Photography and Modern Icons

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The Visual Planning of Myth

By

Federica Muzzarelli

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CHAPTER ONE

PHOTOGRAPHY, FASHION, MODERNITY

At the confluence of two great, rich paths such as those associated with the origins of Photography and Fashion in the mid-19th century also lurk the foundations of the vast, fascinating universe of Modernity. Defined by Émile Littré's New French Dictionary as "qualité de ce qui est moderne"[1], Modernity is a dimension that Charles Baudelaire identifies as characteristic of the new, growing urban reality of large cities. Indeed, between around 1840 and 1920, the preconditions were in place for a radical transformation of society and culture that, between nascent capitalism and the strengthening of industrialisation mechanisms, brought attention to what is given, present "in real time" (fleeting, contingent and transitory, said Baudelaire), and that would later develop into a cross-cutting, syncretic and global aesthetic phenomenon–Modernism–capable of modifying the relationship between humanity and contemporaneous environment, society, culture and thought. In addition to all this, it is worth mentioning that for the first time Modernism was also a movement with an important active female participation.

At that time, Paris was effectively the most alluring and attractive metropolis, and it was also the city that quintessentially favoured the birth and beginnings of fashion and photography.

Thus, the six stories of photography, fashion and modernity collected in this volume tell of personalities who in various ways and at different times have circled around the new, shining, and alluring *ville lumière* like moths in the twilight, and whose common thread is precisely the coexistence of these three territories: the photography they use in various ways and for various purposes, the fashion they influence and invent, and the modernity they inhabit. What the human and artistic events recounted here respond to is this: to have illuminated certain protagonists of a culture in the full bloom of Modernity and to have shown them capable of using, with a pioneering awareness of the power of mass media (photography above all), their own image and identity to give it body and soul in the eyes of an anonymous,

[1] Littré, 1869.

widespread public, thus also favouring (and thanks to the popular reach granted by new cinematographic tools) a style, a fashion, a trend.

Photography, Fashion and Modernity were in this way able to demonstrate their mutual osmotic capacity and their natural emergence into a phenomenon that, while original for the times covered here, would later be destined to become emergent: that of the fashion mass icon dictating fashion.

As Christine Buci-Glucksmann well summarised, modernity is imbued with an urban identity devoted to the worship of images and their reproduction: "Of this we can be certain: the image engraved upon the flâneur's body, the Baudelairean passerby barely glimpsed in the intoxication of large cities, this multiplicity of emotions are only specific examples of what is characteristic of modernity: the cult of images, the secularization/sublimation of bodies, their ephemeral nature and reproducibility"[2].

In fact, the six fashion mass icons investigated here seem to exemplify certain key points of the aesthetics of Modernism and at the same time the first vestigial or behavioural attestations of fashion ideas that still cyclically return today. The icon and Cléo de Mérode, the French dancer who experienced in an auroral manner what it meant to be a popular mass visual stereotype imprisoned in a cliché to be reproduced as a commodity. Poetry and Charles Baudelaire, the special interpreter of the mournful monochrome of black, the most famous subject of the photographic lens of his friend Nadar, who challenged future audiences by wearing tragic ironic masks. Dance and Vaslav Nijinsky, the flying angel of the Ballets Russes immortalised by Sir Adolph De Meyer in his faun suit, an explosive condensate of erotic and exotic transgression, the dream of forbidden escapism and sensual diversity that became an album and advertising poster. Post-colonialism and Nancy Cunard, the rebellious, non-conformist writer who brought the creed of the negrophiles into art and life, and who, to impose and solidify it also visually, had herself photographed by Man Ray with African fetish-bracelets covering her long, thin arms. The gender-crossing of Annemarie Schwarzenbach, the little Swiss woman who sought a place in the world through reportage photography, but who also knew how to use photography to indulge herself in unforgettably chic images, aimed at constructing an unconventional identity and disseminating androgynous clothing that was both a declaration and a choice of gender. Conformism and D'Annunzio, the writer and poet who fought bourgeois mediocrity and the banality of the ordinary with verse and deeds, who created magical and

[2] Buci-Glucksmann, 1984, p. 85.

imaginative garments for his nocturnal guests, but who in his personal wardrobe at the *Vittoriale* could not renounce the snobbish elegance dictated by the fashion of the élite he sought to join, paradoxical because it was an irrepressible necessity for the chanter of the admonition to *audere semper* to conform to the clichés of the style of power.

A few more words on the so-called osmotic incursions of the three territories of fashion, modernity, and photography that the book's protagonists inhabit.

