DIANA AND SARAH: Images of Ourselves

Diana Simmonds

In Today's People the title of this epic was, inevitably perhaps, shortened to concentrate on Sarah and Diana, but the title is really "Sarah and Diana - images of ourselves". And by that I mean that I see them literally as images of "us" as in western women, Australian women, women of the late 20th century. They are true representations of ourselves and I believe that in looking at them we can see what has happened to "us" in the last ten or fifteen years. What is happening to us now. And what we can expect to happen to us in the near future — our future. And I'd like to think — and that we should all think — about what we can and should do about it.

I'd like to look over some of the events of the past six years in a kind of chronology — with some jumpcuts and flashbacks — to point up where and what I believe are significant matters for us all to consider.

In 1981, Lady Diana Spencer descended, fully fledged and virgin, on the British media and public. The then successful leftwing publishing house, Pluto Press, decided they needed a light-hearted piece about her in their next Year Book of world events. They asked me to do it. For some reason, it's usually me who's asked to do this kind of thing. I would never have been asked to write Hamlet.

The thing to bear in mind about Diana is that it had to be light-hearted in order to illustrate that we weren't taken in by the hype and weren't selling out to the running dog lackeys of increased sales and mass popularity. At the time, you may remember, Britain had just celebrated two undiluted years of Mrs. Thatcher and was in need of a lolly to take away the nasty taste. The "fairytale" princess, as she was inevitably dubbed, was made to order. Particularly for Fleet Street.

The warning signs for women came very early: Diana's uncle, one of the more toadlike Spencers of Althorp, went on national television to personally guarantee her virginity. This astonishing statement was taken as, FIRST of all, an unquestioned truth and, SECOND, a reasonable and unquestioned statement to make about a person. It didn't occur to the interviewer to ask how the old goat knew she was a virgin; after all, how
DO you ensure a girl’s virginity except by physical examination. And neither did it occur to anyone to be outraged that the state of her hymen was a talking point and, by definition, public property.

At the time, women on the left, feminists, were caught in a curious position: to be offended by Diana’s treatment by the media and to voice a protest or defence somehow was transformed into a defence of the monarchy and of privilege and privileged women. Many women felt appalled and puzzled but nevertheless didn’t say anything, me included. It was this line of male left thinking that held women’s issues, that is, the kinds of things women wanted to place on the political agenda, to be distractions and unnecessary to the real work of promoting the revolution. The temporary paralysis and guilt it caused in women permitted the most spirited and imaginative leftwing attacks on the Thatcher government to rise to the heights of the demo March chant “Funk Thatcher”. And also allowed this entirely dreary and sexist response to go unchallenged.

Indeed, on THE Wedding Day, the official alternative celebration in London was an outdoor festival of reggae and warm beer which went under the title “Funk the Wedding” and was closely accompanied by the standard “Funk Thatcher” rituals. The feminist magazine Spare Rib ran a more carefully thought out, and worded, campaign with their best selling “Don’t Do It Di” badges, but it was predictable that, for many more millions of young girls and women across the country, the dream had become reality: the frog had been kissed and Diana had become a princess. They were all for it. Given half the chance and they’d do it along with Di, no worries.

Never mind that the frog remained a frog.

He was a rather pleasant frog by the standards of the day and unconscionably rich too. When they married I remember that someone did an estimate of his daily income as someing like £8,000 sterling, which I always thought was probably an underestimate. Anyway, the point is that, in material terms alone, the rewards were incalculable and, probably even more important, just as Barbara Cartland had been predicting for decades in her romantic novels. Diana’s fairy-floss step-grandmother had never stopped plugging away at the rewards of virginity and chastity and nuptial bliss despite Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem and years of women’s liberation.

In HER books, every good girl lived happily ever after and that meant (1) that she was a virgin to start with, (2) that she kept it that way despite being crushed to the chest of the huskyvoiced hero in the first six pages, and that (3) she still kept it that way despite the temptations of passion and various different evil-intentioned lust merchants until, finally, between two and six pages before the end, she succumbs to the rising wave of ecstasy and desire and submits her will to his. But this definitely does NOT mean she surrenders her virginity, either before marriage, or before the end of the book. That vital epistemological break finally occurs in the imagination of readers, it does not sully Miss Cartland’s pages, nor tax her creative powers; she does have two sons and several Pekingeses, but I think she actually got them at Harrods.

