“We will not understand why celebrities fascinate and trouble us so much until we have a more fully elaborated history of celebrity culture”, writes Tom Mole on p.26 of his illuminating new study. But do they fascinate us and trouble us? Do they not rather bore and annoy us, and is not celebrity culture one of the prime sicknesses of the modern world? Celebrity may be “a debased cultural phenomenon” (Mole, p.157) but it is certainly not “unworthy of serious study” (ibid). Daniel J. Boorstin, at whose “notable Jeremiad”, The Image, or What Happened to the American Dream Mole glances on p.4, never to refer to it again, summed up celebrity culture ages ago: “Nothing is really real unless it happens on television” – “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” – “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some hire public relations officers”, and so on. Boorstin invented the term “pseudo-event”.

In fact celebrity culture isn’t a creation of the modern world. In Ancient Rome, gladiators were celebrities: they had fan clubs, and sponsored products – the makers of the famous Russell Crowe movie discovered this latter, and thought of putting it into the scenario, but figured no-one would believe them. Obviously Ancient Rome didn’t have steel engravings, still less podcasts, cable TV or satellite, for ease and speed of distribution of text and image: but they managed well enough within their technological limits.

Celebrities are not icons, but totems. With an icon, there’s only one option: you worship it. With a totem, you can dance round it if things go well, but if things go badly you can also spit on it, poo all over it, or chop it to bits. Thus David Attenborough is an iconic celebrity, but Britney Spears is a totemic one. We’re just as fascinated and troubled by Britney when she goes to pieces as we were when she was a success – more so, in fact, because we’re secretly pleased she’s gone to pieces, because really, we envied and hated her all along.

Last week (this is March 2008), Marion Cotillard was an iconic celebrity – the brilliant actress whose portrayal of Piaf got her the Oscar. This week, she’s a totemic one – someone found out that she thinks the Twin Towers were, on 9/11, destroyed by controlled explosions! From transcendently talented star to self-evident looney in twenty-four hours! 9/11, the most traumatic event of the century (so far), a pseudo-event? Only a mad person could speak such blasphemy.

This is how celebrity culture works. What really happened, what the person really does and thinks, is irrelevant: it’s all mass subjectivity and an inability to see or think straight when dealing with reality. It is, in fact, collective madness, exploited by politicians and other parasites. Reality doesn’t stand a chance. Tom Mole quotes Baudrillard as writing that “Once authenticity becomes a choice amongst other choices … it returns as a simulacrum of itself” (p.106). Celebrity culture is an alternative to the real world: you might say, to authentic culture – your own life is so dull, you project all your wishes and fantasies on to … Posh Spice … hmmm … or … Jordan. The blanker the screen, the better the person serves as a totemic icon. Talentless people make the best totemic celebrities. They can be all things to all men, and to all women. HMQ understands this (she’s the nation’s official totem, after all), which is why all her endeavour is to appear as blank as possible.

I would blame English teachers, except that, in fact, my pupils would be perfectly happy to admit, when interrogated, that they plastered their GCSE folders with soap-opera stars because they hated them, and watched their TV series because they were crap. The quality programmes you saw late at night, and that I tried to get them to review, were, they admitted, sort of interesting, but they were a turn-off – they hurt your head. With the crap culture you got on primetime, you knew where you were – you could shout insults at it. The same with totemic celebrities. In drama improvisations, what they did to Posh and Becks won’t bear relating. Hatred was their motivation.

Byron was a totemic celebrity. What he wrote was irrelevant. What he did was irrelevant, and to an extent still is. “He was a great lover, a great romantic poet who believed in the workers, believed in democracy, and died fighting for Greek freedom”. All crap, but in celebrity culture it doesn’t matter.

1: Or stereotypy, mezzotint, stipple engraving, aquatint, “macadmised roads, canals and eventually railways” – all from Mole, p.80.
When things went well (from 1812 to 1815), you loved him; when they went badly (from 1816 onwards), you abused him and threw him out, in one of your periodical fits of morality. The man himself, and his poems, were always elsewhere, unexamined, as they are in much academic writing about him today (though not Tom Mole’s).