As is well known, the terms fashion and modernity have a common etymological origin, but here it is more important to emphasise the intimate ontological connection and the profound bond that binds these two worlds: "The hallmarks of *la modernité* found their most immediate reflection in *la mode*.... Essentially, *la modernité equals la mode*, because it was sartorial fashion that made modernity aware of its constant urge and necessity to quote from itself"[3]. In the period that is the focus of this volume, i.e. between the mid-19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, fashion began to acquire the physiognomy we recognise today, shifting from being a domain that essentially distinguished elevated social classes to a mass phenomenon[4]. As Patrizia Calefato recently reiterated, the beginning of the 20th century saw the transition from the fashion system as a system "based on social distinction" typical of the modern age, to fashion as "mass-fashion", i.e. as a "system whose territory of expression and reproduction, of social cohesion and communication of taste in the urban dimension, which is based not only on distinction, but also on imitation.... Mass society, widespread consumption and the city are the three elements that underpin this transition between the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century"[5].

Contributing to this transformation was the emerging society of mass consumption and, of course, the presence of technological tools capable of allowing that new taste, that new fashion, to be broadcast and thus reproducible and therefore imitated. As already mentioned, fundamental then was the role of cities with Benjamin's shop windows, warehouses and passages constituting the stages welcoming fashion's transformations and affirmations.

As far as the contribution of photography to the definition of fashion identity is concerned, it is enough to reflect on the fact that it could not simply be a purely technical improvement or instrumental facilitation of

[3] Lehmann, 2000, p. XII and XX.
[4] Calefato, 1996.
[5] Calefato, 2012, p. 11 (my translation).

something already given and defined in a structured manner. Photography contributes substantially, institutionally, to making fashion what it is today.

"Many histories of modernism have observed how the structures of modern fashion put in place in the mid-19th century rigorously rearranged the circulation of desirable products and images in the public sphere. The accessibility of fashion products was increased through developments in mass production and sales, and through the promotional avenues of media and advertising, and eventually film"[6]. The idea of fashion as an event characterised by constant change, a cyclical and unstoppable dynamism of taste has been a truism since Georg Simmel's writings. That is, of fashion as a system that makes change and the transmission of that change one of its distinguishing traits. So, it is clear that fashion as we understand it, philosophically from Simmel onwards, was born with photography. With a technology that establishes that trend, makes it concrete, visible, and above all shareable, disseminated, communicated[7].

Elizabeth Wilson argues that "Fashion resembles photography. Both are liminal forms, on the threshold between art and not-art. Both are industrially produced, yet deeply individual. Both are poised ambiguously between present and past: the photograph congeals the essence of the now, while fashion freezes the moment in an eternal gesture of the-only-right-way-to-be"[8].

Going beyond Elizabeth Wilson's statement that "fashion resembles photography", we might add, with some bias, that "fashion was born with photography". That is, since when science and technology could ensure that an instrument was available that could capture the image of the world with absolute fidelity, something that had hitherto enjoyed a restricted audience and a very limited dispersion was instead offered to a scene without geographical and social boundaries. From the happy circumstance whereby in modernity fashion's and photography's fates were progressively and virtuously linked, giving life to one of the most interesting relationships in the history and visual culture of the 20th century, we can proceed backwards by investigating precisely how in some early pioneering experiments fashion trends were personified by celebrities, actors, writers and dancers, charged with playing their part as mass and fashion icons both in and out of the spotlight.

When Gillo Dorfles explained the distinction between *icon*, *idol* and *àgalma* in ancient Greek culture, he chose the term *icon* to indicate what we understand by *image* today, namely "a historical image, of a real figuration,

[6] Breward, 2003, p. 159
[7] Marra, 2004, pp. 39-42.
[8] Wilson, 2008, p. 7.

not deceiving, nor in the form of a simulacrum"[9]. Thus, borrowing Dorfles's suggestive definition, one cannot help but recall how it was during the age of photography, starting from the official christening of the Parisian invention on 7 January 1839, that the icons or legends of modernity underwent their process of democratisation[10]. Thanks to photography, the faces, lives, and behaviour of the protagonists of culture, art and politics entered the imagination of ordinary people as early as the middle of the 19th century. The boosted power of the images we are constantly immersed in today, ensured and preserved by the internet, has only made photography an even more influential and pervasive dimension, but one whose potential was already clear at the origins of the medium. As mentioned above, with great foresight some in the late 19th and early 20th century exploited the "myth-making" power of photography (Edgar Morin called it "starification") and endeavoured to increase the number of opportunities to have their image reproduced in photographs, thus making themselves seen by an anonymous, infinite potential audience to make themselves eternal and identifiable forever.

