



The Culture-Breast

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The Culture-Breast: A New Clinical Concept

Noreen Giffney

If you search for the word 'breast' in PEP-Web (1998-), an online subscription-based database of books, articles and videos relating to psychoanalysis, you will discover over 10,000 references. Despite this, the breast is not recognised as a clinical concept in the same way as other concepts, for example, transference, projective identification or containment. By which I mean, the psychical operations represented by the term 'the breast' have not been mapped out in the same detail. The breast appears frequently but it is usually as an actor on some other stage, such as within the wider context of the object relations forming part of the paranoid-schizoid or depressive positions. Having said that, there has been a lively engagement with different configurations of the breast as a part-object, as people attend to the nuances inherent in terms, such as 'good/bad breast', 'penis-breast', 'toilet-breast', 'breast claustrum', 'patched breast', to name but a few. The psychoanalytic discourses of the breast have been of particular interest to me over the past few years, as I have been thinking about how and why we engage with cultural objects and the psychical reverberations of those experiences in our work with patients in the consulting room.

What happens to us emotionally and unconsciously when we listen to a song, watch a film, encounter an art object, or read a piece of literature? How might our encounters with cultural objects be understood as a feeding experience for our minds? How might cultural experiences be understood as part of the environment-individual set up for our psychological development and wellbeing? How might the way we engage with cultural experiences relate back to our earliest encounters with the breast as infants? What is the difference between identifying with and using a cultural object? What might our experiences with cultural objects tell us about ourselves? What happens psychically when our encounters with cultural objects become psychopathological? Why are these questions relevant for our clinical work with patients? These are some of the questions that have been preoccupying me as I have been writing my book entitled *The Culture-Breast in Psychoanalysis: Cultural Experiences and the Clinic* (2021). I introduce 'the culture-breast', a new clinical concept, to explore the formative influence of cultural experiences in our lives, and their central importance in the internal

worlds of patients and psychoanalytic clinical practitioners inside and outside the consulting room.

The breast operates concretely in psychoanalysis as a word to refer to the body part or bottle that feeds the infant. It encompasses the feeding experience, including what is happening emotionally and unconsciously with regards to the mechanisms of introjection and projection. Our experience with the breast is one that will stay with us for the rest of our lives, in spite of the fact that we will be unable to recall it, and will thus impact on our future relations with ourselves and our objects. It will, in other words, form part of the unconscious texture of our experience of the world around us. At a more symbolic level, the breast gestures towards the psychical processes by which we encounter an experience, process it and make meaning of it, if we have the capacity to do so. The culture-breast relates particularly to how cultural objects become bound up with these experiences, whether we are aware of it or not. Cultural objects are incorporated, introjected and identified with, split off, projected and evacuated like other experiences. They give containment, provide framing for our screen memories, can function as the glue that holds a psychic retreat together, and offer us opportunities to learn from experience, if we are fortunate enough to have the psychical space to make use of them. For some patients who have experienced environmental deprivation, cultural objects can become a being rather than simply a doing, enmeshed with the psychic structures of the personality. In this instance, patients relate not just *to* their cultural objects but *through* them, in which case the cultural object operates as part of a defensive system through which experiences become filtered. In these instances, the patient needs to be weaned off the culture-breast through the transference relationship, and indeed this psychopathological functioning of the culture-breast becomes palpable through the transference-countertransference dynamic.

Over the past eighteen months while the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on every facet of our lives, many of us have become more aware of our investment in cultural objects. Those of us privileged enough to sit in our homes, 'locked down', gorged on television boxsets, visited art exhibitions virtually, listened to album after album, and read or endeavoured to read some of the books in our 'to read' pile. We feasted on cultural objects and our worlds grew bigger, if only for a second. These experiences held us, contained our distress, facilitated our regression and lined the walls of our psychic retreat. They mopped up our anxiety and gave us hope that someday what we were experiencing, collectively yet differently and by no means

equally, would end. In the early months of the pandemic films like *Contagion* (2011) and *Outbreak* (1995), about deadly viruses ravaging through the population yet ultimately brought under control, were gobbled up by audiences eager to witness the horrors unfold before them. Fictionalised productions have also appeared, which focus directly on Covid-19, such as the film *Songbird* (2020) or the feature-length television film, *Help* (2021). Why have these cultural objects proved to be so popular? There are many reasons; I will mention one. Covid-19 has highlighted the precarity of life, our vulnerability and ultimately the ever-present uncertainty that we live with, but usually repress or split off to get on with our day. The situation we find ourselves in is, for many, deeply anxiety provoking. There is a free-floating anxiety persecuting many and pervading the social. For a couple of hours, these cultural objects soak up the too-muchness of experience and provide a frame for the uncanniness of an environment that feels like fiction and real life have been turned inside out. For a short time, the culture-breast does its necessary work.

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