

Breast is Best

Ana Teixeira Pinto

And yet a restless, always unsatisfied craving for the nudity of paganism [...] but that love, which is the highest joy, which is divine simplicity itself, is not for you moderns, you children of reason. It works only evil in you. As soon as you wish to be natural, you become common. To you nature seems something hostile; you have made devils out of the smiling gods of Greece, and out of me a demon. You can only exorcise and curse me, or slay yourselves in bacchantic madness before my altar. And if ever one of you has had the courage to kiss my red mouth, he makes a barefoot pilgrimage to Rome in penitential robes and expects flowers to grow from his withered staff, while under my feet roses, violets, and myrtles spring up every hour, but their fragrance does not agree with you. Stay among your northern fogs and Christian incense; let us pagans remain under the debris, beneath the lava; do not disinter us.¹

— Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*

The problem for Christianity is not (as it was in classical antiquity) penetration or domination but rather erection, which is to say desire itself.²

— Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints*

In “A Childhood Memory and Some Reflections on the Novel”,³ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch recounts how, in his boyhood, he would enjoy reading about the tortures inflicted on early Christian saints and their martyrdom at the hands of pagan henchmen. “I would sit in a dark,

¹ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, <https://www.huntingtontheatre.org/articles/venus-In-Fur/Gallery/Complete-Text-of-iVenus-In-Fursi-by-Leopold-von-Sacher-Masoch>.

² Virginia Burrus, *The Sex Lives of Saints* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 24.

³ Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, “A Childhood Memory and Reflections on the Novel”, originally published in *Revue Bleu* (1888), republished in Gilles Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 274.

secluded corner of my great-aunt's house, devouring the legends of the saints; I was plunged into a state of feverish excitement on reading about the torments suffered by the martyrs.” Severin, the protagonist of Sacher-Masoch's novel, *Venus in Furs*, and in a way his alter ego, also experiences intense sexual stimulation by reading the lives of martyrs. It is usually said that Sacher-Masoch's reading is twisted or depraved, that he reads martyrdom perversely, but it could perhaps be argued that, rather than perverting the correct reading, he simply recognized that hagiography is a pornographic genre.

In her work *Fat to Ashes* (2020), Pauline Curnier Jardin taps into what Sacher-Masoch called “the mysterious affinity between cruelty and lust”,⁴ the symbolism of amputation, bodily mortification, and the way Christianity, in its early phase between the third and the sixth centuries, redefined the relation between the body, the Chthonic cosmos, and the social order.

Each year from 3rd to 5th February, the province of Catania celebrates the martyrdom of St Agatha of Sicily. According to Italian chronicler Jacobus de Voragine, Agatha was a fifteen-year-old from a noble family, who, due to her Christian faith, had sworn a vow of chastity. When Agatha rejected the advances of Roman prefect Quintianus, he had her imprisoned and tortured. Much to the delight of his reader, Voragine spares no detail of the agony inflicted on her young flesh, which is whipped, burned, and pierced by iron hooks. But the torment Agatha is most celebrated for is rather more gruesome: consumed by spite and rancour, the Roman prefect had her breasts cut off with iron pincers. Agatha died in prison circa 250, presumably as a result of her injuries. One year later, on the anniversary of her martyrdom, the city is engulfed by a volcanic eruption. Terrified villagers take to Agatha's tomb for protection, using her veil to shield them from the lava flows. Miraculously the white veil, now reddened in the infernal heat, stops the molten tide. The province of Catania also celebrates St Barbara. Martyred in 306, she is another virgin whose breasts, like those of St Agatha, were cut off. In a further parallel with St Agatha, St Barbara is credited with stopping the eruption of Mount Etna in 1780 – yet another involuntary emission.

The theology of the early Christian church was forged by martyrdom. And martyrdom assigned a new valence to sexuality, thereby redefining it. In the non-Christian world, sexuality, as Foucault argues, was relational; thus sexual relations could not be dissociated from social relations. For St Augustine however, as Richard Sennet argues, sexuality is not

⁴ Ibid.

about a relationship to other people, but about “the problem of the relationship of oneself to oneself, or, more precisely, the relationship between one’s will and involuntary assertions”.⁵ The main question is not, as it was for pagan scholars, “the problem of penetration: it is the problem of erection”.⁶ By redefining sexuality as an index of self-abnegation, the church also began to efface the symbolic valence of the body and by extension of bodily functions and fluids.