But, seriously, these books are worth examination. There are dozens of them, and again, quite seriously, you only need to read one as the plots are as entirely interchangeable as that precis suggests. It would be a mistake to dismiss them, though, and not least because those scores of books sell in the multi-millions. They’ve been translated into nearly every language except English, which Miss Cartland remains stubbornly and blithely unable to write — although I don’t suppose either she or her bank manager care a fig about that.
Then again, despite, or maybe because of, the new realism of the '80s that we see in soap life like East Enders and Brookside, there is still a determination, by millions of young women, to continue to believe in the Cartland-style fairytale romance version of life. And when you consider the bastardry of daily life for the average working class girl in Britain today, it isn't surprising.

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There are two arguments at work when it comes to the power of TV soap and the Mills and Boon romances. One says that people aren't stupid and that they know it's escapism and that they're deliberately choosing it for just that purpose. The second argument is that people identify with the soap characters or the situations to be found in penny-dreadful romances and that this is dangerously misleading.

The first argument is probably true when it comes to the images of things like Dallas and Dynasty which are clearly fantasy and enjoyed as such. East Enders and Brookside are the other side of the coin. There is nothing glamorous about the situations depicted in these two radical soaps and they attract mail by the truckload, most of which confirms that people see their own misfortunes and problems reflected each week on the screen.

By "radical soap" I mean that they've moved quite radically away from what we've come to expect of TV soap. A Country Practice and Coronation Street, for instance, have always been tagged on the realistic side of soap — real situations, real issues, real prime ministers, everyday life. Both a bit cosy though and quite unlike the two new ones which started with deliberate policies of butting head

... on into the actual social issues, like long-term unemployment, the plight of the aged, racism, and so on. There is no falsely rosy glow over Brookside Close or Albert Square, they do tell it like it is.

Which is where the Cartland school of escape comes in and can be seen in the light of the second argument against it. With the descent to earth of Princess Diana, the fiction was made flesh. For millions of young girls, she was living proof that living happily ever after was something to strive for, and was attainable, with effort. It has to be admitted, though, that East Enders is Princess Diana's favourite TV program and she is an avid reader of Cartland novels. So you could say that, as the theory said to the practice, "honey, it doesn't signify".

The conclusion of my book Princess Di — the National Dish, written in late 1982, was that Diana was destined to be the disastrous icon of the '80s. I don't think I was wrong. On the one hand, the issue of her virginity put women right back in the centre of male ownership wrangles. The Chief of the Tribe, the King, could not be seen to possess a lesser man's cast-off, or what would that say about their collective male pride and standing in the eyes of the world.

On the other hand, her appearance and the emphasis on her weight put pressure right back on women once again to Look Right. To strive to achieve the ideal Size Ten. For ten years, feminists had been arguing that a woman should not be judged merely by the way she looked, particularly when that look depended on artifice and self-inflicted torture. Dieting, as a legitimate and desirable occupation, had just begun to give way to notions of healthy and sensible eating when Diana came along and blew it all out of the window again. It clearly pointed up the impossible demands being made of young women. Diana was praised for her desirable "slimness" and "model girl" figure and then made to suffer the "has Di got killer anorexia slimmers' disease?" treatment.

The demands of polar opposites is the most common dilemma for women: the "good" girl is the one who is desirable for the purposes of marriage; on the other hand, the "bad" girl is the one the boys go for and "good" girls who stay that way apparently don't get asked out a second time. How does a girl win? As time went by, Diana further compounded the contradictions by

Like the original Virgin Mother, Diana really has been an impossible act to follow.

... seemingly managing the impossible and incorporating the images of Virgin and Mother in the one perfect Size Ten body.

At this point I think it's worth considering where we get our roles of perfect images and ideal appearance. Advertising is the most pervasive and most influential source of Pictures of Women. None of us can go through a day without seeing, subliminally or otherwise, exactly how we are supposed to look. That some women know and understand the problems of these images doesn't seem to help break their power. Not least because many ads have now taken on the superficial trappings of feminism and neatly turned them around.

