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Cartomania: Sensation, Celebrity, and the Democratized Portrait

RACHEL TEUKOLSKY

Sensation novels have attracted much attention from literary scholars for their lurid plotlines and assorted casts of social climbers, bigamists, disinheritors, and murderesses. Yet sensationalism in the 1860s was not limited to the literary sphere; Victorian critics perceived the phenomenon to occur across the cultural spectrum, from stage melodramas (to which the term was first applied) to any person or event drawing a crowd—tightrope walkers, trapeze artists, criminals, or even paintings and photographs. Generated within the echo chamber of Victorian periodical writing, “sensation” was a fashionable insult hurled by critics and satirists at any spectacle or object that cultivated novelty.

In this essay, I seek to expand our understanding of sensation by looking to an aspect of its visual culture—specifically, the vogue for cartes-de-visite that exploded onto the cultural scene at exactly the same moment that sensation did, in the early 1860s. Known as “cartomania,” the cartes-de-visite craze inspired the creation and collection of millions of small photographic portraits. The idea of a “mania”

ABSTRACT: “Sensation” in the early 1860s was more than just a series of scandalous novels. Critics hurled the insult at any object that courted novelty, from mouthwash to photographs. This essay examines an aspect of sensation’s visual culture in “cartomania,” the craze for cartes-de-visite that inspired the creation and collection of millions of small photographic portraits. The carte introduced a new kind of celebrity, one based on image, notoriety, and a fleeting kind of fame familiar to us from today’s tabloid culture. The greatest sensations were generated by cartes of questionable women—actresses, courtesans, and female criminals. Like the sensation novel, the carte upended traditional divides of class and gender by foregrounding powerful women of dubious backgrounds.

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seems appropriate to the sensation moment, with its connotations of a fast-moving trend both poised on the cutting edge of modernity and fated for quick obsolescence. Some 300 to 400 million cartes were sold in England every year from 1861–67, before their popularity began to wane in favor of other photographic products (Darrah 4).

A novel is, of course, a different object from a photograph. Yet here I will trace some of the qualities that sensation novels and cartes-de-visite were seen to share, especially their common tendency to trouble traditional divides of class and gender. This analysis will also seek to revise a key critical commonplace about sensation in which it is described as a bodily effect, an agitated physiological response modeled by Victorian characters and then mimicked by breathless readers or spectators. Sensation novels “preach[ed] to the nerves,” in H. L. Mansel’s memorable 1863 formulation (482); more than a century later, D. A. Miller similarly sees the genre “address[ing] itself primarily to the sympathetic nervous system, where it grounds its characteristic adrenalin effects: accelerated heart rate and respiration, increased blood pressure, . . . etc.” (107).

While many modern scholars echo Victorian rhetoric, here I question whether the physiological effects of sensation can ever truly be separated from their discursive and ideological constructions. To cast sensation as merely corporeal, as the response of a lone perceiver’s body to a stimulating text or event, misses the way that the phenomenon emerged out of an inherently group-oriented mass culture that was marketed and packaged by both critics and consumers. This analysis aims to change how we think about sensation—not just as a series of illicit bodily effects, with their related sense of lurking criminality, but also as a series of *image* effects, a form of visuality associated with a new, problematic female celebrity. Women on view in cartes-de-visite became sensations in one of the word’s other senses—as bestsellers, hot properties marketed in legitimate capitalist enterprises. Of course, these female spectacles were not exactly incorporeal. In fact, they invited physiological response, as a woman’s body could be bought and sold and handled in card format. But the image component of this equation added an element of fantasy, a web of socially-constructed visual meanings that filtered and shaped the physical effects of perception. This imagery suggests the power of new media, and of mediation itself, in creating the sensation phenomenon.

First, a brief account of some of the technological changes that inspired the cartomania craze. Before the carte, the most popular kind

of photograph had been the daguerreotype, an expensive, one-of-a-kind image printed on luminous reflective metal and contained in a decorative case. In the 1850s a new collodion process, combined with the development of multi-lens cameras, allowed photographs to be printed on paper in multiple copies. By 1860, all of the necessary photographic equipment—papers, lenses, chemicals, studio props—were being manufactured on a large scale, leading to photography’s massive commercialization and standardization. These shifts led to the explosive growth in cartes-de-visite. The carte itself was a small photo, usually a portrait, mounted on a card of approximately two-and-a-half by four inches. Unlike the daguerreotype, which was precious and unique, the carte-de-visite was cheap, easily reproduced, and existed in multiple copies. Portable and highly collectible, the carte epitomized a new kind of reproducibility and circulatability in the nineteenth century.