The Mediterranean area is rich with myths that express creation and renewal through the metaphor of sexual reproduction. Milk, most often breast milk, is endowed with generative force. For the Greeks, the Milky Way squirted out of Hera’s breasts while she was nursing Heracles. In Egyptian lore it was spilled bovine milk, deified as the fertility goddess Bat. After the unification of Lower and Upper Egypt, Bat was syncretized with the theriomorphic Hathor, the personification of the Eye of Ra or Sun Disk, attributes which were later taken on by Isis, often portrayed wearing the horned Sun Disk as a headdress. In the Hellenic world, Isis was conflated with Artemis, a deity with a dual character herself, who presided at once over chastity and fertility: both attributes that would later reappear in the iconography of the virgin and mother Madonna. In Ephesus, on the western coast of Asia Minor, Artemis is represented with animal ornaments such as lions, griffins, horses, bulls, and bees, as well as with numerous breast-like lumps adorning her midriff. This led to the designation “Artemis polymastia”, or Diana polymastia,⁷ a multi-breasted figure that appears as late as 1615 in *The Discovery of the Child Erichthonius* by Peter Paul Rubens. The Virgin Galaktotrophousa or Nursing Madonna is a Christian appropriation of Isis Lactans iconography, which was popular in the Mediterranean from 700 BCE until the fourth century CE; the Marian cult entered the Christian horizon rather late through the Copts in Egypt, and began to gain ground in the seventh century only. The Gospel does not mention the nursing mother. Rather, the erasure of the female principle, and of the functions of the female body, is articulated as a mutilation.⁸ It is the body of the pagan goddesses Isis/Artemis/Hathor who is mutilated; Agatha’s martyrdom is an exorcism.

⁵ Michel Foucault and Richard Sennett, “Sexuality and Solitude”, *London Review of Books* 3, no. 9 (May 1981).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Some scholars have argued the lumps hanging in the statue’s midriff are not breasts but bull’s testes or eggs, offerings to the deity.

⁸ See Salvatore D’Onofrio, *Les Fluides D’Aristote: Lait, Sang et Sperme dans L’Italie du Sud* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014).

Unlike monotheism, which is a religion of the book, polytheistic or cult religions did not have a theological system. They evolved organically from the institutional and material conditions of society as a “system that is not just coextensive with culture but practically identical to it”.⁹ Monotheism, however, is not coextensive with culture but antagonistic to it. For the religions of the book, “the truth to be proclaimed comes with an enemy to be fought. Only they know of heretics and pagans, false doctrine, sects, superstition, idolatry, magic, ignorance, unbelief, heresy, and whatever other terms have been coined to designate what they denounce, persecute and proscribe as manifestations of untruth.”¹⁰

The question of truth, in its new normative sense, and by extension untruth, is also the question of the two worlds or two cultures: the splitting of culture into official and unofficial, sacred and profane, canonical and folk, highbrow and lowbrow, pop culture and counterculture. This is what Theodor W. Adorno would much later call the “torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up”.¹¹

Whither the breast, when creation is brought under a regime of truth? Female fertility is a false fertility; it begets life but that life carries death within it. Purified life is freed from matter and mother. Flesh is made word. The question of Agatha’s body, and its mutilation or loss of integrity, is the question of the body politic and its reorganization by the church – and the violence that inheres in such *reorganization*, with organs, literally, put out of order – but also the question of the gendered body under a doctrine predicated on revelation and transcendence. One could say the festival celebrates the brutal repression of its former pagan festivities, but its splitting of the world, and by extension of experience, leads the subject to misrecognize her own mutilation as elevation, and to see in her subjection a form of emancipation.

Every border regime creates its own backdoor, however, and that which was evicted re-enters the room. St Agatha is often depicted holding her breasts on a platter. Catholicism is duplicitous: it bears encrypted within itself the paganism it ostensibly rejects.¹² Broaching the

⁹ Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ Theodor Adorno to Walter Benjamin, 2 August 1935, in *Letters to Walter Benjamin*, *New Left Review* 1, vol. 81 (Sept/Oct 1973), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i81/articles/theodor-adorno-letters-to-walter-benjamin>.

¹² I am paraphrasing Jan Assmann’s, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 111.

border the church imposed, the mutilated breasts, unable to nurture, reacquires nutritional properties. Unfazed by their anatomically correct appearance, the Catania tourist information office proudly announces the province's breast-shaped ricotta and marzipan pastries, topped by a red cherry emulating the nipple. An edible reminder of Agatha's martyrdom, or a frenzied gourmandization of cannibalistic license, the *cassateddi di Sant'Aita* or *minni di Sant'Aita* are consumed abundantly. *Breast is best*. The Feast of St Agatha is a real *feast*. But it is also a muted utterance that says without saying that flesh is not word: it is womb, but also wound. Sanctified life is purified life, but you cannot purify life without killing the living.

