

## **Remember, Body: The Female Body in the Art of Theology and Photography**

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### **Abstract**

The female body is being attacked throughout time, from its commercialization in advertising to its objectification in the metaverse where everything is possible and everything is for consumption, in a false world made of illusions and immaterial humans that coexist. The metaverse increasingly promotes the abolition of human corporeality. The corporeality of women in Christianity is given a different meaning through the presence of the Virgin Mary who sanctifies every female body. The Virgin Mary becomes a place (*chora*) of the uncontainable (*achoritou*) that contains the inconceivable, the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human. Also, the acceptance of the Virgin Mary to contain the divine miracle in her body makes her part of the divine economy. Another example cited in this paper is that of the Old Testament and more specifically that of the *Song of Songs*, where the significance of every feminine detail that the human body carries becomes apparent. The poetic photographic glance of the British photographer Bill Brandt (1904-1983) searches for the woman in a fragmentary way, bringing her from darkness to light. In his work *Perspective of Nudes* (1950) we can find female pictures that focus on specific parts of the female body and that resemble the poetic words of the *Song of Songs*. So, this paper combines comparatively the apocalyptic way of theology and photography as a chance to speak anew for the importance of the female human body and its matter in contrast to the immaterial future of the metaverse.

*Keywords:* materiality, metaverse, sense, photograph, apocalypse

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## Introduction

Body is the whole physical structure of a human, the main part of a body not including the head, or not including the head, arms, and legs (body noun from the Oxford Advanced American Dictionary). The female body was always in the spotlight. Today's society uses the female body with multiple ways: in industries, in advertisements, in magazines, in pornos. The usage of the female body is a matter that should concern today's society, maybe more than ever. Technology and internet became the tools to have access to innumerable female bodies. Bodies that do not belong to anyone but are free to be observed. Imaginary, real, symbolic bodies that in the digital world are represented as other existences (Mitrou, 2024). Defenseless female bodies that are all the same: ready to be consumed.

Theology has a dynamic speech that could place new ways of human's perception, give new dimensions in today's metaverse reality. Metaverse is a parallel universe that has no materiality. Reality is the area, the set of existing things, situations or conditions, the objective world as it exists and is perceived (reality noun from the Dictionary of Standard Modern Greek). By reality in Theology, we mean the created beings, the sensible as well as the conceivable, from the angels to the microparticles that are subject to a "finite relativity" and are characterized by materiality, temporality, and physicality (Matsoukas, 2005). Intangible is that which has no material existence; the incorporeal, the spiritual. Metaphorically we mean something very transparent, ethereal, airless as if it were immaterial (immaterial adjective from the Dictionary of Standard Modern Greek).

Today we are becoming devotees to a technology that is constantly developing to such an extent that even the scientists themselves who, for example, research artificial intelligence, cannot assess its risks and possible effects on humanity and society (Metz, 2023). Even more, there is talk of a meta-universe (metaverse) whose universally accepted definition still does not exist. Some believe it could be an improved version of the internet or a new frontier of online interaction between the physical and digital worlds through avatars. That is, a parallel, virtual universe where everything is and becomes digital according to the standards of video games (see *Sims*) and various platforms, digital media in general (VR headsets, computers, game consoles and phones). In this parallel digital universe people get digital experiences that are connected to real life (wedding, birthday). Matthew Ball, an entrepreneur, and former Amazon executive, characterizes in his essay the meta-universe as "a device (hardware) or otherwise a digital experience" (Ehrlich, 2023). Ball argues that the meta-universe will be a new set of technologies, applications, and economic opportunities. A whole digital world where game companies, fashion companies and social networks will make millions selling digital products and virtual experiences. Digital buying and selling extends to the virtual real estate market (Ehrlich, 2023).

