

From nursing Virgins to brelfies: the project of maternal femininity

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Abstract: Contemporary debates about breastfeeding are saturated with ideas about what constitutes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothering, ‘achieved’ or ‘failed’ femininity frequently derived from Christian representations of the Virgin Mother. In this article we trace deeply entrenched values about the maternal breast through the representation of the Madonna del Latte, specifically concentrating on breast ownership and the depiction of unattainable motherhood. The myth of maternal femininity is then explored in relation to contemporary visual discourses of the nursing mother in which the narrative of unattainable or failed maternal femininity is challenged. The performance work of Megan Marsh-McGlone and the phenomenon of sharing ‘brelfies’ on social media are read as indicative of a new relationship to the Mary myth in which mothers expose the cultural fear of achieved maternal femininity. Ultimately, we argue that what is required of mothers is that they are held in a process of becoming maternal and that representations that subvert this imperative signal a shift in the landscape of Marian iconography.

Keywords: breastfeeding; maternal femininity; brelfies; Marian iconography; Renaissance art history

Introduction

Visual representations of breastfeeding are replete with ideas about how to be a good mother and achieve maternal femininity, which are frequently drawn from Christian representations of the Nursing Virgin. In this article we argue that such representations hold mothers in a process of becoming maternal, which ensures that control of their bodies is located elsewhere. We argue that despite the dominance of this visual repertoire there are contemporary interruptions, such as the breastfeeding selfie, in which mothers take back control, both ideologically and visually, thus confronting a profound cultural anxiety about ownership of the nursing woman’s body. The Renaissance motif of the Madonna breastfeeding Christ will be introduced as shaping

and enshrining deeply entrenched and enduring values of motherhood and maternal bodies. The iconography of the Virgin Mother presents a number of themes that remain salient in contemporary narratives of breastfeeding, performances of motherhood and, more broadly, the mythologising of women's bodies. We offer visual analyses of a selection of Nursing Virgin paintings that spotlight aspects of the Mary myth that resonate with these themes, all of which point to the control of women's bodies by patriarchal institutions of power. This is then extended to a discussion of contemporary visual representations of the nursing mother, in particular the breastfeeding selfie, and their potential to challenge the Mary myth.

Mother Mary

Marian cultic veneration has a long history, formed through texts that celebrate her, ceremonies, festivals and pilgrimage sites devoted to her, and the abundant visual and material productions that represent her. Mary's image is ubiquitous in Christian iconography and Marian scholars Shoemaker (2008) and McGuckin (2008) trace evidence of her visual representation back to the fourth century Eastern Roman Empire - the Byzantine Empire - and into the fifth and sixth centuries where, they argue, Marian devotion flourished. Despite this, and despite Mary clearly being referenced as Jesus's mother in the Bible, she plays only a small part in the New Testament. Furthermore, many key beliefs about her – not least her virginity, her Immaculate Conception and her Assumption into heaven – are not clearly evidenced in Scripture (Warner, 1976).

Mary's minor role in the Bible is in contrast to the iconic figure of the Virgin that she became known as. A key part of the cult of the Virgin that endures in contemporary culture is her motherhood, which is narrated in the plethora of art historical material depicting her maternity.

The Virgin's motherhood is symbolised through an aspect of her maternity that is shared with mortal mothers: breastfeeding. There is debate amongst Marian scholars over when and where the earliest images of this type emerged. Lasareff (1938) and his followers argue that the Nursing Virgin motif makes its earliest appearance in a fresco in the catacomb of Priscilla in Rome in the third century while others contest this, for example Parlbay (2008) proposes that the Priscilla fresco may be a funerary portrait of a dead mother and child rather than a Nursing Virgin. There are strong cases for the earliest images of this type appearing in Egypt from the seventh century onwards (see Tran Tam Tinh, 1973, p. 42; and Higgins, 2012, pp. 75-76), while Marina Warner (1976) locates the earliest Nursing Virgin image in a twelfth century mosaic on the façade of the Basilica of Santa Maria in Trastevere in Rome – a temporal and geographical context closer to that with which this motif is most commonly associated. While the origins are disputed, it is certain that the motif of the Madonna breastfeeding Christ was at the height of its popularity and production in Christian art of Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy.