Here is a fan letter, written to him by “Anna”, on September 3rd 1812:

[Lord Byron / Cheltenham]

My Lord, Tho I have not the honor of being personally known to you, I yet venture to address you; tho, I cannot offer any other excuse for the Liberty I take, if the irresistible desire I feel of thus (unknown) paying my humble tribute at the Shrine of Genius, be not deemed any apology. My Lord, I have been indebted to your muse, for soothing & interesting some of my Saddest hours, I have wept over Child Harold’s griefs & sympathized in his wrongs. I would have rejoiced when he rejoiced but there seems no joy for him in this World. Often have I wandered in these gardens with your poem for my Companion & “with thee, conversing have forgot all time” [Paradise Lost IV]. I have hung in rapt attention over every Line of Child Harold, I am not a Critic but an inexperienced young Woman, but the language of genius & of nature must be felt & never makes its appeal in Vain to my heart, & who can read those lines unmov’d, those beautiful lines to Thryzza particularly, who! without feeling the tenderest compassion for their unhappy author & indignation against those wicked people who (as I have heard) have by their treacheries & injuries, thrown as misanthropic gloom, over so noble & so great a Mind, a Mind which I am sure, was form’d by nature to be the delight & comfort of private & Social Life, as much as it ever shines conspicuous in the World of Talent. I have often remarked with pleasure occasional, (tho, evidently sought to be suppress) traits of tenderness & warm affection, bursting thro, the gloom, which too generally pervades your poem. he must surely feel affection & kindness who could excite them so strongly in others who could soften even the rugged Albanian & melt him into tears. Cherish these kinder feelings My Lord, & let Not the perfidy & ingratitude of a few, tho hard to bear I know, Steel your bosom against your erring brethren in general, do not my Lord, if I may entreat you, suffer your mind to be so affected by those evil Spirits who have been the cause of your sufferings, as to think of with drawing [which I have heard was in your thoughts] yourself from your native Land, from that Land which once was dear to you, from that Country which proudly owns you for one of her most favor’d Sons, & of which you were formed to be the ornament & the pride. remember that your talents were not given you for yourself alone, & that you must account for them hereafter. think not that it is because I cannot feel for your wrongs, I know they have been great or that I do not sympathize with you, because I am so earnest on this subject, I do most deeply enter into your feelings, peculiarly so perhaps because I have felt the same [cause] in some respects, to despair. I know that “Sorrow is a sacred thing”, [Cowper, Retirement] my Lord I have known what it is to lose those we love. Mine was the task To watch my drooping flowers, to mark the rapid changes of decay [there follows a twenty-two line poem, and more prose]

Now Childe Harold I and II – all “Anna” would have had of Byron’s output in September 1812 – doesn’t present a blank screen; but it might as well do, for all the evidence “Anna” displays of having read it. She’s erased whatever memory she retains of 98% of the poem, listened to a couple of rumours, and from those, invented a fantasy-Byron with whom she’s fallen in love.

Tom Mole begins his cultural-materialist analysis with a fascinating chapter on the Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill. Taking issue with Jerome McGann and Malcolm Kelsall, he writes that in it Byron is not “powerlessly commenting on a completed event” (the passing of the bill), but “intervening in an ongoing process, in a poem that may well have influenced the important amendment that reduced attempted framebreaking to a misdemeanour” (pp.36-7). He’s discovered a reprint of the Ode, slightly mutilated, in the Whiggish Nottingham Review, and surmises that the poem “may have circulated orally among the weavers” (p.39). Paralleling the passing of the bill with technological developments in both weaving and printing, he argues that, in 1812, Byron was, albeit anonymously, “a fifth columnist, redirecting the energies of early industrial capitalism from within” (p.42).

He follows with the best analysis I’ve read on the different styles, and audiences, for whom Childe Harold I and II were conceived. Initially Byron targeted, he says, “a small audience of friends who would mediate between him and the unpredictable reactions of a larger and more public audience” (p.47). Chief among these was C.S.Matthews, who would appreciate the poem’s “private references and ironic Spenserianism” (p.47), especially its homoerotic details. But, because there was a homophobic scare, because Murray etc didn’t like these bits, and because Matthews died, the more
intimate audience had to be cut out of consideration. This left Byron “placed against his will into an unmediated relation with the anonymous audience of the Romantic period” (p.54); and as edition followed edition and his fame snowballed, he “cultivated the hermeneutics of intimacy” (p.56) in another fashion, namely by adding the ten new stanzas “To Ianthe”. She “trumps the [Greek] boys as a suitable object of desire for a celebrity poet because the representation of her beauty relies not on a clandestine conversation but on a publishable poetic convention” (p.57):

“To Ianthe’ fantasises that although Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage is sold to a faceless commercial audience, it is received by a single special reader, who accepts it as a billet-doux inviting her to a reading which is a kind of tryst. (p.58)

It this dream of an “eroticized reading” (p.59) to which the unfortunate “Anna” (see above) has fallen victim.