## The Female Body and the Holiness

The created nature of man consists of soul and body and is recapitulated in the human person as the unity of his nature, in his totality, as otherness and, even more, as unrepeatable distinctiveness (Matsoukas, 2005). Man is created by the Triune God ("let us make") in the image and likeness, in male and female (*Gen.* 1: 26). The image is a possibility that cannot be understood without the human body (Stamoulis, 2022). The image of God concerns the whole man, with his body and not in part (Gregory of Nyssa, *PG* 44, *De hominis opificio*, 185C). The creation of woman from Adam's side makes her equal to man (*Gen.* 2: 21-23). Virgin Mary is the woman human model that free willingly accepted God's will to carry in

her body his Word, Jesus Christ. Her positive answer to the holy mystery of the incarnation makes her part of the divine economy. Holy fathers spoke about Virgin Mary, and they likened her with the Church. The Church is likened to woman. A representative textual example of the relation of Christ with the Church is the *Song of songs* (*Song of Sol.*, 1-8) in which we read about the poetic love of two lovers. The two lovers represent the unity of Christ with the Church (Gregory of Nyssa, PG 44, *In Cantica Cantic Omilia*, 836AD).

Virgin Mary is the woman face and the female body that incarnated the human's salvation through Jesus Christ. She became a worldwide symbol of compassion and consolation, motherly ideal love, the person who combines the mixed feeling of joy and sadness (*charmolypti*), the "as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). The joy for the birth of Jesus Christ and the sadness for his suffer and death. Virgin Mary keeps all these characteristics and energies that make human part of the Church. Virgin Mary also reveals the ecclesiastical mystery that expresses the way that man acts (Stamoulis, 2005).

Theotokos is called the saint of all saints because she reveals the mystery of Christ's incarnation. And Christ's incarnation reveals Virgin Mary's mystery too. Virgin Mary experienced the reality of being the mother of God. Virgin Mary is the woman that had a very essential role in the mystery of salvation. She is the tear and the joy, the model of the restoration of the real unity, the holy sensitivity of the mother that had the responsibility for all humanity and the mystery of salvation (Stamoulis, 2004). She is the mortal female human that accepted the God's will, carried the Son of God in her human mortal female body and gave birth to the human's salvation through Jesus Christ. She is the woman that carried the miracle of salvation and the woman that succeeded to become the saint of all the saints through and with her female body, acclaiming every female body that has the possibility to host and incorporate the holiness.

### **Bill Brandt (1904–1983): From Darkness to Light**

The British photojournalist and photographer that was born in Hamburg, Germany. He traveled to Austria for a doctor visit, and he finally worked in a photography studio (1927). Bill Brandt travelled to Paris and collaborated with Man Ray. He returned to London, in 1931 and published his pictures in the illustrated press (*Picture Post*, *Lilliput*, *Weekly Illustrated*, *Minotaure*, *Verve*, *Harper's Bazaar*). He pictured the British society but after the Second World War he focused to female nude and landscape. These two elements, the female body, and the space, enter each other, and create a dialogue between darkness and light (Droth& Messier, 2021). The bare female body is photographed as an instant win of beauty (*kallos*) and light, a scream of life after the darkness of death of war, a limit between life and death, "a triumph of the skin" (Kangelaris, 2020; Martínez, 2022).

Bill Brandt's photography exposures many elements of different realities and perspectives. His photography revelations are divided into social documentaries, portraits, nudes, and landscapes. His black and white nudes are a great characteristic category that he started discovering in the 1940s and more systematically in the 1950s. According to the photographer that shaped modern photography, "A good nude photograph can be erotic, but certainly not sentimental or pornographic" (Jay, 1971). For three decades he focused on female nude, and he gave new aesthetical dimensions to woman's body and corporality or corpo-reality (Kangelaris, 2023). Every creative decade opened a new window to woman's everyday wonder. Bill Brandt captures the femininity and the reality of the human body in every photographic fragment.

Brandt's series of nudes that created *Perspective of Nudes* (1950), "a pictorial exploration" photographed at coastal sites in Normandy and Sussex (David & Brandt, 1985). This project is unique for its pieces of the female life in the pictures. The female revealed parts on the photographs are like pieces of puzzle which seem to have the potential to unite. Every female body, every female body part is different and unique. But at the same time every female body part can have a reference to *any* body part as an ecumenical female body. The ecumenical female body is close to the meaning of the common body of the church that has its reference to the real poet, the creator of every created reality. It is a poetical metamorphosis of the photograph because the poetic element exceeds the simple information (Rivellis, 2020). The nude bodies are like being transformed into sculptures (Wolfe, 2022). Sculptures that are seeking the light of their true, pure nature after the postwar darkness. This metamorphosis could refer us to the intense white light of Christ's metamorphosis in mount Tabor (*Mt 17:1-2*). A transformative, apocalyptic light by which everything is glorified and sanctified.