The disturbing conflation of embodied and encultured experiences, which allows a mutilated breast to multiply into a myriad of edible breasts, is represented in Pauline Curnier Jardin's film *Fat to Ashes* as an explosion of vernacular energies and overwhelming ecclesiastical pieties, turning Agatha's mortified flesh into a reaffirmation of the lactating breast potency. St Agatha's festival exhibits an exuberant quality, transubstantiating dearth into abundance, breast tissue into sugar, agony into gluttony, and horror into glee. Is the church licensing the carnivalesque festivities or deferring to their power? As if confirming the latter, the film leaps from Catania to Cologne. We are now at the carnival, the week-long street festival, taking place between Fat Thursday and Ash Wednesday, both referenced in the title. As if to emphasize the fact that the term "carnival" comes from *carnelevarium*, which means "the removal of meat", Curnier Jardin's camera directs our attention to a hog being bound for slaughter.

Carnival, according to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, is not a religious ritual, for it is free from mysticism and piety. Carnival also does not share the character of prayer or vernacular religion, for it does not command or ask for anything, and even parodies the Church's cult.¹³ Carnival, Bakhtin argues, is neither religion nor art, but life itself – the second life of the people – shaped according to a certain pattern of play. Grotesque realism, the essence of carnival, degrades and lowers everything that is heavenly and upward, bringing it downward to the level of the body and the earth, an element that can bury and sow, that is able to deny and assert, simultaneously. The spirit of carnival is alien to nihilism: "it is always conceiving".¹⁴ At this point in her film, Curnier Jardin enters a discussion that has been staged

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

and restaged throughout modernity, concerning the ambivalent politics of carnivalesque festivities, under the individuating conditions imposed by bourgeois culture. Miriam Bratu Hansen's survey of what one could call the afterlife of the carnival within the cultural industries can perhaps illuminate how, no longer pregnant with regenerating force, carnivalesque registers turn into satire or pageantry. When only the negative element is preserved, the carnival becomes profoundly conservative, providing what Adorno and Horkheimer called a "medicinal bath of fun"¹⁵ where the bathers are immersed in *Schadenfreude*, brutality and sadism.¹⁶ By restaging the discussion between Benjamin and Adorno in the early 20th century, Bratu Hansen details the imbrication of entertainment and aggression, be it sexual or racial, palpable in the streets of Cologne. Teeming with cardinals and Prussian officers, soldiers and sailors, cat-women and peasant maids, the carnival affirms male dominance and female docility. There are revellers in feathered headdresses or keffiyeh; there is a big group wearing blackface. Laughter becomes indistinguishable from horror.

In his essay on laughter, *Le Rire: Essai sur la Signification du Comique* (1900), French philosopher Henri Bergson asks why white people find black faces comical, pointing to the dual function of comedy as a tool for othering while affirming group-identity, a form of affinity predicated on the absence of empathy. Central to this carnival is, as Walter Benjamin argues, "the cozy acceptance of bestiality and violence as inevitable concomitants of existence".¹⁷ Though still associated with dissent or conflict with the social order, the carnivalesque desire to mock or subvert moral codes has no truck with a turbulent transgression emerging from below, but rather expresses a "defensive numbing of perception", which prevents the participants from recognizing the mechanisms that make them complicit in the stasis mass culture imposes, at once victims and agents of its diluted chauvinism and misogyny.¹⁸ Resuming an "old tradition which is far from reassuring – the tradition inaugurated by the dancing hooligans to be found in medieval depictions of

¹⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 110, quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168

¹⁶ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Micky Maus" fragment, quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

¹⁸ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

pogroms”,¹⁹ carnivalesque attempts to refetishize social relations are always perched on the threshold to fascism.²⁰

In its final minutes, the film *Fat to Ashes* reaches a fever pitch, juxtaposing unwittingly camp hagiographic scenes with a re-enactment of Agatha’s martyrdom as performed by six-year-old children – the moment when one wonders whether to laugh, cry, or call the hotline for child abuse – in a crescendo of lewdness and casual cruelty. As the hog is butchered, the image leaps to a small boy, struggling to wield pincers too heavy for him to lift to a little girl’s chest, her hands tied above her head, simulating Agatha’s torment. Her limp body is then thrown to the ground and removed by a group of male children.