Visual material is particularly significant in forming and re-forming Mary's myth and cult; while reliance on visual material for narrative remains substantial, it was yet more crucial in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, due to low levels of literacy and restricted access to written texts. Lasareff (1938) reports that the Nursing Virgin type was an increasingly popular subject amongst painters and sculptors after the beginning of the twelfth century and into the thirteenth century, reaching its peak in the fourteenth century (pp.34-35) and fifteenth century. Thereafter it was produced in smaller numbers, and by the eighteenth century it had 'more or less died out' (Boss, 2000, p.37). The Nursing Virgin heyday emerged in the European, particularly Italian, context of a developing 'robust religious culture in the thirteenth century, with Mary

increasingly at its heart' (Rubin, 1991, p. 197). The subsequent section focuses on representations of the Nursing Virgin type produced in, and influenced by, this Late Medieval and Italian Renaissance context. This type is referred to hereafter by its common Italian name *Madonna del Latte*. We argue that given the significance of Christianity, Marian devotion and visual and material production in the shaping of culture, Late Medieval and Renaissance productions of the *Madonna del Latte* are instrumental in Western historical representations of the maternal breast.

The Sacred Breast

Virginal and lactating, the breastfeeding Madonna signifies an inimitable model of maternal femininity. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Madonna del Latte* (figure 1) is characteristic of this idealisation. Lorenzetti depicts the Virgin with what appears to be a stick-on breast, a part-object that reads more as an appendage than an integrated part of her body. While breastfeeding is a human possibility, there is nothing human or possible about her disembodied breast. This incongruity continues; adjacent to Mary's feeding breast, where her right breast should be, is a flat space. Mary's is a breast in the singular, and Christ clasps it with both hands as though it were more His object than a part of her body. The flat spaces and odd positioning of the breast appear, at first, to be products of their time; Lorenzetti produced this painting a century before his successors made the technical advancements that led to linear perspective, the technique that enabled the visual communication of three-dimensional space, depth and proportion on the two-dimensional plane. However, there is evidence of three dimensions in her rounded feeding breast. These incongruities are more convincingly read as a means to mark Mary apart from mortal maternity and amplify her divinity; hers is an unattainable model of motherhood.

The viewer (perhaps particularly breastfeeding mothers) is both drawn towards and distanced from Lorenzetti's *Madonna del Latte*. Unlike byzantine icons of this type that depict the Virgin with an austere outward gaze, Lorenzetti's Virgin looks towards her feeding child. Marian scholars such as Mallory (1969) and Lasareff (1938) cite this image as pioneering a shift in the depiction of the Virgin's relationship with Christ, away from the detached asceticism of Medieval representations and towards emotion. As Christian art becomes less hieratic and painted figures appear more humanised through this period, mortal Christian viewers (especially mothers in this case) are invited to draw a closer connection between themselves and the painted subject. However, the Madonna's virginity, divinity and anatomically incorrect feeding breast, position her apart from mortal mothers. Breastfeeding mother viewers are 'hailed' in Althusarian terms (Althusser, 1971), while simultaneously distanced through their own mortality.

Messages on motherhood in Late Medieval and Italian Renaissance visual culture were echoed elsewhere in texts and teachings that encouraged mothers to breastfeed their own infants. For example, in a fourteenth century childcare manual Paolo da Certaldo warned that an infant 'nourished on animal milk does not have wits like one fed on women's milk, but always looks stupid and vacant and not right in the head' (Ross, 1974, p. 187). The following century, in a text on wifely duties, Francesco Barbaro encouraged mothers to breast feed their own children rather than employ a wet nurse: 'in this way the young infant will not imbibe corrupt habits and words and will not receive, with his milk, baseness, faults, and impure infirmities' (Kohl and Witt, 1978, p. 223). These sentiments were echoed in clerical teachings (see Boss, 2000, p. 33); the voices of healthcare and the Church in written, visual and aural European

Medieval and Renaissance culture form a body of breastfeeding promotional material that posits the maternal breast as nurturing and healing.

The *Madonna del Latte* type presents a public performance of breastfeeding and sends the message that maternal duties extend beyond one's own infant. Miles (2008) argues that Christ's gaze directs the viewer *in* to the Lorenzetti image (p. 6). However, Christ also appears to look *out* - and *beyond* the viewer. There is no one to one intimacy to Christ's gaze. Christ's is a contemplative gaze towards a plural audience rather than a single viewer; this is a public performance. With the disembodied maternal breast as a prop, the viewer of this presentation of nursing motherhood is invited to see themselves as one of many. Indeed, 'the many' is pertinent here; representations of Mary as mother of many were common in the work of Lorenzetti's peers and successors through to the sixteenth century, and most clearly depicted in the *Virgin of Mercy* type in which Mary shelters and protects the masses (see figures 2 and 3 for examples: Piero della Francesca, *Madonna della Misericordia*, c.1460-1462; and Niccolo Alunno, *Madonna della Misericordia*, c.1462). This is mother as nurturer and protector of humanity; Mary's maternal duty extends far beyond her son. This kind of clerical teaching on mothering not just one's own child but all of humankind is one of the naturalised myths of femininity, and finds its way into contemporary attitudes towards breastfeeding as well.