It is a fact that Bill Brandt's nudes are a metabasis from the darkness of the close spaces to the light of the open air of the daylight. His first nudes were very specific: women of the shadows, women that reminded Alfred Hitchcock's films, *femmes fatales* and models that were recognizable (Jeffrey, 1994). His 1950s nudes and especially in *Perspective of Nudes* the women are transformed into a pure, natural light. It is an apocalypse of the woman's body freedom, and it is an apocalypse of the light through the shadows. It is also an aesthetical apocalypse of the photographer, from the closeness and darkness to the openness of the sun (David & Brandt, 1985).

**Figure 1**

*Bill Brandt, East Sussex Coast, 1958, Gift of Steven E. and Phyllis Gross, The Art Institute of Chicago*



**Figure 2**

*Bill Brandt, East Sussex Coast, 1960, Gift of Jeffrey Hugh Newman, The Art Institute of Chicago*



### **The Poetics of the Female Body**

These poetical fragments are erotic fragments. They look like clear forms that they could represent the abstract art. Pictures that reveal the honesty the female humanity in external places, as parts of nature within the nature. These human parts of the female body are hands, breasts, knees, fingers, elbows. All of them become symbols of femininity and symbols of the woman. The eroticism of the women figures, and the female parts do not identify with sexuality. These nudes are not pornographic. They are poetical transformations of the real female body, a “surgical metamorphosis” of the reality through the human senses, without missing sensuality (Rivellis, 1993).

In the fourth chapter of the *Song of Songs*, we read about the female’s lover description with a poetic language. Poetic words become poetic images that can incarnate in Bill Brandt’s nudes:

He

4

How beautiful you are, my darling!

Oh, how beautiful!

Your eyes behind your veil are doves.

Your hair is like a flock of goats  
descending from the hills of Gilead.

2

Your teeth are like a flock of sheep just shorn,  
coming up from the washing.

Each has its twin;  
not one of them is alone.

3  
Your lips are like a scarlet ribbon;  
    your mouth is lovely.  
Your temples behind your veil  
    are like the halves of a pomegranate.

4  
Your neck is like the tower of David,  
    built with courses of stone;  
on it hang a thousand shields,  
    all of them shields of warriors.

5  
Your breasts are like two fawns,  
    like twin fawns of a gazelle  
    that browse among the lilies.

6  
Until the day breaks  
    and the shadows flee,  
I will go to the mountain of myrrh  
    and to the hill of incense.

7  
You are altogether beautiful, my darling;  
    there is no flaw in you.

8  
Come with me from Lebanon, my bride,  
    come with me from Lebanon.  
Descend from the crest of Amana,  
    from the top of Senir, the summit of Hermon,  
from the lions' dens  
    and the mountain haunts of leopards.

9  
You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;  
    you have stolen my heart  
with one glance of your eyes,  
    with one jewel of your necklace.

10  
How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!  
    How much more pleasing is your love than wine,  
and the fragrance of your perfume  
    more than any spice!

11  
Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;  
    milk and honey are under your tongue.  
The fragrance of your garments  
    is like the fragrance of Lebanon.

12  
You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride;  
    you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain.

13  
Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates  
    with choice fruits,  
    with henna and nard,

14

nard and saffron,  
calamus and cinnamon,  
with every kind of incense tree,  
with myrrh and aloes  
and all the finest spices.

15

You are a garden fountain,  
a well of flowing water  
streaming down from Lebanon.

She

16

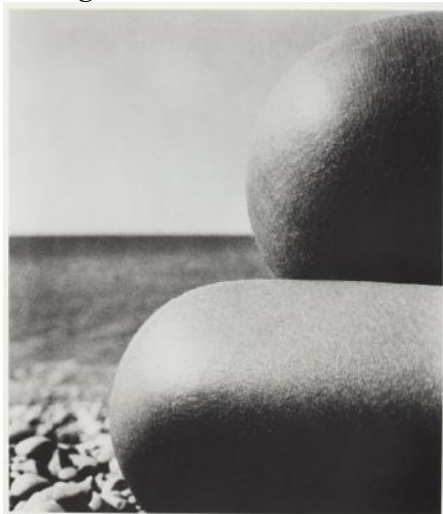
Awake, north wind,  
and come, south wind!  
Blow on my garden,  
that its fragrance may spread everywhere.  
Let my beloved come into his garden  
and taste its choice fruits (*Song of Sol.*, 4:1-16).