And if, as James Joyce argues regarding Ulysses, myth has no other function than to make "the dark soul of the world burn"[11], then modern myth–the mass, technological and fashionable version–has its primary masochistic guinea pig precisely in the first storyteller of Modernity, the poet of the *Flowers of Evil*. The vaporisation of the ego, which for Baudelaire is one of the causes of the melancholy that impoverishes modern humanity, begins in Nadar's atelier, in front of a mechanical shutter whose cold and impersonal click, in Benjamin's words, "indicated the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of aura in the experience of shock"[12].

[9] Dorfles, 2003, p. 17 (my translation).
[10] It is evident how reference is not made here to the terminology established in the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce and the related distinction between index and icon, but rather the more widespread and popular meaning of icon as a faithful image linked to a cult of personality.
[11] Maffesoli, 2008, p. 24.
[12] Benjamin, 1962, p. 130.

CHAPTER TWO

CLÉO DE MÉRODE, THE FIRST MASS ICON

1. The Star, Modern Icon

In his essay on stardom, Edgar Morin identifies a very suggestive combination in the constitution of the star: they feed on a mixture of archaic and modern dimensions: "...the subject of stars seems to me all the more fascinating the more it forces us to link archaism to modernity...: this subject, a historical efflorescence of the capitalist economy and a bourgeois civilisation, responds to profound anthropological aspirations that are expressed on the level of myth and religion. Star-goddess and star-merchandise are two faces of the same reality, one referring to fundamental anthropology, the other to 20th-century sociology"[13]. This seemingly ambiguous and paradoxical dual face of the star's physiognomy, old and new at the same time, manifests itself as a hypothesis of a stimulating homology precisely with respect to the photographic device that is the common denominator of this recognition of modern fashion icons. First of all, it is necessary to specify the fact that the words *star* and *diva* are used here as synonyms for *icon* and *mass legend*, since while the former two are more closely linked to the history of cinema, they share the nature of religious-type images with the latter two ("Être star, ce n'est pas seulement imprimer sur la pellicule une icône parareligieuse...")[14]. Morin again offers the image of stars as subjects "participating simultaneously in the human and the divine, analogous in certain aspects to the heroes of mythology or the gods of Olympus and inspiring a cult, indeed a kind of religion"[15]. Between the sacred and the profane and reality and magic, *Diva*, *Star*, *Legend* and *Icon* are therefore terms used in reference to personalities who impose themselves on the media and draw their symbolic force from visible

[13] Morin, 1995, p. 25. In addition to Morin's historical essay, see Dyer and McDonald, 1998, in which screen stars are analysed from both a sociological and semiotic perspective (my translation).
[14] Delage, 2000, p. 14.
[15] Morin, 1995, p. 24 (my translation).

appearances, from images that from a certain moment onwards can only be photographic, those photographs that Morin himself defines not by chance as "the universal presence-fetishes of the twentieth century"[16], and towards which people have an attitude of devotion and adoration. The fact that current events strongly reflect the link between terms with an ancient and distant flavour (such as icon and legend) and terms that are more common in today's mass society (such as star and diva, the latter moreover used in the Latin world with the meaning of deified and referring to emperors) is underscored by Michel Maffesoli's words: "Like the gods of classical mythology, the stars of our time and paradigmatic situations merely crystallise the collective light. Having a specific irradiation, they exert a kind of allure. Hence the need to draw figurines that give reasons for one (irradiation) and the other (allure)"[17]. And there is no doubt that in contemporaneous technology, the allure and irradiation of stars comes from technological figurines, from photographs. Photography then, a tool that is simultaneously ancient and modern: capable of combining the aspirations of doubling those men have dreamed of since prehistoric times with the modernity of a medium that adapts to the demands of a machinic and futuristic world. Thus, while the French scholar's reflections apply to the world of cinema and its mechanisms, the genetic emergence of cinema from photography makes it possible to attempt to adapt them pioneeringly to photographic icons as well. In fact, going back to the well-known theses that Marshall McLuhan elaborated in the 1960s, specifically the insight that the message resides in the medium[18], aware that in the first decades of the 20th century it was the cinema that was the true, great and immense disseminator of the star system, we can propose some early, anticipatory 19th-century cases of photograph-based "starification". Moreover, entrusting other contributions with the responsibility of entering the merits of the thorny issue[19], we will attest to the common semiotic identity that indicates that thanks to recorded certification, *physically* produced, the cinematographic image allows for a fragment of reality. If this is so, it is certainly not difficult to argue how the birth of celebrity lies within the nature of the medium that ontologically constitutes it, defines it. Cinematography is the space of the maturity and fullness of meaning of the star, but historically–by chronological, and indeed genetic precedence–it was with photography that the phenomenon itself was made conceptually possible, thinkable. While even before the photographic age there was no lack of forms of loyalty and