The identity of Mary as mother of many and of her breast milk as sustenance for physical and spiritual health is communicated in the writings of Saint Bernard of Clairveaux. Although Saint Bernard was French and lived during the Medieval period, he travelled throughout Europe to preach the story of the Virgin - to whom he was ardently devoted - and disseminated his Marian writings throughout Europe, so his work would not have been unfamiliar to those living through the Italian and Northern

Renaissance. Saint Bernard is renowned for his Marian apparition in which the Virgin appeared to him, holding Christ, and fed her milk to him by squeezing her breast and ultimately purified him. Several of the more commonly known visual representations of this apparition were produced by The Flemish School, such as *The Lactation of St Bernard*, c.1480 (figure 4). As in the Lorenzetti image, the Madonna's gaze in the Flemish School painting is directed towards the recipient of her milk, emphasising the function of her breast milk as purifying and nurturing. Saint Bernard promoted the message that a mother's breast milk was healing and sustained the Christian soul (Warner, 1976, p. 197) – an early 'breast is best' campaign. Visual representations of Saint Bernard's apparition perpetuate breast milk as a symbol of not only mothering a child but also healing humanity.

A Breast Binary

The Madonna's visible feeding breast, juxtaposed with the absent breast in the Lorenzetti painting, creates a breast binary that recurs in the *Madonna del Latte* motif throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Evoking Kleinian readings of the 'good' and 'bad' breast (see Melanie Klein's writing on the paranoid-schizoid position, 1946), the breast binary becomes even more pronounced in Carlo da Camerino's *The Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve* (figure 5), in which the Virgin and Eve share the picture plane and each have one breast visible. The figure of Mary conforms to the tropes of the *Madonna del Latte* motif apparent in the Lorenzetti image; however, the breast of Eve, the 'fallen woman' at the base of the picture plane, is more realistic. Miles (2008) discusses this image in terms of the Virgin's 'extremely perfect' and Eve's 'extremely bad' breast (p.82), and it is worth adding that Eve's realistic 'bad' breast in contrast to Mary's reads as a poignant example of artists consciously

presenting Mary as sacred, rather than a 'real' woman. This image states that a real breast is the breast of a sinner and is not appropriate for a 'good' woman. While Mary has been mythologised as 'alone of all her sex' (Warner, 1976), and therefore an unattainable model of femininity and motherhood, the 'real' femaleness of Eve – characterised as the temptress and personification of evil – is equated with her more realistic breast. As such, Camerino reminds viewers (both women and men) that 'real' women's bodies are inherently sinful and dangerous.

The Virgin in the *Madonna del Latte* type, with her stick-on breast and identity as mother of many, is *both* presented as the personification of idealized, unattainable femininity *and* breastfeeds as a mortal mother might. Her incongruous breast is a reminder that her body should not be read in the same way as a 'real', mortal female body. And yet, the themes set up in the Virgin/Child motif in visual culture are so powerful that it is disputable whether any imagery of a 'real' nursing mother can escape being read through their lens.

According to the male (as far as we know) authors (ie cultural producers, including artists) of *Madonna del Latte* images, breasts are *either* maternal *or* erotic, and always the property of someone other than the woman who bears them. Jean Fouquet is useful to reference here as his work helps extend this idea; although French rather than Italian, Fouquet experienced the early Italian Renaissance first hand through his travels and his art production necessarily exists within the context of this exposure. On one level, Jean Fouquet's *The Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels* (figure 6) is like other *Madonna del Latte* imagery. The Madonna is presented with one breast visible and Christ in her arms; her gaze is averted and there is an incongruity with her breast, which appears to be artificial and fused onto her body. Unlike the *Madonna del Latte* type, however, Fouquet's Virgin is not feeding Christ; nor is Christ remotely

interested in the sacred breast. Christ sits away from the Virgin's body, His presence reminding us that this is a sacred breast rather than one that might be read as straightforwardly sexualised, as it would if this were a mortal woman. As with depictions of allegorical figures throughout art history (and representations of posthuman and cyborg figures in a contemporary context), when depicted under the guise of the otherworldly as the Virgin Mother is here, the female body gives licence to the (male) artist to author women's bodies in the realm of (their) fantasy. Unlike in the Lorenzetti image, Fouquet's Virgin's covered breast is clearly implied, and therefore imaginable. While the figure is here sexualised, she has no sexuality of her own; her gaze is so averted that it almost shuts down, detached from both the viewer and her own body. Fouquet's Virgin is unmistakably presented as an object of desire for the viewer–consumer.

