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book review of

Cleo de Merode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture by
Michael D. Garval

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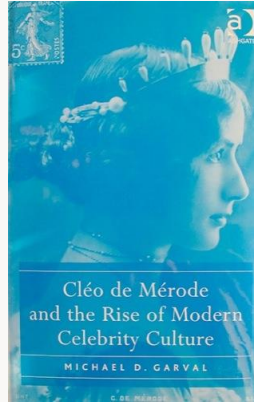
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Michael D. Garval,
Cléo de Mérode and the Rise of Modern Celebrity Culture.
Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited 2012.
265pp.; 40 b&w illustrations, no color; bibliography; index.
\$104.95
ISBN: 9781409406037

Although we live in an age of exaggerated celebrity culture, one where even individuals of little deserved notoriety are often instantly raised to great heights through media and public attention, this phenomenon in the visual arts has received very scant attention by the academic community. Few cultural historians have probed the reasons for this type of mass hysteria, and little attention has been given to the ways in which celebrity culture manifested itself beginning in the nineteenth century. Even less importance has been paid to this emerging phenomenon despite its importance to aspects of visual creativity, whether linked to the lives of creators or centered on the subjects of their adulation.

Often people achieved fame for a few brief moments before receding into the background to be remembered by only a few of the most ardent fans. This was also the case with previous eras. This is how Cléo de Mérode (1875–1966), once regarded as the most beautiful woman in the world—an icon of beauty—was quickly forgotten after the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, it is with particular fascination that we discover Michael Garval’s superb examination of Cléo de Mérode’s meteoric rise to public consciousness, used by the author as a touchstone for probing the value of celebrity culture in general. Garval goes far in reestablishing her importance, in bringing a clear-headed and well-documented assessment of the ways in which she was venerated. Her celebrity was used as a means of promoting culture, of selling material goods; Cleo de Mérode’s strategies for keeping herself in the public eye by carefully using the press and photography to cultivate her personality provides a model case for the ways in which an individual can use celebrity to increase fame and popularity.

In his book, Garval raises significant issues. He tries to find answers as to why Cléo de Mérode was so obsessed with achieving fame. In an introductory section, he reconstructs her background and examines her childhood, trying to determine if it was the illegitimacy of her

birth or the role played by a “pushy mother” that ignited her quest for adulation. Considering her limited talent also helps the author and his readers judge how creative she was in using every contact or moment of attention to further propel herself upward. Around 1900, according to Garval, Cléo de Mérode was the most photographed woman in the world. In her photographic portraits, Garval argues, Cléo styled herself with “confidence, sophistication and resolve,” using the visual media of the day to accentuate her presence, making her a prefiguration of a modern day movie queen (5). Garval demonstrates how Cléo de Mérode engineered her own cult of personality that made her the first ‘true modern icon’.

In an imaginative first chapter Garval focuses on the public obsession with Cléo’s ears during the 1890s. He recounts how her ears, which were hidden under her novel hairstyles, became the subject of innumerable newspaper articles and gossip. People wondered whether she had ears. What size they were? Were they deformed or not? Garval states that Cléo’s ears generated an “. . . orgy of misinformation, misinterpretation and innuendo” (9). This fixation on Cléo’s ears, whether she had any or whether they were missing, fed scientific theories of the time associated with degeneration, while at the same time providing numerous cartoonists with endless opportunities to satirize Cléo, her hair style, and her life. Serving as the basis for art works, notably Alexandre Falguière’s sculpture *The Dancer* (1896, Paris Salon), made Cléo de Mérode the talk of artistic circles, further adding to her fame as a “muse” for numerous artists, but one who also attracted crowds because of her beauty and sense of mystery. As Garval documents, she was also extremely savvy in advancing her presence on the world stage.

Within the slowly emerging celebrity culture of the era, Cléo de Mérode purposely visited the leading Parisian photographic studios, sitting for portraits that showcased her beauty. She knew how to mold and fashion her public persona in order to reach an audience that simply wanted to possess her photograph. In the process Cléo de Mérode became a star. She capitalized on something new: sex appeal from afar. And all of this crystallized in an ever-increasing obsession with Cléo’s hidden ears. After establishing the sense of mystery surrounding Cléo de Mérode, Garval proceeds to carefully elucidate just how she first emerged on the Parisian art scene to become such a popular icon.

