D-cups, groin-guards & Supermodels: Writing the body into history

by Beth Spencer

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Terry Goldie has responded to this article.

This essay circulates around two images, from two recently published books: Saint Agatha’s breasts on a plate, reproduced in Marilyn Yalom’s A History of the Breast, and Christ’s erection, from a book by George L. Hersey called The Evolution of Allure: Sexual Selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk.

Or I should say Christ’s alleged erection; for I’m not entirely convinced that the suspicious looking bulge under the drapery in Maerten van Heemskerk’s sixteenth-century painting Ecce Homo (Man of Sorrows), actually is an erection, although it’s certainly, well, a dick. I suppose if Christ was God made man then he had to have one; and according to a book cited by George Hersey (Leo Steinberg’s The Sexuality of Christ), there was quite a genre of such images in Christian art at one time. For to be the perfectly sinless man, Christ had also to be subject to the usual fleshly temptations in the first place. Or as Hersey puts it: “What is the virtue in renouncing a temptation that is not felt?”

Hersey’s book explores the role of Western figure art in recent human evolution, and there was something about this fleshy human paradox of the risen Christ exhibiting his wounded body as a mark of both strength and vulnerability, activity and passivity, perfection and potential imperfection, that seemed an appropriate icon.

It is impossible, after all, to control for everything; or to control everything.

The second image I have chosen refers to the early Christian martyr Saint Agatha, who was tortured for her faith by having her breasts cut off. A painting by the seventeenth-century artist Francisco de Zurbaran, reproduced in Marilyn Yalom’s A History of the Breast, shows her protectively carrying her severed breasts, beautiful and bloodless, on a plate.

This image evokes for me something of Yalom’s book because in her search for the “real” breast underneath the historical overlay of patriarchal images and appropriations, it’s as if she detaches it from the rest of the body, serving it up in neat methodical slices. Each garnished with a specific flavouring: sacred for the fifteenth-century, erotic for the sixteenth, domestic in the seventeenth, political from the eighteenth-century, then psychological, commercial and medical ...

The “natural” breast (as opposed to the cultural meanings inscribed on and within it) thus becomes a kind of goal, the pristine thing of great value, the unjustly contested object. And if we can strip away all the historical debris and marks of usage (the muddy hand prints of men), we can uncover the truth about who has legitimate ownership over it, and the right to define its uses and pleasures.

But by locating the truth about breasts in women’s own feelings about them — as if women’s attitudes are somehow more normal, more real, less tainted by culture — the effect is arguably only to further enmesh women within the dichotomies of the period of western history that she explores. That is, to reinvoke the traditional opposition between nature and culture, with women on the nature side.

The emphasis on visual imagery or art history (as opposed to the body as constructed within language), and her method of reading paintings as if each has a single “clear message”, as tracts illustrating or furthering the dominant view, strengthens the workings of this division between the body as cultural surface, and the real (felt or lived) body.

Within this paradigm and method, women are predominantly represented in the book as objects of the male gaze (passive victims or consumers), or possessors of subjective and largely unrecorded feelings about breasts. Positioned therefore not just as outside of power (subject to it: “powerless”), but almost (until recently) as irrelevant to the historical process. For how can it be possible to make any sense of or chart a history of the breast when such a large piece of the puzzle is missing, unless it isn’t seen as that important anyway?

Women’s views, in this analysis, are private history — regrettably lost but, as fairly universal and constant, not affecting in any way by their absence our reading of public history, the history of movement and social change.

There’s a story going around that goes something like this: a famous writer agrees to meet a long-term fan, and when she does she can’t help but notice her companion’s face drop. They soon get over this initial awkwardness and end up happily discussing various issues about the author’s work — mother-daughter relationships, love and sex and so on. But finally the author can’t resist asking what it was about her that was such a disappointment. The fan blushes, then confesses: “Well, I thought you’d have bigger breasts.”

In a wonderfully evocative paper called “The Teacher’s Breasts”, the American critic Jane Gallop points to the distinction between “breasts” (plural) and “the breast.” To speak of one in relation to women evokes the maternal, the breast as the symbol of nurture; to speak of (or gesture towards, or touch) two, however, is more immediately and explicitly sexual, and introduces a whole new and unpredictable range of meanings and problems.

Fundamental to Yalom’s book is a question posed in her introduction. “Who owns the breast?” she asks, presenting a list of candidates: the child, the lover, the artist, the fashion arbiter, the clothing industry, the religious and moral judges, the law, the doctor, the plastic surgeon, the pornographer … Or “does it belong to the woman for whom breasts are parts of her own body?”