The title of Mole’s next chapter has two hard words: Scopophilia and Somatic Inscription in Byron’s Verse Tales. I was unable to find Scopophilia in the Shorter OED; online investigation revealed it to mean “love of watching”, that is, voyeurism. Somatic means “to do with the body”. Mole starts by analyzing how, in the Turkish Tales, the protagonists’ bodies are read like texts, and then how, in Corin Throsby’s phrase, Byron flirted with his readership through his incomplete narratives – in The Giaour, and to a lesser extent in Lara. Next Mole lists a number of instances in which Byron’s body was read in real life, by Annabella and by Coleridge (he omits Scott, whose description of Byron’s face as an “alabaster vase lit from within” is strikingly sexy, coming from a Scotchman so straight). “Romantic consumers”, he concludes, “could come to know him [Byron] without becoming known themselves” (p.77). This one-way relationship was one with which many consumers were dissatisfied and tantalized – “Anna”, for example.

The chapter which follows is on how Byron’s ad vivam portraits were copied, multiplied, distributed and distorted ad nauseam, taking on a life of their own. It holds fewer surprises, but is very thorough. The idea that Byron half-assisted and manipulated the process is argued, but the evidence is thin. Such a self-conscious nail-biter as Byron would not have enjoyed publicity: how would he have done on Parkinson? Mole’s conclusion …

… seems just. Less than twenty years after Byron’s death, Dickens was writing, in The Old Curiosity Shop, of Byron as Interchangeable Waxwork:

… these audiences were of a very superior description, including a great many young ladies’ boarding-schools, whose favour Mrs Jarley had been at great pains to conciliate, by altering the face and costume of Mr Grimaldi as clown to represent Mr Lindley Murray as he appeared when engaged in the composition of his English Grammar, and turning a murderess of great renown into Mrs Hannah More – both of which likenesses were admitted by Miss Monflathers, who was at the head of the head Boarding and Day Establishment in the town, and who condescended to take a Private View with eight chosen young ladies, to be quite startling from their extreme correctness. Mr Pitt in a nightcap and bedgown, and without his boots, represented the poet Cowper with perfect exactness; and Mary Queen of Scots in a dark wig, white shirt-collared, and male attire, was such a complete image of Lord Byron that the young ladies quite screamed when they saw it. Miss Monflathers, however, rebuked this enthusiasm, and took occasion to reprove Mrs Jarley for not keeping her collection more select: observing that His Lordship had held certain opinions quite incompatible with wax-work honours, and adding something about a Dean and Chapter, which Mrs Jarley did not understand."

Byron had by 1840 become what Elvis has become today: an icon before which young and old ladies instantly scream and faint, as by Pavlovian reflex.

John Murray is the villain of Mole’s next chapter. Hebrew Melodies, he argues, would have been seen as a new departure of Byron, an embracing of morality after the satanic shifts of the Turkish Tales: but Murray’s insistence on packaging them uniformly with the rest of his four-volume Complete Works, and adding to them, without distinction, the Elegy on the Death of Sir Peter Parker and the lyrics which had formerly been printed with Childe Harold, drew attention from the moral conversion
which the newly-married poet wished them to advertise. Not that the world was likely to see, for, as Mole brilliantly points out, the first work in his next volume, Parisina, with, at last, in Hugo, an unByronic, repentant, truly Christian [I’d add, “unambiguously heterosexual”] protagonist, was in fact passed over by the canting reviewers as too depraved to be afforded notice. Byron couldn’t succeed in the attempt to refashion himself as an iconic as opposed to a totemic celebrity – but the supposedly conservative and correct John Murray didn’t help him.

I’d argue with a number of details in this chapter: Murray isn’t the only purveyor of pseudo-events in this episode. Isaac Nathan’s charlatan’s insistence that his mediocre settings were “all of them upwards of 1000 years old” (quoted p.105) might have been treated with greater severity. The idea that “By the end of 1814 … Byron … had mined his experience of exotic travels almost to exhaustion” (p.98) is to take the Turkish Tales as autobiographical and / or authentic in a way that won’t stand upwards of 1000 years old” (p.107) cease to do so after the first two (The Giaour and The Bride); and one or two jokes about Joanna (“Mrs Trinity”: BLJ IV 171) Southcote don’t make Byron “fascinated” by her (p.102).

The next chapter, on Childe Harold III, is one of Mole’s best. Arguing that by mid-1816 Byron “was trying to rethink his position in … Romantic celebrity culture” (p.113), he points out that Lushington, Annabella’s lawyer, took the “hidden crime trope” which had been a major selling factor of Byron’s poems (p.118), and turned it against him. Rather than flirt with his reader by keeping some central ideas in reserve, Byron now “asserts [that] poems need encounter no one except the poet” (p.119): “he fantasises about a kind of self-expression so powerful that it would entirely negate the reader’s subjectivity and force the writer’s meaning upon him or her with the elemental power of lightning” (p.121). Hence the famous stanza 97, “Could I embody and unbosom me now …” The only reader who really matters – so the poem asserts – is his daughter, addressed in its first line; “Any message Byron sent to Ada had to go through the public domain, because Lady Byron’s antipathy ensured that all other channels were closed” (p.121). “Anna” would have been upset and bewildered to find herself so excluded.

