

A Brief History of Cleavage

I've always loved the word "cleavage." It reminds me of long division and other old-fashioned mathematical skills learned in grammar school but no longer useful to me in adult life. (Now I rely on a calculator for the simplest sums and subtractions.)

The word "cleavage" has two divergent meanings. "To cleave" is to adhere or cling: to cleave to one's wife, home, principles. But "to cleave" is to also to split or part—as Moses cleaves the Red Sea, or a controversy cleaves the Democratic Party, or civil war cleaves a populace.

Female cleavage is a suggestive, nocturnal phenomenon, produced by pressure of bra or bodice—with nature's cooperation.

The first cleavage I remember glimpsing—furtively, quickly: when an elementary school teacher, dressed in a muu-muu, bent down to demonstrate, on my waiting tablet, an esoteric calculation (eight times eight equals sixty-four?), I saw a thick line, as if drawn in charcoal, between her two butterscotch-hued breasts. She was a punitive teacher, given to paddling truants; I couldn't reconcile cleavage with disciplinarianism.

I don't remember her breasts. Instead, I recall the line between them, the dark declivity. Is that like seeing a Rembrandt and remembering the frame, but not the painting?

Later in the year, while she explained Hawaii's late admission to the Union, again she exhibited cleavage: a gift. I accepted the inordinate, intimate vision. She had recently made the transition from "Miss" to "Mrs.": newfound wifhood plumped out the cleavage, abetted its ripeness.

I fantasized placing my finger, like a dulled pencil, between her cushiony breasts.

My next indelible glimpse of cleavage was cinematic: Barbra Streisand in *Hello, Dolly!* and *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever*. Incongruity: the films, family fare, were rated G, and yet the star's cleavage seemed calculated to provoke lust, or to prove that she had moved past gawky Fanny Brice into loudmouth sophistication.

On A Clear Day: in a flashback to a previous incarnation, Barbara wore an antique, cleavage-producing gown. Fiercely the frock pressed the breasts upward and together, proffering them to the viewer. The cleaved—joined? divided?—breasts suggested two scoops of Baskin Robbins French vanilla ice cream in a plastic cup, early on a July evening, when the weather is sultry and nothing exciting will happen, only a bike-ride or a rereading of a Hardy Boys mystery.

I am trying to be objective, but these remembered images lead me to the brink of an indeterminate, stammering sensuality.

Streisand's cleavage was the visual equivalent of a certain velvet piano-bench cushion that inspired me to press, with a fingertip, its crew-cut nubs, to rearrange its stubby plush into patterns and lines.

I considered cleavage an articulation, a way for breasts to converge and say hello. Cleavage stood for rigor, for monastic simplicity. A wild, voluntary act of dressing-up, it allowed breasts to pose as historical objects, and to pass, uncensored, into juvenile vision. Paradox: cleavage, a sign of sophistication, made breasts innocent. Certainly Streisand couldn't flash breasts in a G-rated musical unless arrangement into cleavage rendered them sumptuously didactic.

A third pivotal instance of cleavage: backstage, at a children's production of *The Wizard of Oz*, in which I had a small role (the Farmer Munchkin), the mother of a fellow extra was helping out with props. This matron seemed wealthier than average. From the evidence of her generous cleavage, I gathered that she lived in a two-story "colonial" house with columns; that her privileged daughter played with Madame Alexander *Gone with the Wind* dolls; that the family, dignified by its matriarch's cleavage, inhabited an evolved stratosphere of Coupe de Ville sedans, Brandy Alexanders, hollandaise, expeditions to Lake Tahoe, and immunity to impetigo—an affliction I frequently suffered, and which I assumed never attacked children in cleavage's tranquilized vicinity.

Backstage, I beheld the dark, sweaty line separating the elevated breasts. It seemed this woman had applied indigo lipstick—a shade

appropriate for Carnival but not for daily life—to her chest, drawing a provisional mark, like a prospector who suspects gold, or a surveyor measuring a future sidewalk. The juncture of the two breasts was as pleasingly definite as the division between two chunky squares of white chocolate. Cleavage's line seemed a deliberate act of will on the part of the woman who "wore" it like a brooch. It never occurred to me that cleavage was natural. I considered it a grooming detail obtainable by craft.

The last crucial cleavage I remember from that ambiguously golden age appeared in the eight-hour Russian movie version of *War and Peace*, screened in two parts at my neighborhood's deluxe, space-age, breast-shaped theater, a free-standing dome descended, UFO-style, on a suburban mall's parking lot. I went with a friend: we shared a sinister interest in foreign stamps and a desire to build miniature houses, for trolls, out of cigar boxes. We sat through the epic, not comprehending its intricate plot; our common focus was the cleavage of one of the co-stars, whom I remember as "Irene" (I don't know whether this was the character's or the actress's name). Irene's cleavage radiated a Tsarist grandeur, and a blotchy sense of diminished prospects. The line between her breasts conjured up images of the Kremlin's lying *Pravda*, and a tattered paperback, *The God That Failed* (about the Western intelligentsia's disenchantment with the Revolution?), which occupied a place of no special honor on my mother's bookshelf, near the hardcover *Ideal Marriage* and the paperback Dr. Spock.

Years passed, with their conventional disappointments. And then Robert Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter* appeared, offering the pleasure of a dormant spectacle rising again to consciousness—the dominating splendor of Sophia Loren's cleavage. (I'd last seen it when she lip-synched Renata Tebaldi's Aida in an obscure, sepia-tinted movie version of the Verdi opera.) Immense as her hat-brim, the cleavage was the drama's unmoving center. Around it, scandal swirled; the cleavage, reposeful, mutely smiled.

While preparing to write this reminiscence, I asked a fashionable woman friend whether cleavage was passé. (She has cleavage when she chooses.) She told me that cleavage is natural—it really happens—and hence transcends questions of vogue. And yet it is also a construct: a matter of foregrounding, emphasis. It may represent a creamy femininity too opulent for present starved severities; and yet it is always waiting to return. Any moment we may hear again that cleavage is “in.” Within my cloud-encumbered imagination, it has never been out.