Poetic words such as *hair*, *mouth*, *neck*, *breasts*, that describe the perfect beauty of the woman in its every detail (Cantera Ortiz, 1998). The female body becomes erotic and creates an ectasis between the two lovers (Arvanitis, 2020). Additionally, in these lyrics we can also find poetic words that describe nature: *hills*, *shadows*, *sealed fountain*, *garden fountain*, and the same time describe the female body through curved lines and symbolisms. The garden symbolizes the human body, the human sexuality (Arvanitis, 2020, O'Donnell, 2023). Nature is described as the undefined landscapes of Bill Brandt's *Perspective of Nudes* (1950) series of nudes (Brandt, 1983). The *Song of Songs* is an allegory that describes the relationship between Christ or Yahweh and the nymph is the Church or Israel. But this is only one hermeneutics that is more dominant in Orthodox theology. The *Song of Songs* is a text that is not used in the liturgic life of the Church. One possible aspect of this cause is the fact that the Old Testament's texts are not used as much as the New Testament's. The other cause, which is much more possible, is the fact that the Christianity seems to be got afraid of the sexuality and eroticism of this poem (Stamoulis, 2019). More interpretations refer to divine marriage or hierogamy, to the engagement of Christ with the Church, to a collection of songs that praise the faithful love, to a literature hermeneutics of the goodness of love to the couple (Kaimakis, 1991).

Poetic, aesthetical female parts that shape a new female body, and in which every inch of the materiality and corporality is praised and underlined to its every detail. A whole microcosmos under the microscope of the art where every detail matters, every spot and every "meaningless" detail that might seem ordinary and dull, can have new meaning and shape. Moreover, the art of photography and the art of theology could also meet through abstract art and apophatic theology. An effort not to determine the essence, because the real essence is unapproachable. So abstract art and apophatic theology try to describe the undefinable, as tools (Papadaki, 2010). The separated part is a revelation of the whole, of the totality of the body. It functions as a symbol, as a partial revealing reality.

**Figure 3**

*Bill Brandt, Baie des Anges, France, 1958, Gift of Helen Harvey Mills, The Art Institute of Chicago*

**Conclusions**

Metaverse is a new fake parallel reality, but it is also a human invention. Technology offers the tools to man to go as far as he can get. But the risk of losing the value of the human life that emerges from all this rapid technocratic evolution is lurking. Humanity by itself is also a risk, but in different ways because this risk maintains the importance of real humanity on the move. The real humanity that has its own dynamics, its own human burden of materiality, its real senses, its real glance of the aesthetic world. The woman and her body were always in the spotlight of the industries, advertisements, internet, and pornos. Female body carries innumerable identities that she might did not have chosen. Female body often becomes the map of visual -and not only visual- abuse.

Theology and photography can reveal the female body by giving new perceptions in today's world idol. The female body is the body that can fit the miracle of the holiness and the miracle of human life. Virgin Mary is the human female body that revealed the incarnation of Christ and the mystery of the acceptance of the God's will and salvation in divine economy. Virgin Mary is the female body that can also identified with every female body, every woman. She is the mother of Christ, and the saint of all saints. Her glorified body changed the history and gave hope to humanity that were suffer from daily decay and death. Bill Brand photographed the female body to renew its perception, to move it from the darkness to light, to transform it, to reveal its purity, its sensuality, its femininity, its possibility to a renewal. It is the intensive flash of light exposure that sanctifies the female nude and give to it a new aesthetical dimension and existential proposal.

The aesthetical paths such as the poetical Old Testament's description of the female body in the *Songs of Songs*, and the Bill Brandt's poetical fragments, could awaken the today's society through their aesthetical thrill, and aesthetic culmination. It is a necessity -not only for the female body- but for every human body, to find its identity and tangible reality. We could follow new ways, aesthetical ways to succeed a reconstruction of the female body idea. The female nude needs more than ever its lost paradise.

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