[16] Morin, 1995, p. 106 (my translation).
[17] Maffesoli, 2008, p. 22 (my translation).
[18] Marshall McLuhan, 1964.
[19] See Marra, 2002, pp. 27-34.

even morbid curiosity on the part of a public of enthusiasts for the life and image of famous personalities from cultural or political life (through illustrations, objects, and literary products), it cannot be denied that it was with the appearance of the new photographic medium that the relationships and methods of such loyalty changed profoundly. Only an instrument that could carry with it the emanation of the star, of a part of them (their face, body, hand), of a reflection of their physical presence, of a small (fetishistically private) semblance of them could really trigger something akin to the doubling and identification felt by a fan for the star. On the one hand, therefore, the revolution lay in the genetic characteristics of the star's traits, and the indexing nature is a decisive element in this respect. On the other hand, it lies in the possibilities of dissemination and communication of these traits, a process that is the originator of the star's deification. While with cinematography the possibility of living, mimicking, and blending with the star would be total and immersive, global, and available to the masses, with photography there was already a taste of the burgeoning potential. And while it is true that it was naturally thanks to the democratic and popular impact of the cinema that a whole Olympus of celluloid stars was built, stars who each spectator could faithfully and observantly worship, it is equally true that it was with photography that the possibility of building a media-based legend was born.

The notion of celebrity is bound to such a wide spatial and geographical extension, with such a widespread influence of an individual, that it cannot be imagined as pre-existing the invention of photography. That is to say, that instrument first allowed legends to become famous and, in the meaning used from the 1910 film era onwards, to become stars. Certainly, history and ancient narratives are full of characters who became points of reference for the era they lived in or for those that followed them. In the pre-photography era many men, and a few women, were protagonists, victims, engines of history immortalised by art, architecture, numismatics, literature, and theatre. But can they be called celebrities? Famous, made eternal, engraved in the memory of posterity, yes. Historical figures, men and women of letters, artists, leaders, rulers about whom we now know every aspect of their lives and work thanks to chronicles and testimonies, but who we certainly cannot think of as having enjoyed a following remotely like what we understand as celebrity today. To understand how the phenomenon of celebrity took on a social aspect of new proportions and ways thanks to photography, one need only think of *carte-de-visite* and collector photo albums, the first magazines and individual photos that could be purchased in photographic studios and ateliers from 1839 onwards. Setting aside this

topic for further study[20], here it is sufficient to recall that since Eugène Disdèri's patent of the *carte-de-visite* in 1854, it has been possible for everyone, thanks to very cheap prices, to have small portraits made to send and give as gifts (the sizes were similar to today's business cards) but above all to collect in special photo albums. And knowing that professional photographers soon discovered the business of selling small portraits of famous people of the time (actresses, politicians, intellectuals, artists), one can easily understand how one can link this phenomenon to that of the collecting of figurines and celebrity pictures in general, which still constitutes one of the major sources of income in the celebrity gadget trade. So, it can rightly be said that it was a photographic phenomenon, that of collecting small 19th-century *carte-de-visite*, that started the prehistory of what can be called a kind of image fandom: "Thanks to millions of *carte-de-visits*, the public satiated its hunger for images of its favourites in the fields of dance, theatre or literature"[21]. Before photography, that form of visual cannibalism that has become the hallmark of contemporaneity (and which is of course augmented today by the peep culture that dominates the digital web) was unthinkable. And which, playing with words, should be defined as pop peep culture since the phenomenon of the commodification of images can undoubtedly be labelled as typically pop, and equally pop as the insatiable, greedy need–a sort of unending compulsion–that the mechanism of production-consumption of images brings about daily.

2. The *Carte-de-visite*, Emblem of Peep Culture

The possibility of physically possessing a relic of a legend made image, a possibility that only the new photographic medium could finally grant, the knowledge that that piece of paper constituted an emanation, a filmic trace of the object of one's desire and admiration, triggered a fad (Queen Victoria is said to have possessed no less than 30 albums of *carte-de-visite*) unparalleled in the history of images. Because only replicability and democratic dissemination can constitute the essential characteristics of what we now consider the construction of a media phenomenon that was unthinkable before the photographic age. The truly widespread and massified mythologisation that photography can give to a person's image is countered by a loss of privacy and confidentiality, as their private and public life "is always endowed with a commercial, i.e., advertising, effectiveness. The star

[20] Muzzarelli, 2003.
[21] Ewing, 1991, p. 14.

is a total item of merchandise: there is not an inch of her body, not a shred of her soul, not a memory of her life that cannot be thrown on the market"[22].

