of music, including the violinist Joseph Ghys and the opera singer Gulia Grisi.

The visual and textual portraits in *L’Artiste* represent a growing interest in celebrity and biography during the nineteenth century. The *Bibliographie de la France*, a weekly register of printed matter for sale in Paris, lists dozens of biographies conforming to various formats and prices—from multivolume scholarly works on historical giants to cheap twenty-centime tabloids detailing the sordid lives of French actresses. In the month of October 1831, for example, no less than 54 different biographies were available for sale in Paris alone. Based on their content, the expansion of biography reflected an interest in the intimate details and private lives of famous individuals. One series of biographies, *Habitations des personages célèbres* started in 1834 by Jean-Jacques Champin, for example, took readers into the private homes of celebrities, and even included a printed image. At the start of his article on the actress Virginie Déjazet, the anonymous writer for *L’Artiste* reflected on the biographer’s duty of dwelling in the particular details of a life:

The importance we place on biographical notices is a curious thing. We carefully indicate the particulars of the place and date of birth; we do not spare you the lesser mischievousness of youth; we tell you the projects of adolescence, the

disappointments of adulthood, and then the insipid events of a life without catastrophes, without interest, and always without glory.

The term ‘celebrity’ first entered the French language in the seventeenth century and had become common usage by the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Before the 1830s, *la célébrité* referred only to the condition of being famous, not to a famous individual. Although some historians claim that the definition of a celebrity as a famous person occurred in the West around 1850, the British began referring to people as celebrities earlier in the century and I have found references in French as early as 1831, the beginning of our period. For example, in Honoré de Balzac’s 1831 novel *Le Peau de Chagrin*, the struggling writer Raphaël de Valentin is presented as “one of our most eminent future literary celebrities.”

La célébrité in the 1830s was defined as a “far-reaching reputation” or the “opinion that a great number of people have of someone or something.” However, celebrity was regarded as a very distinct type of well-knownness, often carrying negative associations. Thus, in 1832, the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* carefully distinguished between celebrity and glory. *La gloire* belonged “exclusively to great men;” it involved an undertaking that went beyond duty and was not always consciously pursued by the hero. Celebrity, in contrast, could result from “great crimes” as well as from “great actions;” it was a form of notoriety that was actively—sometimes nefariously—sought. As the literary critic Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve acerbically put it, “most celebrities die in a veritable state of prostitution.”

Such critical handwringing is evident today in the scholarly literature over what is widely regarded as the utter lack of value in celebrity culture. I take particular issue with Daniel J. Boorstin who reduces the celebrity to what he terms a “human pseudo-event:” a

person who exists for the sole purpose of and is only considered real through media publicity, and who serves no other function in real life. Boorstin's assumptions are uncompromising—that there are strict distinctions between reality and artifice, substance and surface, self and image. He also strips the celebrity of any meaning he or she may hold or provide for a culture.

A central tenet of my project is that celebrities participate in the production of significance. Celebrity culture produces a layer of discourse that facilitates the articulation of identity, individuality, values, and norms within a particular culture as well as the movement of these articulations between cultures and across time. Barry King argues that the celebrity serves as a text that organizes the production of representation and identification. Richard Dyer similarly views the celebrity as a person who disappears into a complex configuration of visual, verbal, and aural signs. Serving as touchstones for an array of private and public concerns, celebrities become the ways through which individuals come to understand themselves and their world.

As emphatically public figures subject to endless discourse, celebrities offer the clearest demonstration of the ways in which selfhood and individuality were constructed during the early modern period. Then, as now, 'identity' emerged not only from the individual characteristics of celebrities themselves, but also from the activities of their press agents and other representatives of the mass media, as well as the fans who consumed their imagery. As P. David Marshall demonstrates, the persona of the individual celebrity develops across the interplay of three dimensions: the world in which the celebrity performs; the world of secondary texts, both official and unofficial, such as interviews or paparazzi photographs; and the world of the audience, which produces an

unending series of interpretations based on the materials from the first two dimensions. In a dialectical fashion, elements from these dimensions continuously react and adjust to new discursive meanings. Thus, the self is the product of perceptions in constant flux.

As celebrations of individuality, celebrities represent the ultimate manifestation of the ideologies of the self that had been developing in the West since the Renaissance. Many scholars contend that until the end of the eighteenth century, identity was more solidly fixed, often as a direct reflection of one's social station. With the changes wrought by the French Revolution, the material and ideological conditions of public life grew confused and fragmented. The Romantic notion of the self-determining entity emerged—an ostensibly autonomous individual but one that was still part of a universal whole. Selfhood splintered as it evolved into an expression of a social order that was no longer determinable or stable. Celebrities represented heightened examples of individual accomplishment and transformation that was possible in the newly fluid society of the early nineteenth century.