Fouquet's Virgin is a hybrid of sacred Madonna and mortal contemporary woman; her high forehead conforms to beauty ideals of the day. The subject of this portrait is widely considered to be a representation of King Charles VII's deceased mistress, Agnès Sorel; dressed up in the *Madonna del Latte* motif, the image reads as a private one for the King's gaze. Given the identity of the sitter, the eroticised breast here is an upper-class breast. Upper-class breasts in this period were not necessarily maternal feeding breasts; by the sixteenth century, upper-class Europeans will have had the means to employ wet nurses to breastfeed their babies, while the maternal feeding breast may have been more ubiquitous amongst the masses.

Although not a *Madonna del Latte* type, *Gabrielle d'Estrées in Her Bath* (figure 7)¹ substantiates the idea of the maternal/erotic breast binary as classed. In the foreground is Gabrielle d'Estrées, the mistress of Henry IV, while in the background is their child's wet nurse. Gabrielle d'Estrées is presented with the ideal breast of the Christian tradition – an ideal that remained popular beyond the period in which this image was executed and through to the seventeenth century and that favoured young, virginal and compact breasts. In contrast, the feeding breast of the wet nurse is maternal, full and used. This single image juxtaposes the nurturing maternal breast (for the child) with the eroticized, idealised breast (for display). Both sides of the breast binary are available for consumption to either the child or the objectifying gaze – neither is owned by the woman herself.

The absence of a woman's pleasure in and autonomy over her own body runs through the *Madonna del Latte* type. We know of very few, if any, *Madonna del Latte* images authored by women during the European Renaissance period. There is one major example, however, which was produced towards the end of the popular production period for this 'type': Artemisia Gentileschi's *Madonna and Child* (figure 8)². The intimacy between the Madonna and child in this image is strikingly deeper than the aforementioned examples. Here, Christ touches Mary's neck with a tenderness and adoration reinforced in his gaze towards her; meanwhile, Mary is presented in a state of pleasure, receiving her child's affections and leaning towards him. Mary is grounded and occupies the majority of the space; there is little of the picture plane left outside of

¹ The composition of the painting is taken from Francois Clouet's painting of Diane de Poitiers, 1571.

² This image has been attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi, however the painting is unsigned.

the figures so that Mary's own pleasure, and the intimacy between her and her child, is spotlighted.

The weight of the Western Christian tradition on representations of women's bodies is substantial. One overarching theme throughout the body of *Madonna del Latte* imagery, and that has not dwindled in significance since, is the ownership of women's breasts. Historically and currently, women's breasts have been hijacked by powerful institutions; from the clergy to medical discourse and pornography, women's bodies have been more often controlled by men in power than by women themselves. These powers dictate what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' breast and mother. The Madonna's disembodied breast in the Lorenzetti painting contains a literal reminder of this: far from being fully whole and autonomously authored by the women themselves, these bodies are dismantled and reorganised according to hegemonic ideals.

In symbiosis with the theme of breast ownership is that of unattainable femininity – and with that unattainable motherhood. The *Madonna del Latte* type contributes to a myth of maternal femininity that is impossible to emulate and that continues to resonate in contemporary breastfeeding discourse.

Maternal deviance and the double-bind

In this section we focus on contemporary societal pressures on mothers, arguing that women are put under enormous pressure to breastfeed yet are often maligned for doing so. In a double-bind, mothers also find themselves shamed for not breastfeeding, thus they are always subject to potential failure in their maternal femininity. We then introduce Megan Marsh-McGlone's contemporary performance piece, *No Keener Revelation* (2013), as a critical commentary on this situation and argue that her work confronts the lack of societal care shown to nursing mothers.