To the question: "Did the idea of celebrity exist before the advent of the technological age?" one must answer in the negative. Celebrity is a product, an extension of a person, a phenomenon typical of the cine-photographic era, solely responsible for the media construction of the legend whose life becomes the property of all by virtue of the voyeuristic power of the photographic medium that breaks down the barriers between public and private, as Roland Barthes so beautifully put it: "The age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private".[23] It is no coincidence that right from the first lines of his text Edgar Morin defined modern stars as demigods, thus marking a link with the mythological imagery of all times and at the same time pointing out their different and decisive ontological nature in contemporary times, derived from technology[24]. Indeed, the fact that it is through cine-photographic images that it becomes possible to create a modern legend allows reiterating a constant in this reflection dedicated to the original connections between technological instruments and fashion: it is precisely because they are capable of presenting themselves as a trace of certified reality with which to identify and immerse oneself that photographic and film images allow one to escape into the imaginary and dreams, indispensable dimensions for the birth of the star and the media icon. Injecting magic into our "so-called rational" societies is the fascinating oxymoron that technological media take on.

It is known that photographic portraiture was a fad in the early years of the new patent's diffusion. Portrait studios, specialised professionals and equipment designed for the occasion (such as a sadistic headrest that forced the subject to stand still for the first lengthy photo shoots) popped up everywhere, marking the urban fabric of European and American cities in an unmistakable manner. Being able to see oneself in effigy, an effigy with the licence of truth and a trace of reality, immediately proved to be an irresistible attraction for ordinary people, as well as for the rich and powerful. The whole of Parisian society queued up in front of the studio of Nadar, the most famous portrait photographer of the 19th century. In their midst was Charles Baudelaire, thus even someone who certainly did not refrain from categorically excluding photography from the possibility of being considered on a par with real art. In this sense, it can be said that every

[22] Morin, 1995, pp. 122-124 (my translation).
[23] Barthes, 1980, p. 40 (my translation).
[24] Morin, 1995, p. 23.

single *photographic* man, that is, of the photographic age, was subject to the strong drive for self-celebration, narcissism, and exhibitionism. But if to truly construct a modern myth, a celebrity, one of the essential prerogatives is that of mass dissemination, then we must identify cases and stories in which the multiplication of images, faces, identities, and styles gave rise precisely to something that had the characteristics of a cult, of a religion that was certainly not iconoclastic but rather iconophilic.

Commenting on Heidegger's thoughts, Gianno Vattimo wrote that "the age of the image of the world properly defines modernity as that age in which the world is reduced, or rather, constituted in images"[25]. Guy Debord's *society of the spectacle*[26] and Jean Baudrillard's *consumer society*[27] have described our age as one in which the image is worth more than reality itself and for which mass images, the protagonists and driving forces of spectacle, constitute the main commodity of exchange. Far from apocalyptic tones and albeit suggestive fears of simulacra (now frustratingly ubiquitous), we limit ourselves here to recounting some of the events related to the early phenomenon of technological legend-making in contemporary photography.

3. Cléo de Mérode, the Stereotype of Beauty

The story of Cléopâtre Diane de Mérode, known as Cléo, has the same irresistible appeal as the adventures of heroes by chance, featuring ingenious insights aided somewhat by fate and luck, typical of the early stages of a great revolution such as the one introduced by the photography patent.

Cléo came from the Austrian branch of a noble family with an ancient lineage, originally from the Netherlands. Her mother moved to give birth to her in Paris, severing all ties with that austere past. Cléo was only seven years old when in 1883, thanks to her pleasant face and good looks, she had her first contact with the great Parisian public, playing a small part during a performance at the Opéra[28]. From then on, the theatre would become her stage for art and life, but above all it would be her image, made famous and multipliable by the new technology of photography, that would make her story worthy of being remembered.

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[25] Vattimo, 1989, p. 26 (my translation).
[26] Debord, 1967.
[27] Baudrillard, 1970.
[28] Most of the information on the history of Cléo de Mérode is taken from Corvisier, 2007.