Then, as now, celebrities relied on the mass media for the promulgation of their image. Ironically, the mass-dissemination of these images that gave birth to the celebrities also denied them their self-determination—as a product of increasingly complex systems of reproduction, dissemination, and consumption, they were no longer able to control their own selfhood. In short, celebrities themselves became commodities—spectacular commodities of subjectivity.

This flexibility is reflected in the celebrity portraits in *L'Artiste*. For the most part, these portraits as well as their accompanying biographies conform to a standardized format. All of the portraits, created in the lively and sketchy manner of the lithograph,

depict the individuals at half- or bust-length. Below the portrait the names of the sitters and, in some instances, those of the lithographer are inscribed. With the exception of the double portrait of the artist brothers, Tony and Alfred Johannot, the celebrities are always depicted alone. The space behind them is generally featureless except for some often quite dramatic effects of light and shade; furniture and props are few. With the notable exception of Alfred de Vigny, who is hunched over an open book at his desk, writing instrument in hand, the figures are not shown engaged in their profession or accompanied by symbols of their fame. The suite thereby diverges from the tradition of depicting notable individuals surrounded by the symbolic accoutrements of their station, fame, and power. Take for instance, the portrait of Paul Delaroche: despite being a decorated artist and member of the Académie, he is presented simply as a dapper bourgeois. Traditionally, artists were shown with symbols of their knowledge and elevated social standing, as demonstrated in the portrait of the founder of the Académie, Charles Le Brun. This convention continued well into our period, as seen in the 1846 portrait of the wealthy architect and philanthropist Antoine Vivenel, who is surrounded by architectural plans and statuettes of Charity. In the *L'Artiste* portraits, dress also serves to distance these individuals from the world of their celebrity. The actress is not shown on stage in the guise of her most famous role; the sculptor is not shown in the atelier with his smock and working tools. Rather, the figures are all dressed in plain, but elegant bourgeois costume. In other words, the figures are abstracted from the world of celebrity and seem to exist solely as ordinary—if unusually alluring or glamorous—individuals.

Through the informality of their style and mode of presentation and lack of direct reference to their sitters' professions, the portraits in *L'Artiste* seem to operate on a

wholly private plane. The figures often express a soulful interiority, a portrayal that brings them to a level that is at once immediate and private, a growing feature of Romantic-era portraiture. For example, Andrew Shelton has noted that the printed portraits of men by Achille Devéria reveal an intimacy and relaxation that is highly unusual for traditional official masculine portraiture.

The writers in *L'Artiste* insisted on the truthfulness of these intimate representations. The editor claims that Giroux managed to capture the “dreamy and spiritual physiognomy” of the writer Alfred de Vigny with “grande vérité.” Nearly all of Léon Noël’s lithographs were said to be done “after nature.” The artist had managed, as it were, to truthfully translate his own private encounter with the famous individual to others. This experience is facilitated by the medium of lithography, the sketchy and lively manner of which recalls the tradition of portrait drawings. Portrait drawings had long served a largely private function, often given as gifts between friends and used as poignant remembrances of particular events or relationships. Both images of the actress Marie Dorval—the mass-produced lithograph by Noël and the unique colored chalk drawing by Delaroche—establish a startling closeness between subject and viewer. By evoking the immediacy and intimacy of the spontaneously produced portrait drawing, the lithographic portraits achieved similar affects but, ironically, were disseminated en masse to a growing market of anonymous consumers with no direct connections to the sitters. This translation of the one-of-a-kind, intimate portrait drawing into a mass-produced lithograph afforded diverse individuals the vicarious pleasure of encountering famous personages directly and privately. These images thereby fulfilled what P. David Marshall terms an “affective function:” the generation of an emotive response to celebrities from

their audiences. Through these seemingly immediate and intimate encounters with a famous person, viewers were also prompted to reflect upon notions of selfhood through processes of projection and identification. The cultural consumer could, in short, identify with these deceptively “ordinary,” seemingly approachable celebrities and project their desires onto them.

Serving essentially as blank slates, the portraits in *L'Artiste* encouraged viewers to participate in the construction of identity of celebrities on a private, individual level. These seemingly personal printed portraits that set up a private encounter between individuals encourage an intimacy dominated by perceptions where private fantasies about subjectivity are enacted and where society renegotiated understandings of the self. The celebrities, these spectacles of subjectivity, served, then as now, as touchstones for an array of public and private concerns whose identity was continuously reconstructed in accordance with the ideological concerns of the culture at large.