But in what sense do I (or could I ever) “own” my breasts or any part of my body unless it could be said that I have some kind of existence over and above, or apart, from it? That is: except within the framework of the old mind/body split. (Unlike Saint Agatha I could carry my breasts forever around on a plate, defying anyone to try to take them from me again.)

And if the relationship between “the breast” and “breasts” is (as Gallop suggests) like that between the phallus and the penis, does having the actual fleshy bit give you an exclusive right (or more of a right) to define the way that particular bit functions as a cultural or symbolic object?
Without our bodies we have no social existence, without others there is no self, and without the personal there is no public.

The problem with Yalom’s use of the language of individual rights and ownership is that it is inadequate to deal with the differences between men and women’s bodies — in particular, the specific reproductive and nursing capabilities of women (which is ironic in a book about breasts); as well as the fact that we don’t begin life as adults, or even as individuals.

For insofar as “the breast” signifies for all of us a time in our personal histories when the boundaries between self and other were not just blurred, but subjectively non-existent, where does breast-milk (for instance) fit into this schema of ownership?

It’s a bit like the old saying that all men, rich and poor, are equally free to sleep under bridges. After all, how meaningful is it really to suggest that when the child asserts what (it thinks) are its rights to the breast by crying, that the mother has the same “right” as anyone else to ignore it?

* * *

Jane Gallop isn’t mentioned in Yalom’s book. Nor Luce Irigaray, or Elizabeth Grosz or a whole host of recent feminist theorists of the body.

She has, on the other hand, collected together an impressive array of historical information, as well as some wonderful images from contemporary artists.

However I found it strange to have Annie Sprinkle’s (fabulous) “Bosom Ballet” featured on the cover of a book that pushes a fairly classic pro-censorship line on pornography. Sprinkle may be a self-styled “Post-Porn Feminist”, but she’s certainly not an anti-porn one, having for many years herself starred in Triple-X-rated movies.

But then, Yalom does have what I call the “but” technique down to a fine art. The few times she mentions post-structuralist theories she somehow manages to both mention and ignore them at the same time, or co-opt them for a completely different purpose. Thus after lamenting for a page how women get taken in by fashions created by men, she suddenly pops in a little mention of Michel Foucault (enough, miraculously, to earn him a place in the index even though only two words of his are actually quoted, and the citation is via an article by another writer).

She’s a bit like a gracious dinner party host, where the post-modern guests are invited along and acknowledged, but not allowed to speak.

Even when practised in a thoroughly nice way, when it becomes an urge to resolve differences into a unifying overview (a non-adversarial wish perhaps, a gesture of womanly solidarity), the “but” technique can very neatly co-opt, defuse, cannibalise and disempower. It includes and excludes at the same time.

The dinner party version of her chapter on “The Commercialised Breast” would go a little like this:

Oh dear, look sir, sigh, women are so manipulated by fashions created by men! But then, (noddling down the table to Monsieur Foucault) we mustn’t just see women as “docile bodies” after all, must we?

(No we mustn’t! but we do.)

After all, there are those women who quite deliberately sell their breasts, either for sex or for wet-nursing ...

(And, now, now, stop tapping your plate, Monsieur Lacan, you’ll get your four words in chapter five.)

Where can I fit myself in a text like this? How can I feel at home with such over-zealous housework?

Or to mix my metaphors again: when she clamours laboriously up one side of a theory, and then immediately goes “but”, and slides down the other side, I’m left with nothing to grab onto. I find her work difficult to praise (obviously), but even harder to criticise.

And not just because it’s such a slippery text, but because within the gaps and slippages, despite the amused tone and wry aside, there often seems a fair amount of rage and pain, and at times a certain vulnerability or defensiveness which her theoretical underpinnings (or lack of them) leave her unable to express or to deal with. Leaving her caught in the contradictions between her faith in American market liberalism (in which implants, for instance, become finally just another choice now available to women as a result of medical progress) and the despair she feels at the constant “assault” on women of commercial images of perfect breasts.

Or caught, perhaps, between her role as a mother and a part of the history she writes about, and her role as historian and observer. Thus when she speaks about breast-feeding as now “back in fashion” after “a generation of bottle-feeders”, I wonder what this means for her. Likewise, when five of the close family members she thanks in her acknowledgments are doctors and psychologists, how might this affect her (rather benign) interpretation of the role of medicine?

* * *

Of course I too have a whole range of investments in the topic...