One dominant contemporary form of breast control is the mantra that ‘breast is best’. An example of this is a specific campaign launched in the UK in 1999, which became an absolutist expression of an institutionally-legitimated preferred feeding strategy. Commissioned by Tessa Jowell, then public health minister, and taken up by the National Health Service, the ‘Breast is Best’ campaign aims to increase breastfeeding rates in the UK, which are significantly lower than in many other countries. In the last UK-wide Infant Feeding Survey, conducted in 2010, the rate of breastfeeding initiation was 81%, but this fell to 17% exclusive breastfeeding at three months and 1% at six months (unicef.org.uk, 2018). The campaign emphasises the health benefits to infants including reduced risk of infection and disease, lower chance of obesity in childhood and adulthood, and an increased bond with the mother. It also promotes the health benefits to mothers, including a reduced risk of breast cancer, ovarian cancer and osteoporosis. However, the ‘Breast is Best’ campaign has been criticised for suggesting that breastfeeding is special rather than ordinary. In 2010 an organisation called The Breastfeeding Network called on the UK government to stop using the slogan because it suggests that breastfeeding is something extraordinary rather than the norm. The intervening years have seen no resolution to this debate with the hashtag #normalisebreastfeeding used heavily on social media by mothers reporting incidents when they have felt pressured by family or strangers to stop nursing.

In ante-natal classes and information leaflets given to pregnant women breastfeeding is presented as ‘natural’ in two senses, both invoking Mother Nature and the idea that it is an inevitability. Mothers are encouraged to equate breastfeeding with motherhood, for example by organisations such as La Leche League, which formed in 1956 and has become an influential international organisation to support and encourage breastfeeding. The organisation’s mission statement delivers a clear message that

‘mothering through breastfeeding is the most natural and effective way of understanding and satisfying the needs of the baby’ (laleche.org, 2018). A by-product of this has been feelings of shame for those who formula feed either by choice or necessity. The implication is that somehow these mothers are not providing their infants with the best start in life and are less able to satisfy their baby’s needs.

In fact, the argument for breastfeeding is both historically and geographically specific. As a practice it declined in developed countries when infant formula was developed in the late 1800s. The idea of being a modern woman who is giving her baby the benefit of scientific advances made this a popular alternative. Breastfeeding was associated with working-class women who were unable to afford the best for their children. This happened alongside a decline in wet nursing once it was understood that disease could be passed from wet nurse to baby. However, Berit Åström has argued that attitudes towards breastfeeding are historically paradoxical. Drawing on medieval, early modern, Victorian and contemporary discourses on motherhood, Åström argues that breast milk has at various historical moments been understood as simultaneously nurturing and poisonous, life-giving and toxic (2015, p. 576). Even as it sustains life a woman’s body is considered potentially destructive and in need of regulation and control by others.

The ‘Breast is Best’ campaign originated in the UK, but as a mantra its reach is international. The World Health Organisation has a global initiative to promote exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months of life. The policy has been criticised for ignoring specific local conditions that affect a mother’s choices (or lack thereof) with respect to feeding such as access to clean water, distance from neo-natal medical facilities and legal protections for feeding and expressing milk in the workplace. Sabrina Joy Stevens has, for example, argued that working class women and women of

colour disproportionately work in low-paid jobs that do not offer paid family leave, lactation rooms or the flexibility to express milk whilst at work. Her point is that the 'choice' to breastfeed is not equally available to all mothers and that campaigns to promote public breastfeeding need to acknowledge discrimination rather than the hurt feelings of privileged women (2015). These differences are, however, flattened out by the ferocity of the 'breast is best' mantra, which homogenises the experiences of mothers and denies the contextual realities within which mothering takes place.

The force of this imperative has been matched recently by the Trump administration's refusal to sign up to a breastfeeding resolution at a United Nations World Health Assembly held in Geneva in 2018. The proposed resolution called on governments to protect, promote and support breastfeeding and to restrict the aggressive promotion of infant formula. In a controversial move the Trump administration chose to protect the interests of the formula industry in a debate that saw women's bodies used as pawns in a game of high stakes over profit margins. This institutional contestation leaves women in a double bind: they risk shame for being insufficient mothers if they do not breastfeed and shame for being insufficient consumers if they do. Either way, they are perceived as flawed.

