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uncovering nudity

RUTH BARCAN

Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy

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In so many ways it's an incredibly banal thing to note, but for me at least it really wasn't until I was reading a book on the subject did I realise nudity is everywhere. Sure, there's the fetishisation of nubile young bodies in advertising; the salacious comments about nudism and peoples' mixed experiences of nudist beaches; the nude in art; and the nakedness (in its many guises) of sex, streakers, and the daily rituals of (de)robing we generally all experience. Further, due to the contentious standing of public nudity in contemporary Western societies (the specific focus of this book) and its association with sexuality, it does of course constantly feature in news reporting. My reading of the book coincided with a number of media reports which registered perhaps more than they would otherwise: the damaging in a drunken pub incident in Melbourne of the landmark Young and Jackson Hotel's famous nude 'Chloe' (the painting itself gets a mention on page 31); the proclamation of Dame Helen Mirren as 'naturist of the year' by peak British group British Naturism; and, most worryingly, reports from Swaziland that bus drivers were apparently taking it upon themselves to sexually assault young women wearing mini-skirts, following a ban issued by some drivers earlier in the year. Certainly, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* definitely gets you thinking about how nudity, or the relative perception of it, is indeed a foundational point of organisation for the Judeo-Christian world.

Wishing to move beyond the already relatively charted examination of nakedness and representation (Ruth Barcan especially draws attention to the oft-explored figure of the 'nude'

in the ‘implicitly masculinist visual arts tradition in Western art’ (5) and in the feminist cultural criticism of pornography and theorising of the ‘male gaze’), Barcan’s focus in *Nudity* is also upon the actual embodied experience of nakedness, bodily adornment practices and relative undress. Given the breadth of issues such an examination necessarily involves, Barcan offers what she refers to as a ‘horizontal’ rather than ‘vertical’ study in order to accommodate wider coverage of a hitherto under-explored area. What this means for the reader is that while they may at times be left wanting a deeper analysis on particular topics, *Nudity* can lay some claim to being if not an exhaustive study, then certainly a thorough and entertaining overview of the field—one which gives rise to further questions perhaps, but that provides a solid philosophical foundation from which to explore more specific issues.

Setting up this philosophical terrain, the book explicitly concerns itself with nudity within what the author refers to as the Western tradition and from here it focuses on two core metaphysical traditions that it is argued provide the foundation for Christian approaches to the body: Platonic and Jewish. Given this focus, and the imperial history and subsequent multicultural reality of the Christian world, Barcan discusses not only Western bodies, but also how this hegemonic Judeo-Christian paradigm of morality has informed post-settlement approaches to indigenous peoples, and frequently racist hierarchies of morality and humanity. Thus it is only within this framework that non-Western bodies are discussed—that is,

as viewed by the Western world view—in order to further elaborate upon the meaning of nakedness within this Western paradigm. In so doing, some of the most fundamental ordering belief structures can be revealed in terms of the role of clothing within this ideological system; namely, clothing as being inextricably bound to humanness and ‘civilization’, with obvious ramifications for the reading of various unclothed ‘others’ (indigenous peoples, the ‘uncivilised’, ‘deviant’ or ‘insane’).

Chapter 1 sets the philosophical groundwork for the rest of the book by exploring nakedness/dress as a complex dichotomy mobilised variously depending upon the needs and beliefs of the discursive community. To begin with, a series of epistemological binary structures are identified:

nakedness	clothing
natural	cultural
unchanging	changeable
invisible	visible
truth	lies
pure	corrupt
human nature	human society
pre-, non-, antisocial	social. (14)

These divisions can be read in a number of ways depending upon the context, and Barcan is always at pains to unravel this confused tension underscoring the equally confused Western attitude towards the body in relation to various embodied practices. The role of this opening chapter, however, is to explore the clothing–civilisation equation, and to introduce a number of key sites and debates within discussions of nakedness—ones which take as

their starting point the acceptable borderlines around nakedness as in need of stringent management and policing.

As previously mentioned, the artistic 'nude' is, in particular, well-travelled terrain and thus furnishes us with much insight into the cultural myths that coalesce around desired and disfavoured forms of undress, and the gendering of nakedness. A quote from noted art historian John Berger neatly sums this up: 'Nakedness is imperfect and individual; the nude is ideal and universal. Nakedness is nature; nudity, culture.' (33) The figurative practices circumscribing the representations of the naked, generally female, form in art work to 'civilise' the otherwise primal, antisocial naked form. As commented upon later in the book in relation to policing public displays of the body, such an understanding of the pleasures of the unclad female form works within a larger ideological frame in which female nakedness is never as problematic for patriarchal Western society as that of men: women's bodies are expected sites of pleasurable display with a 'logical' connection to nature and nakedness; men's are (apparently) less aesthetically pleasing, and a site of greater physical and ideological threat. Barcan also discusses how striptease problematises nudity, revealing it to be a socially prescribed state, not an absolute description of an ahistorical truth:

Whatever else it may do, striptease actually problematizes nudity as much as simply revealing it. It reminds us, perhaps, that nakedness is not self-evidently the same as exposure, either experientially or

conceptually. Bareness and nudity are not the same thing; bare flesh is not always naked. Can an elbow be nude? Or a face? What about bald heads? Or feet? We talk about 'bare' feet, but never about 'nude' or 'naked' feet; nor do we talk about a 'nude' head. Not all parts of the body can, it seems, *be* 'naked.' This is a cultural matter. (19)

Commercial nudity designed for a male, heterosexual audience in such forms as striptease and pornography is in the author's research revealed to be a major determinant of women's body hair fashion, especially the fashioning of pubic hair. The hegemonic policing of preferred body hair patterning has for a while been a topic of critical concern, especially in the wake of second wave feminist concerns. What is especially noteworthy is Barcan's finding that in the relative absence of other guides to behaviour, the general consensus of her interviewees is that heterosexual women are largely influenced by their partner's wishes when it comes to the shaping and removal of pubic hair and that, in turn, their partner's tastes are derived substantially from what they see in tabloid magazines and pornography. As the author later goes on to note, this educational chain has even more potentially worrying repercussions when we consider the role played in Australia at least by censorship guidelines which require the airbrushing of women's pubic areas to remove the reality of such things as protruding labia, in favour of a 'cleaner', less 'offensive', more Barbie-like genitalia.

Taking a different perspective on the complex binary divide around nudity in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Chapter 2 explores nakedness qua metaphor as a moral positive, not just as a negative or in relation to the state of being dressed. Fundamental to this side of the coin is another seemingly age-old illustration: nakedness as a marker of purity. Arising out of a metaphysical basis furnished by Judaic and Greek traditions, two basic sets of nakedness as a metaphor are identified: 'those associated with *presence* (authenticity, truth, origins, nature, simplicity) and those with *absence* (deprivation, degradation, vulnerability, exposure, punishment)'. (83) Enabling this turn of events is the idea that nakedness is a state we are capable of being 'in'—a state therefore of grace at times, not just an enforced process of absence. The author observes that discussions of nudity frequently evoke the word 'in' ('in the nude'), as distinct from the *prima facie* perhaps more obvious choice of 'out', given that being nude is being outside of one's clothes. This denotes, she argues, nudity's status as something worthy in its own right, as something greater than the opposite of dress, a state which itself is uniquely culturally determined. Nudism as a movement emerges as an important site for the embodied experience of nakedness, contentiously having to fight as it does to disassociate itself from the conflation of nakedness with sexuality to instead locate itself as a freely chosen choice to be in a state of a more pure 'nature'.

Chapters 3 and 4 unravel further the various ways in which these complex understandings of nakedness, morality and power are played

out in specific instances. For example, Barcan addresses such things as modern depilation practices as an exercise in turning 'nature' (nakedness) into 'culture' (nudity); the role of body hair, or more specifically its absence, as a marker of grades of humanness (more hair, more animal; less hair, more human), which has of course functioned to privilege whiteness; celebrity nakedness and the acceptability of nudity for those considered beautiful and young, while applying a different standard for others (witness the recent campaign by a British tabloid to encourage Sarah Ferguson to keep her clothes on and not appear nude in a charity calendar); and the various meanings attached to the exposed female breast—its heroic connection with courageous strong fighting women (French revolutionary figures Liberty and Marianne, Godiva, Artemis and the Amazons), and its maternally derived symbolic role as 'as fount of charity and nurturance'. (230) Chapter 3's discussion of the connections between nakedness and criminality and insanity appears particularly underdeveloped within the space afforded by the study (except in terms of the distinction between 'streaking' and 'flashing'), and this reader was here left wanting a little bit more. Chapter 4, which sees a return to questions of images, is the most Australian-focused of the chapters, employing as it does local examples to illustrate larger claims.

At the core of the author's stated intent in writing *Nudity* was a desire to clearly establish 'that nakedness too is a metaphor, and as social and cultural a phenomenon as clothing'. (57) This she has no doubt achieved and, in so doing, made a valuable contribution to cultural

studies of the body by actually mapping out what is, in its quotidian reality, an always encountered, but under-researched, understanding of our embodied experience. *Nudity* problematises some branches of cultural studies's focus upon representation at the expense of the greater messiness of lived, embodied experience. In so doing, it implicitly calls for more work to be undertaken into our quotidian bodily practices as they are lived by people everyday. However, in never being able to totally escape questions of representation, the study illustrates not only how individual and collective meanings are products of various mediations, but that cultural scholars need to always be attentive to the complex interplay between the two.

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