The confluence of her story with photography is recounted in her autobiography[29], written many years later: Cléo recalled (probably through stories told by her mother) an early photo shoot at the Nadar atelier when she was only three years old. It was 1878 and the Nadar atelier, then run mainly by Paul, son of the more famous Felix, known as "the Titian of photography", was still the most renowned portrait studio in Paris (and beyond). For Cléo, the encounter with photography was a turning point: endowed with a photogenic power that did not escape the most skilled professionals of the lens, from then on, her life and her career were marked by a constant intermingling with photography so extensive and consequential that it recalls some of the more significant 19th-century relationships of this type (certainly among them that of the Countess of Castiglione). But while photography was the language that would offer her immortality, it was art in general that saw her as an inspiring muse: she was only ten years old when the painter Georges Cain portrayed her as the protagonist of a romantic canvas. Then, in just a few years, Cléo's body grew, shaped by the theatre and dance on the stage of the Opéra, and in parallel she was portrayed in photographs as she transitioned from a still boyish appearance to a gradual adolescent awareness of her own attractive potential. In the portrait that the photographer Goplo took of her around 1883, one can recognise components of voyeurism and childish mischief typical of Lewis Carroll's better-known portraiture, while in Goplo's portrait of 1887, Benque's in 1889 and Paul Nadar's in 1889, the focus of attention begins to be her beautiful, very long hair, destined soon to become one of the key elements of her fame. These latter portraits were already of a "public" Cléo, an officially distributed Cléo, i.e. of a young and beautiful actress (e.g. Paul Nadar's photo shows her in costume for the ballet of Romeo and Juliet) who was fully aware of the fact that for the work she loved and the ambition she nurtured, that mechanical apparatus, which could capture and make her face and beauty famous, must become a constant support and an indispensable event. Paul Klee described her as "sans doute la plus belle femme que l'on puisse voir".

From then on, from the end of the 19th century until the early 20th century, many people photographed Cléo de Mérode's beauty and gaze, both for stage photos and for numerous studio portraits. In addition to the aforementioned Parisian photographers, Léopold Reutlinger, Napoléon Sarony, Henri Manuel and Charles Ogereau, among others, would also do so, and for all of them immortalising that face would be a way of contributing

[29] De Mérode, 1955.

2.1 Paul Nadar, Portrait of Cléo de Mérode, 1902

to the creation of a modern icon thanks to an unprecedented diffusion and to the visual concretisation of a true public idol.

Indeed, it was in October 1894, in a series of shots by Paul Nadar, that we can see the launch of this founding legend of Cléo de Mérode in the collective imagination of the time[30]. First, there are recurring elements, such as the presence of a thin chain wrapped several times around her slender neck, which functions as a veritable visual fetish: it creates a sort of link of habit and recognition (think also of the ivory bracelets that would become Nancy Cunard's fetish, see next chapter) with Cléo's public image, and at the same time certainly also alluded to a possible symbolic sexual appeal. This necklace would become a highly visible detail in her photographic portraits except when she was wearing high-necked dresses, and seeing it immediately meant identifying the beauty portrayed with that of Cléo. Then of course her hair, which also soon became a distinctive feature of the young dancer's image, both when she wore it free according to Pre-Raphaelite fashion, dark and shoulder-length, and when it was fastened on her head by an oriental tiara (in one of Cléo's best-known photographs), or when it was worn up and parted at the centre (her profile portraits are very reminiscent of those of the Pictorialist Robert Demachy, which in turn imitated the Impressionist model of Degas's ballerinas). Cléo became recognisable by a hairstyle that was transgressive in its own way: while fashion still prescribed combing the hair in such a way as to make it puffy and backcombed, she made her mark with her "flat locks", also known as a "virgin" cut, which divided the locks at the front of her head and braids gathered behind the nape of her neck. But a woman's hairstyle–think of Marilyn Monroe's curls, Brigitte Bardot's backcombing, Twiggy's short hair–is known to be one of the strongest vehicles of the erotic imagination and one of the most powerful instruments of desire.

Again in Paul Nadar's 1894 series, another fundamental element to Cléo's mythography appeared: while photography was the new, modern tool that could ensure the construction and maintenance of a media legend, that same photography could also certify and consolidate her role as a model and testimonial for the great designers of the time, such as first and foremost Jacques Doucet (whose splendid clothes Cléo wore on many postcards), but also Paul Poiret and Pierre Lanvin who designed her stage dresses[31]. Some

[30] The portraits in question are on pages 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22 of the cited essay by Corvisier.