So increasingly we have images of apparently independent, even aggressive, young women who, nevertheless, on careful examination, look, and thus indicate, just the opposite. And that is: my aggression is only a titillating obstacle for the observer to overcome and my pout and stance actually mean I am available for sex and really telling the
observer of that availability; there are constant subtle reminders that, as ever, when girls say “no” they really mean “yes”.

And, of course, the girls in the ads are always always always slim to the point of androgyny and definitely not women with breasts, hips, thighs, autonomy and demands.

Princess Diana is an advertising image come to life. She is also a fashion page image come to life. That she is the mother of two children has not destroyed this. She is somehow above the sweat and toil of human undertakings — like sex for instance.

The furore that erupted when pictures of her, heavily pregnant and in a bikini, were splashed across the tabloids was actually not much to do with bad taste and an invasion of privacy (who on Fleet Street has ever cared a hoot for taste and privacy!) but was actually all about the horridly revealed evidence of her womanliness and impending motherhood. Any pregnant woman will know how people, men in particular, shy away from the great big fruitful belly. It is an awesome and fearful thing.

In 1977, Dame Edna Everage said to a reporter from the British Gay News that she felt the only difference between him and her was that although they both came from the same place originally, he was terrified of ever getting anywhere near it again. This is neither a flippant nor a homophobic statement. It sums up the actual state of mind of many gay (and heterosexual) men and it is rarely, if ever, acknowledged.

One of the problems for feminist activists in the ’70s, and for lesbian feminists, was, I think, that although we all knew and privately talked about the fact of gay hostility to women (and frequently, downright hatred of women) it was never taken up as an issue in any way for fear of appearing to be anti-gay in a social climate where such a possibility would be immediately seized upon by those who were anti-gay. Consequently, those gay men who are woman-haters have somehow always been granted the right to be that way. And heterosexual men have never had to think about it anyway, it really has always been their birthright.

And it should be remembered that Peter Sutcliffe was not a weird, freaky monster. Everyone who knew him said he was an ordinary sort of guy. Of course, it did come out that it was really his wife Sonia who was the catalyst for his rampage. It was really her fault. This may sound familiar.

Which brings us back to images of ourselves, and Diana and Sarah. Because they take their cues and clues from the same sources, just like us, but unlike us, the results aren’t made public to millions of people. In the main, public imagery of women is created, as I’ve said, by men. The briefest examination of those images will tell you that they are the creations of people who don’t like women very much. In reality, women are human beings who do not look like adolescent boys unless they’re of the tiny percentage whose bodies can be starved into submission — like Diana and the archetypal girl-boy, Twiggy. And they’re the tiny group of women who become fashion models and impose their bodies on the rest of us.

This image entirely denies full breasts, swelling hips, soft flesh, motherhood and thus, by association,
the hidden horrors that go with them: menstrual blood for instance, and the thing that the ABC will tell you is the most shocking, disgusting and vile word in the English language, the cunt. The fact that "cunt" is still the most derogatory and most viciously used swear word in our society is significant.

Feminist has also become almost a swear word. It's definitely unfashionable right now, a bit like wearing flares.

Backlash, prefigured by the rise and rise of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and the New Right, has been upon us for some time and is growing in strength. Feminism has always had to contend with the "bra-burning women's libber" or "smelly screeching lezzos" phraseology of the daily press. Derision Theology is a traditional method of preventing any new idea being taken seriously and is very effective. Unfortunately, the left isn't too good at it — "Funk Thatcher" is proof of that. Then there's the inside attack, unwitting or otherwise, which is invariably the most difficult to fend off. The most damaging knock at feminism that has occurred in recent years is also symptomatic of the reactionary times.