For many critics in the 1860s, the carte-de-visite’s most salient aspect was its democratization of portraiture, which had previously been a privilege of the wealthy. The *Photographic News* wrote in 1861, “Photographic portraiture . . . has . . . swept away many of the illiberal distinctions of rank and wealth, so that the poor man . . . can command as perfect a lifelike portrait of his wife or child as Sir Thomas Lawrence painted for the most distinguished sovereigns of Europe” (qtd. in Gernsheim 56). Some critics found this leveling in the visual sphere to be amusing, but also troubling, as women and men might appear in poses and with props above their wonted station. An 1863 essay mocked “Mrs. Jones” and “Miss Brown” for posing themselves in front of grand, aristocratic backdrops with a “park-like pleasure-ground” and a “lake-like prospect,” even though “[their] belongings and surroundings don’t warrant more than a little back-garden big enough to grow a few crocuses” (Wynter, “Photographic” 149). Cartes borrowed from the tradition of painted portraits, often using luxurious furnishings and painted backdrops that opened out onto imaginary properties. The carte-de-visite thus raised anxieties about the fakery of social class; gentility itself might ultimately turn out to be a combination of costumes and stage properties that could easily be simulated. Anxieties about the carte’s possible duplicity resonate with the recurring plotlines in sensation fiction in which criminals counterfeit the appearance of respectability, or commoners impersonate more genteel characters. Like the sensation novel, the photographic carte also produced class confusion surrounding persons and things.

The carte-de-visite often entailed an act of self-portraiture. Victorians had cartes made of themselves and then distributed them to friends, to be collected in albums and pored over during visiting hours. Geoffrey Batchen suggests that this vast, formulaic self-picturing has led modern art historians to disparage the carte-de-visite. Cartes, he writes, perhaps “too obediently embody the sensibilities, economic ambitions, and political self-understandings of the middle class”; in this sense, says Batchen, they might be said to represent “capitalism incarnate” (81).

Yet the carte-de-visite, for Victorian commentators, was just as notable for depicting celebrities beyond the intimate circle of family and friends. “Cartomania” named the craze for collecting cartes of people one didn’t know, famous or notorious public figures who constellated the world of gossip and conversation. The photo album on the drawing-room table served as a conversation piece for the pictures of celebrities it contained, and so mediated between the parlor and the public sphere. A critic in the *Saturday Review* described the parlor photo album as “at once a mild form of hero-worship and an illustrated book of genealogy. It does duty for a living hagiology, and it will supersede the first leaf of the Family Bible” (“Lord Derby’s Carte” 446). The comparison of photo album to family Bible neatly and ironically characterizes the way that carte-de-visite portraits of public figures were creating a new kind of commercialized celebrity, a version of secularized star worship that had previously been reserved for notables in the religious sphere.

The mass-produced portrait found its perfect display venue in the photographic shop window, which attracted crowds eager to see cartes of politicians, priests, actresses, and courtesans (fig. 1).¹ Critics observed how these so-called “street portrait galleries” were admirably democratic; as one wrote, “here . . . social equality is carried to its utmost limit” (Wynter, “Cartes-de-visite” 135). Commentators dwelled especially on the way that shop windows or parlor albums juxtaposed cartes of mismatched celebrities. Descriptions of these odd mixtures are both a humorous cliché and a staple of cultural commentary in the early 1860s. Catholic bishops might appear cheek-by-jowl with evangelical preachers, or respected politicians alongside actresses and criminals. In the carte-de-visite album, writes the *Saturday Review*, “the ballet and the pulpit, the senate and the prize-ring, the *haut-monde* and the *demi-monde* are alike laid under contribution for portraits” (“Lord Derby’s Carte” 446). The



Fig. 1. Henry W. Taunt, “Henry Taunt’s shop in Oxford,” c. 1874–94. Reproduced by permission of English Heritage.

rigidly divided and stratified Victorian social world became an alarming jumble in the photographic shop window or album; both offered visions of a radically heterogeneous and mixed society.