In traditional societies, most saliently in the Mediterranean area, women are contested resources, subject to usurpation. In the absence of effective state bureaucracies, codes of honour and shame become central to the social order. Women are repositories of men’s honour but have no positive relation to it; the only impact a woman can have on honour is to destroy it. Any female misconduct upsets the social order. The investment in women’s virginity and chastity thus becomes the focus of common interest among the men of her family, and the centre around which male homosocial bonds are organized. As a result, men are socialized to commit violent acts to uphold it.

Socialized to bear part of this burden themselves, women see their own sexuality with suspicion. There is no contradiction between a virgin and a mother; they are just two sequential moments in the way honour organizes sexual and social life. But the figure of the whore mediates between the two: there is no other way for a virgin to become a mother. The pitfall of placing contradictory demands on women’s bodies is that the transition becomes slippery. If the invisible part of the triad becomes visible, the honour of the family is lost, and when honour is lost nothing can save you, not in this world. When honour is lost, the world breaks apart: hence the Etna eruptions, the thick ash clouds, the rivers of lava scorching everything in their wake. The end of social life is articulated in terms of a natural disaster, as

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, “Micky Maus” fragment, quoted in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 168.

²⁰ Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno*, 1st ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 182.

the end of the world. Only a miracle can mend it.

Vernacular religion and ritual, according to Ernesto de Martino,²¹ are tied to the precariousness of life, the pressure exercised by uncontrollable forces, the dearth of forms of social assistance, the harshness of toil, and the immense power of the negative throughout an individual's lifetime. In a way all religion is an apotropaic ritual, an attempt to avert hurt, hardship, and hunger, or at least to assuage it.

In *The Accursed Share* (1949) Georges Bataille notes that preindustrial societies were characterized by the "unproductive consumption of the surplus".²² Sacrifices to deities were conceptualized as symmetry, literally a form of debt repayment. Capitalism, the only economic system that redirects the surplus back into production, is in this sense an aberration, an economic anomaly. For capitalism too, nature is fertile but impotent; only stock has a generative force. In Curnier Jardin's video *Fat to Ashes*, the many breasts of Artemis reappear as bouquets of balloons, flanking the procession or hovering over the cavorting crowds. There are lions, horses, sharks, Dalmatians, princesses, Spidermen, and Spice Girls. Myth, made in China.

Capitalism could be construed as the negation of tragedy: a cargo cult announcing the imminence of copious blessings. Money is a tutelary deity. It provides protection from all things evil, even disease or despair, even the lack of fertility, via in vitro fertilization or surrogacy. Capitalism delivers what religion can only gesture toward: to be freed from want. A shopping centre is the land of Cockaigne, a promise of plenty. Nuns wear racy mesh underwear, roasted pigs wander about, and fountains spout milk. Every mother, virgin, or whore attends the same sex-positive workshops. Who needs Hathor if you have Nestlé! Don't the goddess's robes look like supermarket shelves, brimming with rows of canned meat, breakfast cereal, and avocado honey?

One could also say the term "capitalism" names the divorce of economic practices from their symbolic valences, and the dominance of "depersonalized, disaffected and asignificant"

²¹ See Ernesto de Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South*, trans. and annotated by Dorothy Louise Zinn (Chicago, IL: HAU Books, 2015).

²² See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, in the original French *La Part maudite* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1949).

relations, which undergird a market economy”.²³ Economic value is a function of the intensity of desire, but market economies also tend to rework the subjective imaginary in such a way that “the whole field of insolvent desires”, like sexual desires, is “resignified by solvent desires”.²⁴ The American dream is not about having stuff, it is about having opportunities. And breastfeeding is linked to higher IQs, as it provides ideal nutrition. Breastfeeding gives your child a competitive edge by boosting their immune system; breastfeeding changes the ordering of life’s outcomes to the child’s benefit. As one element in the configuration of desire, the breast always finds its solvency. Aspirational yet nihilistic, capitalism resignifies the liminal by generalizing it. By articulating the grammar of the ritualized and the repressed, *Fat to Ashes* bypasses the complexities of the political economy via the shortcut of the libidinal. Cinema, a medium, which is both mechanical and spectral, becomes the site for *disorganization*, and the *reorganization* of both film and flesh, the site where polytheistic polysemy finds its image.

The author would like to thank Anselm Franke, Salvatore D’Onofrio, and Erhard Schüttpelz for their valuable input and advice.

²³ Jean Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 202.

²⁴ *Ibid.*