I must admit, with her frequent use of phrases such as “tiny conical breasts” for breasts that didn’t seem, well, all that minuscule to me (such as the “tiny-breasted German model” within a collage of magazine covers: my god, what would she think of mine?), I found myself obsessively turning to the author photograph on the inside back cover flap. Alas, head and shoulders only.

Yalom’s history is a maturation story, a story of self-realisation for women, beginning back in ancient times in the traditional cradle of the West, tracking through all those turbulent medieval, renaissance and revolutionary years in Europe, and ending up (well, where else?) in the United States.

One of the contemporary artists Yalom presents in her chapter on “The Liberated Breast” is Cindy Sherman, whose self-images appropriate an anarchic mix of symbols from art history, Hollywood glamour stills, and popular mythology — such as in her Untitled # 225, with the fake breast poking out from amongst the glittery velvet clothing, spouting a little drop of milk.

“You yet it is not certain,” Yalom chides, “that Sherman herself has been able to remain outside the exploitation she purports to expose.”

And I feel like screaming: But that’s the point, there is no outside.

But Yalom’s language does posit an outside. Or an above (an impartial goddess-like view), or perhaps it’s an inside.

If at times I felt like I was at an exclusive dinner party, at other times I felt like I was in a sociological or medical lecture theatre. With a chain of interlocking “we’s” building a circle of privilege — from “we in the West”, or “we in the twentieth century” through to the royal “it cannot escape our notice” or “as we have observed” (particularly when she suddenly puts in a little mention of Michel Foucault (enough, miraculously, to earn him a place in the index even though only two words of his are actually quoted, and the citation is via an article by another writer)).

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The “we” of the text embodies a “they” as objects of study and wonder (all those people from past eras, those misguided enough to still think Freud had something useful to say, or who pierce their nipples, or put personal ads in tabloid papers and so on) as well as relegated to the outside a whole host of Others. The sexually ambiguous, the cross-dressers and transvestites for instance who never get mentioned (well, how could they, in a book aimed to demonstrate women as unequivocally the only legitimate possessors of breasts?), as well as those mentioned only incidentally, as kind of footnotes or counterpoints: such as lesbians, Black women, and women from other cultures.

The boundaries are clearly drawn and thus, for instance, the baby-milk scandal of the last decade — where multinational, mostly US-based, companies have aggressively marketed infant formula to poorer countries causing enormous health and economic problems — gets only a paragraph. Whereas I would have thought this was very much a part of Western history: of “our” history, as much as it has become inextricably a part of “theirs”.

In neatly packaging breast history into a progressive narrative structure, lifting and separating each component or historical period (to better identify and enhance the cleavage), what happens to the discontinuities of history within such a narrative? What happens when the bra doesn’t fit, or to the bits that don’t fit?

Somehow Yalom manages to fit even the current devastatingly high breast cancer statistics into her progressive schema. “Today”, she writes, “it is the tragic reality of breast cancer that is bringing women into full possession of their breasts.” In this way, the bad breast is really the good breast. “Save the breast” she suggests, is “a slogan the whole world can endorse.” Thus it might help rescue all of us by drawing attention to the ecological damage and over-production of toxins that many now link with high breast cancer rates.

As such she recuperates Western breast history as a history of progress, and returns the breast not just to (some) women, but to the family (rescuing it, for instance, from
There is a telling photograph right at the end of the book, taken by her son, Reid Yalom, which is titled “The Key to the Breast”, and shows a naked female torso with a chest key on a string around her neck, nestling into the cleavage, just above the heart. This is indeed, as Yalom observes in her acknowledgments, “something of a family affair.”

Beth Spencer’s first book of fiction *How to Conceive of a Girl* was published by Random House in 1996. She is currently working on a book of essays, and a novel with the working title *A (Short) Personal History of the Bra and its Contents: from Maidenform to Madonna.*

References

1. *A History of the Breast* was published in Australia by Harper Collins in 1997, and *The Evolution of Allure* is a Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press hardback, published in 1996.
2. Van Heemskerck’s image is reproduced from Leo Steinberg’s *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York, 1983).

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In the Australian Humanities Review, see also: Essay, Issue 10, May 1998, Spencer, Beth

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Its history is closely connected with the history of the written language. The art of printing in Belarus began in the first half of the 16th century. And the first illustrated books in the. What is body-art? The beauty of a naked human body plus an artistic imagination can turn a person’s body into a magic pattern of colour, shape and movement. It is one of the oldest and the most exotic arts. It originates from the Stone Age and it has been practiced by some tribes of Africa, Australia and Latin America for centuries. Year after year body-art is becoming more and more popular in the civilized world. There are different ways of embellishing your body: painting it, making tattoos or even inflicting scars.