Book Review/Compte rendu

Fred Inglis. *A Short History of Celebrity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, 322 pp. $US 29.95 hardcover (978-0-691-13562-5)

Fred Inglis has written a broad historical account of celebrity from the mid-eighteenth century to the present. However, he really ends his discussion in the late 1970s and pays only cursory attention to contemporary forms of celebrity culture. Therein lies both the central attraction and problem with this book: it provides an eclectic journey through western culture from the era of modernity with interesting illustrative examples but it fails to provide a coherent explanation of celebrity as a category, or how that category has been transformed by the social forces that Inglis describes. Moreover, his evident disdain for contemporary mass culture, and the related expansion of celebrity culture within it precludes an informative understanding or critique of celebrity in contemporary times.

His central theme is outlined in the first part of the book where he outlines an admittedly short history of human emotions in the public sphere. Arguing that celebrities act to magnify these emotions, and that this function expands during modernity, he draws on arguments such as Giddens' about the detraditionalization of the social. He then identifies three key transformations during early modernity that contribute to this need, the first being the initial decline of monarchs and aristocracy from the centre of the social universe, correlated, he argues, with a shift from the social appreciation of "renown" for achievements and position towards an interest in gossip, fashion and consumerism. The rise of fashion and large-scale commercial spectacular venues, such as arcades and department stores, is his second major theme, continuing the argument that the bourgeoisie and their tastes, leisure and income came to replace traditional forms of social esteem. An analyis of the emergent gossip press focusing on the newly rich in the USA during this period completes his three-fold basis for the development of modern celebrity; one that reflects the social changes in political and financial power and status during modernity. This first half of the book is perhaps the strongest, based as it is in many established sources and arguments about the rise of consumer culture and its attendant cultural forms during the era of industrialization. Inglis thus provides a synthesis of previous historical

and sociological ideas and demonstrates their relevance to the rise of a culture that encourages and permits celebrity.

One criticism, however, is that he does not refer to the established literature on celebrity culture, including those that have some historical analysis, such as Rojek's *Celebrity* (2001), which would have enriched his account and provided evidence for his sometimes sweeping claims. This oversight becomes much more apparent in the remainder of the book in which he attends to specific examples of celebrity under themes of "the democratization of celebrity," "sport, rock, fashion and the self," and somewhat jarringly, an emphasis on political celebrity in "the great dictators." Not only is there a wealth of literature on specific examples that Inglis ignores, but it remains unclear whether he is arguing that there are certain types of celebrity that emerge in different contexts, and whether they are fundamentally different from his historical examples. Such analytical clarity is provided by a number of other works such as Turner's *Understanding Celebrity* (2004) and Marshall's *Celebrity and Power* (1997); Rojek has a particular contribution to make on the appeal of "immoral" or "wicked" celebrities, which might help refine Inglis' equation of the cult of dictatorship with entertainment celebrity. Whilst these other texts may not have the verve of Inglis' pronouncements, they do benefit from an engagement with both evidence and theoretical paradigms. Perhaps this is too much to ask of a cultural historian, but I think it is relevant for an audience whose departure point is sociology.

A sociological perspective is important because it demands of us that we first understand the meaningful nature of human action before we apply normative judgements, something that Inglis cannot avoid in both his tone and critique of contemporary culture and the masses who engage in it. In places he admits that he is writing as a fan; there is nothing wrong with that, but his adoration is reserved for a particular time, an era before the 1980s when there were, apparently, more genuinely credible celebrity figures like Paul Newman, Cary Grant, and Marilyn Monroe. He is explicitly judgmental about contemporary stars and stardom, adopting a middle-aged liberal attitude towards David Beckham thus:

> My kind of elderly social commentator praises him for putting his fortune into a football academy while looking doubtfully at the little boys who are drawn to football less by its human artfulness and more by the hateful corruption of the calls to highly improbably fame.

Our author harks back to a time before the corruption of money, but he would have done better to read the studies done on contemporary sports fame that can explain why media commercialization has so dominated sports, how audiences and fans are still able to invest positively despite

this corporatization, and why sports stars remain as one of the few true figures of heroic "renown" in our contemporary culture. Inglis' nostalgia turns to vitriol when discussing reality TV, which he describes as "an imaginative and revoltingly seedy development" participated in by "wretches who take the cheque and the abuse of reality TV." Lest I seem particularly judgmental by quoting a few choice phrases, I point out that this last extract continues with a directly normative judgment: "The further from good art they are, the more liable to the destructive whirl of the psychosis, as expressed on behalf of the people by the unspeakable yellow press." For a study that sets out to put "feelings" as the centre of its analysis, he seems unwilling to investigate the reasons why such forms of entertainment have proved popular — dismissing them as unworthy "art" — or to acknowledge that reality TV produces new kinds of celebrity that indicate something about our social world. Indeed, his analysis of the infamous *Celebrity Big Brother* racism incident in Britain in 2007 (which he incorrectly locates in 2005), Inglis concludes that

> This stuff tells us nothing about the meanings of celebrity except that a new category has been admitted of those talentless few whose foul mouths and ugly judgements (each deliberately worked up and on for show in the show) make them, very transiently, topics of public gossip and easy condemnation.

Those who have analyzed this incident and published on it (myself included) would, I think, disagree on almost every point in this sentence. My aim is not to be ungenerous, but to point out that we need intelligent, thoughtful analyses of our increasingly complex culture rather than judgments based on our generational experience and class. If Inglis had been able to do this consistently, he would not have reduced the historical and social formations of British racism that constructed the *Celebrity Big Brother* incident to the realm of mere individuals with "foul mouths."

Trent University Momin Rahman

Momin Rahman is based in Sociology at Trent University. He has published *Gender and Sexuality: Sociological Approaches* (2010, with Stevi Jackson), *Sexuality and Democracy* (2000) and numerous articles on LGBT issues, including work on queer representations of David Beckham (2004) and in sports celebrity more generally (2011). He is currently working on the tensions between Muslim cultures and sexual diversity.
mominrahman@trentu.ca