[31] Some of the precise, rich descriptions of the clothes and accessories created for her by the leading French designers of the time, which abound in Cléo's memoirs, can also be found in Pinasa, 2010, pp. 154-155. Cléo's stage clothes are kept at the Musée de la Mode du Textile, Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.

of her physical characteristics, cleverly accentuated by stylists and smartly recurring in the images, even became a fashion trend called *â la Cléo*. This is the case, for example, of her famous, very narrow wasp waist, suitably enhanced by very tightly fitted dresses. This young woman thus succeeded in imposing her image to the point of also becoming a model of fashion and costume among the Frenchwomen of her time, who imitated her and followed her choices in taste and style.

4. Collecting Cléo

Certainly, instrumental in launching her image as a modern fashion icon was the craze for collecting picture postcards used for correspondence: "the image of Cléo soon appeared in the windows of all the stationers and souvenir shops. It is not an exaggeration to say that without this publicity campaign–one of the first in the history of stardom, and perhaps more accidental than intentional–Cléo's fame would have remained circumscribed by the small world of the Opéra, or at most Paris, for a longer period of time".[32] Undoubtedly modern, and capable of expanding the legend of a new, more conscious female freedom, Cléo was naturally ambitious and willing to do anything to remain visible. This was proven by her strength in bearing the scandals that must involve any self-respecting diva. She had to accept the weight of the spotlight just as she had accepted that her image could be sold as a commodity to an audience of onlookers, and she knew that this would require dealing with gossip and slander. When the sculptor Alexandre Falguiére exhibited his famous *Danseuse* at the Salon du Printemps in 1896 (modelled on a young girl who posed for him without anything on), everyone recognised Cléo's real face in the delicate facial features. But could the young dancer, who had already become a legend of elegance thanks to her pure, angelic face, really have posed nude as a model in an attitude considered by her contemporaries to be so provocative and sensual? Intelligently handling the media power of gossip, both Cléo and Falguière issued a few denials, which however never proved very convincing and were instead so contradictory that they had the obvious effect of increasing the controversial Opéra dancer's disruptive fame.

[32] Rizzatti, 1970, p. 64 (my translation).

2.2 Léopold Reutlinger, Cléo de Mérode in *Les Danses Javanaises*, 1905 c.

The same goes for her cleverly mischievous relationship with King Leopold II of Belgium, who fell in love with her to the point of showering her with gifts and tributes and thus making himself an easy laughingstock for French satire and humour. During a trip to America that Cléo made in those years, all those dynamics of brilliant stardom that she indeed symbolised (and which would almost literally reappear in Nancy Cunard) were evident: "As the steamer pulled into New York, journalists crowded around waiting for her, cameras snapping pictures: the diva, all in white, 'in a lace dress, mohair cape, lace hat adorned with ribbons' had to answer a barrage of questions before she even disembarked"[33]. This recalls so many scenes reminiscent of a Roman *dolce vita*[34]. In New York, Cléo was honoured by great figures from the worlds of costume and show business such as William Randolph Hearst, and on her return, she was showered with a myriad of requests for work and invitations. "Gossip, a sort of mischievous and curious chatter about the lives of famous people, is an ancient custom, a kind of ancestral necessity for mankind linked to the need to know the vices and virtues of public figures"[35]. However, these episodes naturally only made her even more famous and talked about, and her face even more identifiable and recognisable, even when she was portrayed in the transformist guise in which photographers immortalised her as she posed for *Thaïs*, for the ballet *Les Danses javanaises*, for *les Danses cambodgiennes* (performed for the 1900 Paris World's Fair, of which Cléo seems to have been the main attraction) and for *les Danses de Pompéi*. Or as she impersonated a *nubienne* from *Faust*, or a character from the ballet *Lorenza* or *Phryné* with a wisdom and confidence worthy of a true proto-top model. Javanese dance was one of Cléo's strokes of genius: even though she had never been to the East, to take advantage of the wave of myth and exotic fashion that was invading the collective imagination of the time she studied its traditional movements by watching short films on Cambodian sacred dances. She thus devised her own very personal vision of Javanese dance, which also became very famous in the form of films projected in theatres where her somewhat mechanical and cold movements followed one another in rapid succession on the screen[36].

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[33] Rizzatti, 1970, p. 65 (my translation).

[34] A comprehensive and rich survey of the Dolce Vita phenomenon was conducted by Magistà, 2007. On the subject and its tangencies with the fashion system see also Muzzarelli (ed.), 2010; for gossip and fashion see pp. 105-111.

[35] Muzzarelli, 2009, p. 86 (my translation).