In the “startling combinations” enabled by the cartes (“Cartes-de-Visite” 307), social mixing was often allegorized through insinuations of women’s sexual sin or impropriety. Carte-de-visite displays became especially sensational when they placed images of respectable gentlemen next to those of improper women. The 1864 poem “SENSATION! A SATIRE” complains of “A sweet republic, where ’tis all the same— / Virtue or vice, or good, or doubtful fame. / . . . Coarse ‘Skittles’ hangs beside a Spurgeon ‘carte,’ / With stare, unblushing, makes the decent start. / These are thy freaks, SENSATION!” (lines 195–201). Charles Haddon Spurgeon was a noted British Baptist preacher, while “Skittles” was the nickname of Catherine Walters, a famous and successful courtesan known for her keen fashion sense and her affairs with powerful British men. Walters’s scandalous image was invoked ubiquitously in the early 1860s, in discussions of both cartes-de-visite and sensation novels—sometimes at the same time. As one reviewer of novels wrote in 1863: “It is an unsatisfactory sign of the time when the photograph of an impudent courtesan [sic] is to be found among those



Fig. 2. Sergei Levitsky, carte-de-visite of Catherine or Clara Walters, alias “Skittles,” c. 1859–64. Courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library.

of statesmen and bishops, and sells better than any of them; . . . [and] when a novelist in search of a sensation finds what he needs in this direction” (“Modern Novel” 439).

Some even accused Walters’s photographers of making pornography (“Photography” 87). Yet cartes of Walters in circulation today show a woman posed in costumes that are form-fitting but not too salacious (fig. 2), suggesting that the overheated descriptions of her picture were more rhetorical than literal. Walters’s recurring role in both sensational and photographic commentary speaks to more than just Victorian prudery. The courtesan or improper woman, shamelessly on view and up for sale, became a perfect metaphor for the rise of commercialism itself, as it seemed that the only values that mattered were those of buying and selling—a cash nexus that implied the disintegration of more traditional channels of power.

While this essay focuses largely on photography rather than novels, it’s worth pointing out that Walters’s story parallels that of Lady Audley in M. E. Braddon’s 1862 sensation novel *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Both women are seen as having illicit power over respectable, wealthy men.

Walters uses her sexual wiles to procure male patrons and even gets one to run away with her to America, while Lucy Graham entices kindly Lord Audley to fall in love with and marry her so that she can become a “Lady.” Of course, as we learn in the novel, she’s also a bigamist who is already married to another, less lordly man. Lady Audley uses her beauty to impersonate a high-class woman; the novel emphasizes the visual aspect of her persona by lavishing attention on her portrait, which is painted in a garish, Pre-Raphaelite style. The painting itself becomes a plot point when it enables her first husband to recognize her true identity. The visual culture of sensation, then, is much concerned with the ways in which female spectacle, female sexuality, and female celebrity enabled women to gain power in ways that were unsanctioned by more traditional gender norms.

The alarmist responses to Walters’s photographic popularity suggest that the display of the female body, while seeming to mute the female figure into a disempowered and objectified visual commodity, in fact intimated to Victorian viewers a kind of sexual license and cultural dominance. A woman on view might claim an aggressive, illicit power over her spectators; she was, in a sense, both purchaser and purchased.

The power bestowed by the *carte* heralded the arrival of a new kind of celebrity, one based on image, notoriety, and a fleeting kind of fame, familiar to us from today’s tabloid culture. “No man, or woman either, knows but that some accident may elevate them to the position of the hero of the hour, and send up the value of their countenances to a degree they never dreamed of” (Wynter, “Cartes-de-visite” 135). Unlike the English hierarchies of social class or politics, the *carte* system of value depended only upon a fame “of the hour”; by this free-market standard, a courtesan might be “worth” just as much as a bishop. In the sensational economy of the *carte*, image was everything—especially the erotic or sexualized image of morally questionable women. A *carte*’s value was assigned only by its exchange value on the capitalist market, which equalized and standardized all figures within the image while also emptying it of a more authentic, unique meaning.

In a longer version of this essay, I argue that many of sensation’s objects, both novels and photographs, offered a mixed array of effects from both high and low culture. These items are both titillating *and* aesthetic, art forms that are themselves unmoored from traditional understandings of value. For example, as I have discussed elsewhere,



Fig. 3. Camille Silvy, carte-de-visite of Adelina Patti as Harriet in Friedrich von Flotow's opera *Martha*, 1861. Bequeathed by Guy Little. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

reviewers of Wilkie Collins's 1861 sensation novel *The Woman in White* were flummoxed by the novel's combination of shocking, melodramatic elements with an innovative and intricate plot structure; the novel thus served as a controversial site for debating what constituted high art versus mere entertainment (Teukolsky 431–32). These mixed effects of high and low are also evident in certain cartes-de-visite, such as those of female opera stars. Female opera cartes epitomize sensational photographs with their fleeting popularity and frank complicity with theatrical female display. Yet some of these opera cartes also cultivate an aura of fine art, a result of photography's similarly vexed status as a mode of visual representation.