From the mid-1890s, as Cléo’s dancing on stage became known, her fame spread beyond France. In September 1897, on a trip to New York City for performances, she was able to attract considerable press coverage; the fact that her likeness was captured in so many photographs made it possible for many to ‘possess’ her, thereby fulfilling a fundamental sexual fantasy. Her beauty transfixed people; the idea of an ‘impossible love’ led to many becoming mesmerized. Men became worshippers at the altar of Cléo de Mérode, much as knights of yore would have carried mementoes of their love into battle. While some recognized that Cléo was not a great dancer, they were entranced by her beauty and the mystery surrounding her, by the fact that she had access to a world that most people knew little about, but wished they did. Her status as a performer—even one with little talent—and her beauty augmented the reasons why people were interested in her. After she posed for Falguière, his sculpture became a focal point at the Paris Salon, fueling further discussion of Cléo de Mérode’s attributes. She had tapped into an erotic undercurrent of the era, which was stirred by considerable discussion in the artistic world as to how to represent the nude in works of art. The fact that society yearned to see her body, and Falguière’s sculpture of *The Dancer*, became crucial to any deepened discussion of who Cléo de Mérode was, and of the physical charm she possessed. In the end, even after Cléo

de Mérode's magnetism has been recognized, it remains to determine who she actually was. Was she a courtesan kept by a powerful figure in politics such as King Leopold of Belgium? Was she a tramp? What was the true nature of her sexuality? How had her falsified fame as a dancer helped to catapult her to becoming the most talked about personality in the cultural world? Garval examines all of these multifaceted issues in his second chapter simply titled "Parisian Sensation".

In the midst of her sensational beginnings, Cléo de Mérode decided on an American tour. It was to be her undoing. As a product of considerable hype in the press and magazines, when the American public and critics went to see her perform, they were disappointed. She lacked vivaciousness on stage; her performances were seen as wooden and without originality. Some reviewers, upset that her ability at building herself up had actually not been substantiated by her real talent, commented that Cléo was a product of European degeneration and debauchery. No one likes to be duped. Others however acknowledged that her "beauty" and her "charm" were transcendent (112). Despite the fact that her talent was limited, it was Cléo de Mérode herself who fascinated Americans as "she represented the emerging future of their own celebrity culture" (113). In his assessment of Cléo de Mérode's powerful aura of seduction, Garval goes behind the historical moment. Commenting on the public's willingness to overlook shallowness in a performer, to find a person charming when in fact she was dull, places the very nature of celebrity, of fame, in sharper focus than previously considered. He correctly sees Cléo de Mérode as something that she was actually not: a model icon for an age that loved to believe in something that was not real.

In order to further examine Cléo de Mérode as a phenomenon of celebrity culture, Garval turns to Cléo's worldwide stardom at the Paris World's Fair of 1900 where she became a dancing sensation, and by the fact that she was becoming an international postcard queen (122). Her Cambodian dances for which Mérode was lavishly paid, were always sold out (131). Garval notes too that her increasing postcard stardom focusing on her "flawless face, trendsetting hairdo, and stylish outfits . . ." made her celebrity ever more notable (133). As one of the first to use the postcard to reach an ever-broadening audience, Mérode offered her devotees examples of their favorite pin-up. The story that Garval unravels is an amazing example of the making of an icon as Mérode appeared in these images—depending on the perception of the viewer—as pure and virginal or provocative and sensual. Whatever mode suited Cléo's mood or the onlooker's preference was possible; Garval, a tireless researcher, has located countless images that reinforce these two poles of Cléo de Mérode's perceived personality, revealing that he was able to ferret out the most unusual documents to expand on what he believed was the true story of Cléo's sensational fame.

At the height of her fame in the decade after the Paris World Fair of 1900, Cléo's dominance of popular culture faded. She became "a proto has-been, experiencing the ironic, modern predicament of outliving such extraordinary celebrity . . ." (169). She had a reasonable 'after celebrity' life living until 1966, fifty years or more after she reigned as a celebrated queen of popular culture. Carefully examining these later years, Garval notes that she slowly faded out of sight, passing into history as most icons of stardom actually do. Summing up, he notes that ". . . Mérode anticipated so much of celebrity culture that has flourished over the past century, and which continues to haunt" (213). Will Cléo make a comeback on the internet following the

publication of this exceedingly well researched book that will no doubt rekindle the interest in who she was? Only time will answer this intriguing question.

Outside of the masterful achievement(s) of this book, other aspects of Cléo de Mérode's reign need to be addressed. Was she a stronger influence on visual creators than Garval has suggested? Was she able to influence artists of the 1890s in the same way that Jane Avril, for example, was able to motivate painters, designers, printmakers and sculptors? Are there hidden wellsprings of visual material that used Cléo as an icon, much as the entrepreneur Meier-Graefe did for a poster that was completed for his Parisian shop La Maison Modern in 1900?^[1] These are questions that only visual historians can answer as they build on the research that Garval has done and try to more fully understand how the public persona of one individual can captivate so many. In the meantime, Garval's book will stand as the model for the investigation of celebrity culture, a beacon for others to follow, to read, to use and to understand especially since so many fundamental issues are presented in this book with such forceful clarity and insight.

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[1] Gabriel P. Weisberg, "Lost and Found: S. Bing's Merchandising of Japonisme and Art Nouveau," in *Art Nouveau and Siegfried Bing*, Special issue co-sponsored by the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 4, Issue 2, Summer 2005. 19thc-artworldwide.org, <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/summer05/lost-and-found-s-bings-merchandising-of-japonisme-and-art-nouveau->