There follows a two-part section adhering to the book’s cultural materialist message. Firstly, Childe Harold III, Mole points out, “exists in a pre-publication state as a craftwork rather than as an industrial product” (p.127). This was / is the perfect fair copy in a red morocco-bound notebook which, alas, went astray and did not re-emerge until the Barclays Bank find in 1976. Secondly, Byron insisted, for the first time, on negotiating with Murray over the copyright, thus attempting “to reduce the reader/writer nexus to the cash nexus, removing from it any trace of a gift economy”. A feudal “gift economy” was what Byron had tried, pre-1816, to exercise over his relationship with Murray, but without success, for Murray had paid him for all his poems despite all his disclaimers of despised professionalism, and he had not felt able to refuse the money when it turned up in his bank account.

Not for the first time we are reminded that this is a “pre-Andrew Nicholson-John Murray’s Letters” book. Mole writes (p.127) that “Murray was wary of Shelley’s politics” when asked to employ him as proof-reader for Childe Harold III. In fact what Murray wrote was, “I am sure that the person who was to have been your supervisor is a perfect <wretch> wretch – without any homogenious [sic] qualities to compensate” (LJM 188).

Last, Tom Mole navigates his way through the ocean that is Don Juan via Byron’s reading of Montaigne, using Montaigne’s essay ‘On Repentance’ and applying it to the Pregnant Girl in the Scarlet Cloak in Canto XVI: others can develop by themselves, she has repentance forced upon her by Lord Henry’s local state apparatus, and cannot be allowed to develop at all. But, argues Mole, “in the world of Don Juan” (as in that of Montaigne), “change is rarely developmental” (p.137). His final section charts Byron’s reaction against “the shift from an ancien regime of identity” to a ‘modern regime of selfhood’” (p.130). For Byron, as for Montaigne, the self was shifting, fragmented, “mobile” and unknowable: “the rhetoric of sincerity is part of what Byron calls ‘can’t’: dubious jargon, unreflectively employed, which refuses to engage with those who do not use its terms and mystifies what it claims to illuminate” (p.144). This is the rhetoric which Blackwoods, for example, employed against Byron. It has modern counterparts in academic writing about literature; an example is to be found on Professor Mole’s own p.148 (but nowhere else in his excellent book):

Adeline has what Dror Wahrman would call (following Sarah Knott) a ‘socially turned self’, one which is primarily outward looking and relationally derived from a matrix of overlapping and mutable investments in particular identity categories.

---

5: Murray liked Parisina, in part because Annabella had copied it: “I have been most agreeably disappointed (a word I cannot associate with the poem – at the Story which what you hinted to me and wrote – had alarmed me for [sic] & I should not have read it aloud to my wife – If my eye had not traced the delicate had that transcribed it …” (LJM 150-1)
Byron’s antithetical posture to all this rhetoric is seen in, for example, the “cant/cunt” wordplay implicit in the “teterrima causa” section from Canto IX – long before which, I’m sure, poor “Anna” would have cast Don Juan aside in tears of disillusion, disgust, and despair.

The book is short of several chapters. The greatest celebrity of the time was Napoleon, and Byron was in thrall to his living legend as surely as “Anna” was to Byron’s, and with as little detailed knowledge, if his letters and journals are a guide. Likewise, the “Cato Street Conspiracy”, set up by a Home Office agent provocateur, was one of the greatest pseudo-events of postwar London, and Byron’s innate, horrified anti-radicalism made him a perfect dupe for it: he based Marino Faliero upon his faith in its authenticity as an insurgent act. I was surprised to find, in a book which elsewhere wears its cultural-materialist credentials so confidently, no analysis of what, if any, effect it had on Byron to know that the later Don Juan volumes were available at a shilling each, duodecimo; and surely there is a chapter to be written on how knowing that The Age of Bronze and The Island were going to be published in a left-wing journal affected Byron during their writing.

Perhaps Tom Mole will develop his approach in another volume. We hope so.

There are errors. 6 Rogers wrote Jacqueline, not Moore (p.22). The Fair Shepherdess is an authentic Greek poem (in fact, Cretan) and is not by Galt (p.50). The My Mary which Byron is sending-up in his verse letter to Murray (p.99) is not by Clare but by Cowper.

---

6: The Siege of Corinth is The Seige of Corinth on pp.112 and 188.