About three years ago, Chatto & Windus published a collection of women poets which was subtitled "post-feminist". I think it was the first time that term was used. It has since become common currency. Whatever it was supposed to mean, it has been taken to mean that feminism is now over. Official. Feminists have said so themselves. In other words, "post feminism" has been taken quite literally as "after feminism". At the time it created a whole rash of instances where writers and broadcasters spoke of "now that the aims of feminism have been achieved" or "now that the most modern wave of feminism is over", and used as their proof and reference point the term post feminist. And it is now post feminist and it has now irrevocably entered the language as "post-feminism". Fact.

The original meaning is lost and is also irrelevant now. That there was a change of gear, a change in public attitudes, a change in society, a change in feminist thinking, is not the point at issue. It is one of semantics, and I think is one more symptom of the swing to backlash, albeit unwitting and unconscious.

The next major pointer in the onward march of reaction was, and is, Sarah Ferguson. But along the way we can see all the signs, some larger and others less obvious, but all there for the observant to pick up. At first Sarah Ferguson looked like being a better bet for women than the impossible dreamgirl, the Princess of Wales. For a start she was labelled accessible and ordinary by her nickname, Fergie. Nothing remote or glamorous there. That in itself is actually a clue as to how she has been cut down and remade by the press.

As the papers were keen to tell us, Sarah had a big bum, a bosom, ample thighs, was a bit of a plumpo and — ye gods — she had a past.

Diana has actually taken the line of possible attainment, that is, where an ordinary woman strives for the unreal images of fashion/tv/movies, Diana has taken the boundaries of possibility right into fantasy land. She is indistinguishable from Sue Ellen Ewing or Krystle Carrington, except that she's almost 30 years younger.

Sarah brought all that right back to earth again. As the papers were keen to tell us, she had a big bum, a bosom, ample thighs, was a bit of a plumpo and — ye gods — she had a past.

A past is Fleet Street's euphemism for a busted hymen, of course. They didn't exactly say she was a good-time gababout floozy, but they did list all her lovers in minute detail. All three of them. At 27 she could be said to have given promiscuity a bad name. Nevertheless, as it turned out, her long-gone virginity didn't matter half as much as her shape and her clothes — the way she looked. These became front-page national concerns in Britain, and also sent the fasion editors of women's magazines scuttling for the archives to dust off the images of the '50s, which was the last time women looked remotely like the real thing. Remote is probably the word, though, because gut-crushing girdles, mandatory 19-inch waists, cantilevered padded bras, pencil skirts and winklepicker stiletto-heeled shoes immediately cancelled out any truly threatening feminity.

Like Diana, only a few years before, Sarah had to endure endless public discussions of how to improve the way she looked — not dissimilar to how millions of young western women are treated by this society, except that her ordeal involved thousands of tons of newsprint and hours of television punditry. So, although at first it looked like Sarah was going to go her own way, be her own woman, thumb her nose at the image makers, kick up her heels at popular opinion and so on, it was perhaps inevitable that we would open the papers one morning to find ... The Sarah Ferguson Diet. You too can be like Fergie and trim away those unwanted inches.

Unwanted by whom? She had obviously been happy with her inches. Andrew had obviously been happy with them too. So who didn't want her inches? At the same time, Linda Koslowski was undergoing trial by camera when she revealed a dimpled bum in Crocodile Dundee. It seems that cellulite — whatever that is — is the most offensive bodily characteristic a woman can display in public. I don't know any man who prefers the skeletal androgyne to a woman who looks womanly (with breasts, thighs, hips, bum, curves, cellulite and all). Whenever there is a magazine survey of ordinary Joes they all say they like a cuddly womanly woman, that women feel nice and that the skinny minny boy-girl isn't their ideal at all.

In other words, it's Sarah who is closer to Everywoman, not Diana, who is a constructed icon, an image.

So what are the forces at work that compel a Sarah and millions like her to starve themselves into someone's idea of acceptable appearance? By starving, I mean dieting. I'm continually amazed at
how easily offensive things can be rendered neutral by using another word. Sellafied doesn't sound nearly as life-threatening as Windscale, for instance. Harvesting is a much nicer description than logging, as the woodchip industry has quietly realised. And, of course, dieting is socially acceptable, essential even, whereas starving doesn't have quite the right sound.