[36] From 1912-1913 the Famous Players film production company (the future Paramount) of Adolph Zukor, Daniel Frohman and Edwin S. Porter exploited the

Cléo's face was everywhere. It became a stereotype, a code that functioned as a mass identity fostered by the voyeurism typical of contemporaneity, and which manifested itself in the morbid, continuous interest that the masses have in stars[37]. When the Parisian magazine «Illustration» promoted the publication of a sort of album of national beauties, collecting images of about 130 female artists, Cléo's face turned out to be the most popular: about 7,000 people voted for their favourite celebrity and she prevailed over such legends as Bella Otero, Sarah Bernhardt, and Cécil Sorel.

5. The Dawn of Pop Stardom

To this point, this is the story of a beautiful young woman who gave herself over to the lens of photographers and the brush of artists to exhibit and promote her talents. The real pioneering element in Cléo's history lies not so much in having offered her face and body first and foremost to great and famous artists like the aforementioned Nadar and Falguière, other famous portrait photographers such as Léopold Reutlinger (with whom she would have an almost exclusive relationship for years), then Henri Toulouse-Lautrec (who dedicated a *Folie Berger* billboard to her by drawing her in a white tutu) and the painter Giovanni Boldini (who in 1901 portrayed her in the well-known painting in shades of grey). Instead, the pioneering element lies in the fact that she did not then disdain a true popular and mass commodification of her status of icon consolidated by art, a translation that was in fact "degraded" (because it was multiplied and vulgarised), but at the same time very powerful in terms of media effectiveness. It was almost as if Cléo had anticipated the power of the artwork gadgets that now travelled in the pockets of all the world's cultural tourists, or even the Warholian pop philosophy of the world as a department store where everything is saleable, marketable, cannibalisable.

Little by little, in fact, images of Cléo, the icon-Cléo, began to travel on cigar and cigarette boxes, calendars, postcards, *carte-de-visite* albums and other publicity objects in a true iconic triumph, a modern media idolatry that allowed everyone to possess her image, her public identity. Her life belonged to an anonymous public of whom Cléo knew nothing and who knew everything about her. The portraits of Reutlinger above all, but also of the other photographers who had immortalised her, began to be reprinted

popularity of theatre actors in films that were successful because they transferred theatre stars into the new cinematic language.

[37] Muzzarelli, 2009, pp. 86-115.

2.3 Léopold Reutlinger, Portrait of Cléo de Mérode, 1901

in postcards and albums thanks to new mechanical reproduction techniques, where they were retouched, coloured, mounted with other images, framed in free associations not always approved by her, demonstrating that her own public identity eluded her and became the domain of others. And it is interesting to note that even Boldini's famous portrait was commissioned by a gallery owner who did not even know Cléo in person, but who naturally knew of her fame and her face, which had become a successful commodity.

Then of course the same photos, so widely and variously disseminated, became the inspiration for yet other works, paintings, drawings, and sculptures, which used the image of Cléo as a stereotype of standardised beauty. "A star's way of life is in itself merchandise", argued Morin, who went on to attribute to the "the prodigious marketability of dreams, a raw material as free and plastic as the wind, which needs only to be formulated and standardized to correspond to the fundamental archetypes of the imagination" the responsibility for having constructed stardom thanks to mass technological tools[38]. In the images she delivers to public voyeurism, the French dancer always appears restrained, basically impassive, almost inert, passive. She knows she is pleasing to the eye, without any real, human passion or excess, just film and surface narcissistically adorned with images. She knows that she is a decorative element, a mask, and the substantial coolness that emanates from her portraits is perfect for the iconisation-merchandising process she has offered herself to. "The archetypal beauty of the star recalls the sacred hieraticity of the mask": the mask must make her recognisable at all times and her archetypal identity must always transcend "her poses and metamorphoses"[39]. Canonical beauty and success bind her to an idea of herself in which, as Corvisier says, "l'icône a rattrappé la femme"[40].

In fact, in her memoirs Cléo would recount this process of massification of her own image as having occurred without her direct responsibility and outside her control. Even if this was the case, she certainly owed her immortality to that liberal use of her icon, and in any case her triumphant entry into legend. In her own words, a mix of pride and irritation: "Dès que le critique commencèrent à me couvrir de fleurs et les courriéristes à me nommer presque journellement, je reçus des invitations à poser chez les photographes cotés…. Des gens copièrent sans scupule les meilleures photo en tirèrent des cartes postales à l'infini. Ces cartes se répandirent un peu

[38] Morin, 1995, pp. 124-126 (my translation).
[39] Morin, 1995, pp. 61 and 71 (my translation).
[40] Corvisier, 2007, p. 106.