Camille Silvy, often considered the greatest carte portraitist, made his reputation in England by photographing actresses and opera singers.² His carte-de-visite portraits of the opera star Adelina Patti in the early 1860s sold more than 20,000 copies (Wynter, "Cartes-de-visite" 135). An arresting 1861 photograph of Patti cultivates aspects of both gentility and sensation (fig. 3). She wears an elaborate dress like those seen in cartes of aristocratic ladies, but she also appears among stage props that include a fake tree, a painted backdrop of a forest, and a



Fig. 4. Camille Silvy, carte-de-visite of Rosa Csillag as Orfeo, 1860, albumen print, 184 × 117 mm. Private collection, Paris.

taxidermied dog. Her open mouth and flirtatious pose imply that she is onstage, mid-aria, yet the scene has clearly been staged in the photographer's studio. Silvy's 1860 carte of Rosa Csillag as Orfeo similarly offers both high-art and sensational cues (fig. 4). Csillag bears all the familiar tokens of Orpheus, mythical master of music, with her lyre, toga, and crowning laurel. The *mise-en-scène* offers ruined arches and broken pillars—ruins that speak less of classical Greece than of more recent, neoclassical Old Master paintings, as well as a Romantic aesthetic privileging the fragment. Yet these high-art signifiers gain a frisson in the figure of Orpheus herself, a woman performing a man's role, combining a masculine toga with revealing tights and ballerina's slippers.

Both of these cartes point to the special role played by actresses in generating new forms of Victorian celebrity. While photographic portraits as a genre always entail some form of acting or performance, these images literalize and amplify that fact, with details of costume and pose creating a fantastical, desirable, and collectible persona.

After 1862 Camille Silvy became the major portraitist of the British upper classes. He was known especially for his cartes of women



Fig. 5. John J. E. Mayall, carte-de-visite of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, 1861. Bequeathed by Guy Little. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

in exquisite gowns, posed in rooms lavishly decorated with furniture, tapestries, and art objects.³ The sensational photograph, then, might be seen as one version of a cultural power or celebrity that could also coincide with more traditional forms of social power—a kind of “iconic visibility” (Hearn 24).⁴ At the apex of sensation’s intersection with the celebrity carte-de-visite, iconic visibility in the nineteenth century was epitomized, I want to suggest, by photographs of Queen Victoria (fig. 5). The staid queen, appearing in demure and highly respectable poses with her husband and children, might seem the opposite of the sensational women discussed in this essay. Yet Queen Victoria, focused under the glare of a relentless publicity, is utterly imbricated in the sensation moment as her photograph becomes the consummate collectible, bought, sold, and vastly circulated. The cartomania craze in England was in fact touched off in 1860 when the photographer J. J. E. Mayall marketed his “Royal Album” depicting the queen, Prince Albert, and their children; Mayall sold 60,000 sets in Great Britain, the colonies, and the United States (Darrah 6). Queen Victoria was herself an enthusiastic cartes collector and possessor of some thirty-six albums (Wichard and Wichard 36).

While cartes of the queen would seem straightforward and uncontroversial to most, some critics objected to Victoria’s depiction in

carte-de-visite form, arguing that her humble and too-real appearance as a bourgeois wife and mother contravened her elevated royal status. The punctum of realistic detail in the photograph deflated the more flattering generalities of a painted portrait, creating what some deemed “slanders upon the Royal Race” (Wynter, “Photographic” 149). The carte version of the queen was accused of taking “familiarities” and committing “sin[s] against propriety”—thus exemplifying a problematic female display reminiscent of sensational indecorum (149).⁵ Yet the photographic humanization of Victoria into a real body also occurred alongside her dematerialization into an image. As Geoffrey Batchen writes, the queen loses her royal authenticity when she becomes “visually equivalent to her subjects (who owned cartes of themselves in the same basic pose and studio setting). . . . No longer having a unique existence in time and space, she is only valued as and through reproduction. She becomes image, an imitation of herself, a ghostly ideological construct” (90). Interestingly, this dematerialization is itself the very stuff of celebrity, feeding into a rage for royalty that would develop into Britain’s ravenous tabloid culture.