So we come back again to the hatred and fear of woman. It is inescapable and it is almost impossible to talk about. I feel a compulsion to apologise for bringing up the topic, to be reassuring and actually, to not talk about it at all. The attacker should succeed in making the attacked apologetic and placatory is nothing new in relations between men and women: ask anyone in a rape crisis centre.

Feminists have for long been branded man-haters. Some feminists, in fact many women, do hate men and for extremely good reasons. But it does seem that, after 15 years of repeating like a cracked record — Feminism isn't anti-men, it's pro-women — that we still haven't got very far and it is high time we figured out why not. Because it is effectively allowing the onward march of reaction, just as 'Funk Thatcher' allowed sexism to be an unquestioned part of mainstream left political response. It is also effectively preventing any further human progress — which is the aim I guess.

The fact is that feminists are so busy reassuring the world that they are not manhaters, that the really urgent and central issue — that of woman hatred — is hardly allowed to surface at all. Similarly, as I said earlier, the misogyny of gay men is allowed to flourish undisturbed. And, as so much of the public imagery of women is created by gay men, it really is something that has to be placed in the centre of the personal-political spotlight. By women. Sooner rather than later. All around there is evidence that the “quiche eaters”, the “muesli eaters”, the “sensitive male”, the “feminist man” is in retreat because, along with the rise of the New Right is a resurgence in the idea that it is OK again to be a man. This means a smash hit movie like Top Gun where the jet pilot hero quite literally rides a multimillion dollar phallic symbol the sky and wins the palpitating heart heart of an older technocrat female. That it is also an archetypal buddy movie and a fair example of homo-erotics is also worth noting. You can see the teenage boyos leaving the cinema with swaggering crotches and the newly affirmed right to conquest in their minds. It is really scary.

The menopausal middle class has similarly acceptable New Man imagery in Mission and The Mosquito Coast. Both movies are primarily about the male concerns of masculine pride, honour, strangled emotions and bonding. In The Mission, the trail of doom and disaster is triggered off by a plainly culpable femme fatale. In The Mosquito Coast, the wife and female lead is actually called “Mother” and is indeed cast in the role of trailing around behind her asinine husband, picking up the pieces while he plays cowboys with their lives. It is grim that these two very expensive and prestigious movies were chosen by Anna Maria Dell’Oso as her films of the year and were labelled profoundly meaningful and moving. This does serve to indicate how far we have to go to get out of the mess we’re in.

Diana and Sarah are good shorthand symbols to show us where we are right now and what we have to do. We could consider the strong images of women that are around: Ripley in Aliens perhaps. The matriarchs of the soaps. We could think about what it means when all the major women stars of the moment are around 40 or more and make no bones about it: Sigourney Weaver, Meryl Streep, Sharon Gless, Linda Evans, Linda Grey and Joan Collins, for instance. What happened to Hollywood’s obsession with youth, where an actress was on the scrap-heap at 35? What does it say about the dubious nature of the matriarchal image, the strong woman image? We could think about what it means that Joan Collins and the other Dallasty woman look more like drag queens than real women — or is it the other way round?

But what I think we have to come to grips with is misogyny, which is the major force in our society.

That means male power. Male power is exclusive — women are excluded. No one has ever given up power willingly. So presumably it has to be taken. That’s where revolution has to come. It has long been a fact. It has to be reasserted as such. It’s a bloody revolution, too, it’s the world’s longest running undeclared civil war and women are dying every day. Millions already have. So, the real socialist revolution is the sexual revolution. Not the one that was supposed to have happened in the 70s when everyone fucked everyone else, took their bedroom doors off the hinges and got into non-monogamy.

Profound though all that might have been in causing a shift of sorts, it actually did nothing to disturb the real power bases and actually quite effectively provided the distraction from the forward march that women’s issues have always been accused of. It’s fatuous to suppose that the revolution is going to happen as it did in 1917. This isn’t Russia. The poverty of the poorest members of this society is as nought compared to that of the Russian peasantry. Poverty in the West is as nought when you consider that of Africa or South America.

The traditional notion of bloody revolution occurs when a slow lingering death by starvation and no prospect of human dignity is the only other alternative.

Which is actually where some women are already at.

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