

Titillation of Cleavage

I became aware of what cleavage meant by none other than Gerard Phillippe in his swashbuckling role of *Fanfan la Tulip* (1952), a French romp somehow permitted for screening in communist Hungary, indeed during the strictest, puritanical Stalinist regime. Perhaps the French Communist Party had something to do with it or possibly the director was one of their members, or perhaps it just showed how decadent the West was. This was not something that occupied me at the time. Anything western was keenly sought after and none more than a bit of saucy French tease, a welcome relief from the deadly dull social-realism that was the norm. I was fourteen and could hardly wait for the dark of the auditorium to see, adore, pine for, be breathless at the sight of Gina Lollobrigida playing opposite Gerard Phillippe. She had the shape, the smile, the flirty eyes that boys of my age fantasized about under the bedcovers.



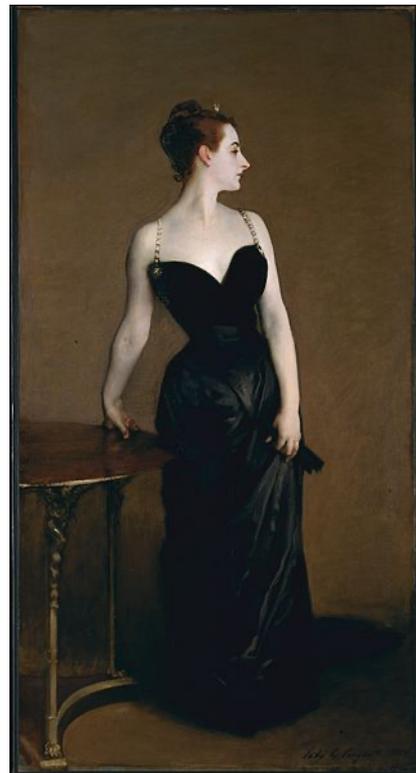
Now after this introduction I come to the episode in the film that has remained with me shaping my imagination about cleavage ever since. So, there was Gerard Phillippe, *Fanfan la Tulip*, standing on top of a haystack. Below, looking up coquettishly, was La Lola helping in some pointless agricultural activity. Her body-hugging dress came down from the round shoulders sweeping under the blouse that was cut just low enough to show off her wonderful bosom, the tops of her breasts coming together in a visage to

die for. I am almost there. Gina trying to rouse Gerard's attention asks, "And what is the view up there?" Came the unsubtle suggestive reply "I see a valley between two wonderfully shaped hills", anyway that is how I remember it. To this La Lola gave a not too modest smile. This trite remark has defined cleavage for me ever since. Yes, but what better introduction to an imaginary display of female thighs joining up at eye level. No wonder the cleavage has been such a powerful symbol of female allure in paintings since the Renaissance. Of course the girls would have been all agog by Gerard's cheeky charm but that was for them, for me it was all about what Gina showed and what was not on view was beyond a schoolboy's dare.

For cleavage is all about revealing just some of the bosom making what remains hidden even more enticing, indeed revealing all would take away the mystery for then what more is to seek after. There is always a Darwinian explanation but that would be all too prosaic for the real question is what makes the heart beat faster. No doubt 'in the survival of the fittest' females who teased were more likely to be captured by the alpha males but who cares about explanations when the sight of Gina was sheer perfection. The physiology has to be just right. A bony chest with rows of ladder like ribs and arching collarbones even above ample endowment is no good. The softness of breasts in a cleavage has to continue without missing a beat up to the shoulders and the neck. There are innumerable paintings from the past where the cleavage seems to be carved out of hard stone. The breasts should barely touch, the Gerardian valley need to spread gently, flawlessly into view.

The Wikipedia entry for *Cleavage* shows as an example John Sargent's spectacular full-length portrait of *Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau* but the great expanse of bosom in the painting has the warmth and flatness of a porcelain dinner plate. There is more to cleavage than restrained display.

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Since writing this five years ago I was invited to a distinguished gathering where an award was given to a woman in her thirties. The chair, a lady academic likeable as one would expect but dry in looks, duly introduced the woman whose achievements in a male dominated field were truly awe inspiring. She stood up by the rostrum to deliver her own speech astounding the male members of the audience with the display of a stunning cleavage. Not just a modest indication, but two cupolas melting into each other in a deeply cut dress, a truely unforgettable bosom. She also had a pretty face, perfect teeth, completely winning smile and length of eyelashes to stir a sandstorm every time she blinked. The question is, as she already had everything, why did she wish to appear like a Hollywood film star posing for the cameras. Those attending consisted of, as is usual on such occasions, dull middle-aged men who achieved much in life, accompanied by their equally dull looking middle-aged wives. All as unappealing to the opposite sex as possible, on par for attending a serious occasion. Then, like a thunderbolt the cleavage appeared in their midst, but for what purpose? This being England everyone pretended not to notice but of course they did. Was it an invitation to the men who were past it to enter phantasy land, or was it to make the females cringe from 'bad taste' or more like from jealousy? How could a man concentrate on what she said when his eyes immediately dropped on breasts that even Gina could not have bettered. Such titillation is control, showing something that the viewer desires but cannot have.

Writing as a man what titillates women is a mystery, I am at a loss to understand why someone who is not good looking still arouses passion. There are members of my sex who think that unbuttoning their shirts bearing their chest appeals to women but generally a swagger in a smart suit must be it, I can just see women reading this say: 'he has no idea!'. Then there is the titillation as a show of superiority. On weekend evenings there is a line of expensive, over-designed cars in Sloane Street outside a hotel. The latest show-off Ferraris, Lamborghinis, BMWs mingle with snub nosed Rolls and Bentleys owned by middle east visitors who probably have never done a day's work. They can own these thanks to a quirk of geology siting their countries on pools of black gold. Their sole way to show off, lacking outstanding ability, is with their sports cars that take an acrobat to get into. No matter, the

aficionados gather there with cameras, their frustration of not having one of those dripping with envy. The haves titillate the have nots in a most vulgar display.

Titillation, the flaunting of cleavage, is age old and came into its own in the eighteenth century then receded during the reign of the arch-prude Queen Victoria who certainly would not have been amused at that gathering. Now cleavage titillation is back with a vengeance. Those who display it add to the stature of the male companion and say to the staring frustrated sods: you can look at me but only possess me in your eyes, I am out of bounds. This is what tests the civility we are brought up with, keeping the male beast under control, except, that sometimes it escapes making unwelcome approaches to women putting them in danger.

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