Yet I would not go so far as Batchen in stressing the ghostliness of these photographs. The very different kinds of female celebrities I have discussed here are scandalous not only for their equalization in the carte—courtesan alongside queen—but also for the very impertinence of the photographic medium, which offered up realistic details about female bodies in a way that painted portraits did not. One of the nineteenth century’s most famous photographic theorists, Oliver Wendell Holmes, writes in “The Stereoscope and the Stereograph” (1859) of the way that photographs use light to capture an object’s “membranes,” “visible films” (72), or “skins” (81). (Holmes’s theory was recapitulated in the twentieth century by André Bazin, who likened photography’s powerful realism to the “molding” of a death mask [12].) From this perspective, a photographic portrait is not the mere mute objectification of a person, but rather a lingering engagement with that person’s intimate, unique surfaces, a literal touching of the body with light. This idea might help to explain why the photographic portrait seemed scandalous to some critics in the 1860s, especially when it was depicting the female body. Even though Queen Victoria’s portraits seem stubbornly tame, they became sensational, even sexualized, in photographic form: the medium itself was touching her. The carte thus offered a two-way street between sensation and perception, between the sitter’s body and the

viewer's body—mediated by a two-dimensional “skin,” to be collected and possessed in hand-sized cards easily touched or passed around. Unlike a painting or even a larger-sized print, the *carte* offered a unique experience of tactility and proximity, an im-mediacy whose tantalizing combination of presence and absence has become a familiar component of modern celebrity (Marcus 1000).

My analysis here diverges from scholars of nineteenth-century photography like Batchen and like Jonathan Crary, who describe an idea of Victorian new media that tends toward postmodern abstraction and dematerialization. Crary argues that nineteenth-century nerve scientists divided vision from touch, which allowed for the invention of illusionistic technologies (67–96); yet Crary's postmodern sensibility seems slightly anachronistic when considering the sensationalist *carte*, which partook of *both* the body and its mediated, simulated presence.

Ultimately, *cartes-de-visite*, like sensationalism itself, signified a complicated and mixed political legacy. Just as sensation novels were attacked for being read by both servants and their masters, so too were *cartes-de-visite* controversial for equalizing the images of politicians and prostitutes. Mass photography invited a language of democratization, both condemning and celebratory, that reflected broader political concerns in advance of the 1867 Reform Bill. The *carte* album and shop window were sites for the configuration of a new kind of media commons, an archive of faces, bodies, and styles—whose ominous analogue would later be found in the police files and mug shots of the 1880s.

Sensational photographs offered women, in particular, a powerful and controversial form of iconic visibility. Even while sitters usually only earned a single sum for the sale of their *cartes* (photographers and pirates pocketed most of the profits) (North 187), women did gain a cultural power through their image's commercial success. This kind of empowerment, I would emphasize, is an ambivalent one at best. After all, women were being celebrated and commercialized for their surface appearances, for a look or fashion that was often fleeting and hypersexualized. Even Queen Victoria's case is not easily parsed, as her undeniable cultural power emerged from her savvy manipulation of image culture combined with her firm adherence to traditional Victorian gender norms. These questions persist today, when a woman's success in an image-dominated culture might generate a financial windfall and cultural influence, but also might attract less desirable forms of public attention such as objectification or shaming. We can,

in fact, recognize many new-media descendants of *carte-de-visite* culture today—in photographic selfies captured on hand-sized devices, in celebrities “of the hour” who are famous for reasons hard to define, and in queens and porn stars appearing side-by-side in the same tabloid magazines. The sensations of our own day would seem to have had their inaugural moment in the now-faded print items of a previous era, the sensational new media of an older age.

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NOTES

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1. For a typical description of the photographic shop window, see “Looking in at Shop Windows” 42.

2. Darrah praises Silvy as the greatest of the Victorian *carte* portraitists (26). Hacking provides an account of Silvy’s involvement with theater photography.

3. For details of Silvy’s career, see Haworth-Booth.

4. Hearn uses this phrase to describe today’s celebrity culture, but her term also seems apt to characterize the sensation moment.

5. Press attacks on royal photographs are described in further detail in Plunkett 175–81.

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