Outside of such institutionalised pressures the decision to formula feed can be understood as a form of 'maternal deviance' (Murphy, 1999). This is, as Elizabeth Murphy explains, not only the decision not to follow the rules and adhere to the mantra that breast is best. Deviancy describes knowing and deliberate behaviour; the mother knowingly decides to formula feed where an alternative is available. In the context of 'breast is best' a mother who chooses not to breastfeed is considered selfish, irresponsible and unwilling to relinquish ownership of her breast not only to her child, but to a regulatory system that monitors her incessantly. She is accountable not only to

the future health of her baby and the views of her partner, but to a public morality that prescribes what constitutes ‘good’ mothering. She is expected to nourish not only her own child, but the population as a whole – a theme that is recurrent in the *Madonna of Mercy* type of Marian iconography (see figures 2 and 3). This form of deviance is saturated with the history of representations of the nurturing and sacred maternal breast. To knowingly decide not to breastfeed where the option to do so exists challenges the orthodoxy of more than the ‘breast is best’ imperative. It is to refuse to accept the deeply entrenched values of motherhood found in representations of the Madonna Del Latte. The ‘good’ mother is the reverse: selfless, responsible and willing to subjugate her own needs entirely to those of her child. Murphy cites Douglas on the ‘absolute morality’ of motherhood (Murphy, 1999, p. 199), the sense in which it is unthinkable that mothers care for their own needs and desires as part of being a ‘good’ mother. The reality, however, is often less clear cut. Women stop breastfeeding for a plethora of different reasons including painful feeds, mastitis, embarrassment when feeding in public and the attitudes of families, partners and friends. Their own happiness and wellbeing as autonomous beings is crucial for the development of healthy maternal relations. However, new mothers posting in online support groups continually report the lack of attention paid by healthcare professionals to their own health and wellbeing needs, beyond those that pertain to the health of the child.

The lack of care for women who are caught between contradictory pressures concerning feeding was the topic of Megan Marsh-McGlone’s 2013 performance *No Keener Revelation* (figure 9), which the artist devised as a feminist critical response to the harassment of a woman nursing her baby in a coffee shop in Madison, Wisconsin. Members of the community had argued that this woman should either stay at home to breastfeed her baby or express her milk using a breast pump so that it can be given to

the baby in a bottle whilst out in public. Marsh-McGlone's response was a performance in which she invited one person to join her and her daughter Morgan in a coffee shop near to the one where the woman was harassed. She did this once a week for four months. In her documentation of the performance on 13 November 2013 she describes a series of interactions with Jess, her audience of one, including hiding under a large blanket whilst telling Jess that women are told not to scare other women with stories about their experience of maternity. Once Jess agrees that they should be able to talk freely about this topic Marsh-McGlone shows her a book she had been given to document milestones and memories in the first year of her baby's life. The book is supplemented with experiences and objects that the artist feels should be valued such as a breast milk storage bag containing a piece of her baby's umbilical cord. As a challenge to the social norms of such books, which commonly focus on family and home, the artist adds her own questions including 'when did mum learn to put together the pump?' (Marsh-McGlone, 2013). As the performance progresses Marsh-McGlone takes a breast pump out of her bag and assembles it at the table before expressing her milk. The breast pump has a number of component parts that need to be sterilised and assembled correctly before every feed. She explains to Jess the difficulties involved with feeding her baby in the first few weeks and months of her life. These include a three-hourly feeding regime involving breastfeeding and pumping to increase the baby's weight post-birth, learning to use the pumping equipment, setting alarms to continue this process during the night and drinking coffee to keep awake. Towards the end of the performance the artist mixes her breast milk with coffee in the baby's bottle. Having extracted some into a syringe she attaches this to a feeding tube taped to her finger whilst describing her experience of having to feed Morgan her milk using this method in hospital. The cultural implications of expressing breast milk, which mechanises the

process and enables a mother's milk to be fed to the baby by someone else, are under-explored in the debate about normalising breastfeeding. Here, the artist recounts her feelings about her baby receiving donated milk while in hospital and of milk sharing, which is a technological form of wet nursing in which the pumping process provides distance from the breast of another woman. In a contemporary echo of the maternal breast as part body in representations of Mary, the breast milk is detached from the body of the woman it belongs to in a practice that allows medical intervention.

At this point Jess turns to another page of the book where parents are invited to list TV programmes and songs that were popular at the time of the birth. In her documentation of the performance Marsh-McGlone explains her own addition:

I tell Jess that I added the page with the title PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS BREASTFEEDING because for a baby, contemporary societal opinions about the rights of an infant to eat and survive have a bit more of an immediate impact on the infant's life than pop culture trends. (Marsh-McGlone, 2017, p. 100)

The documentation of *No Keener Revelation* takes the form of a typed description, which is annotated with hand-written comments. These include a note about another customer who, in a contemporary echo of historical anxieties about the toxicity of breast milk, asks if she intends to let her daughter drink the milk/coffee mixture. These hand-written notes are effectively field notes, observations about Morgan's behaviour during the performance (playing with a toy, tugging at the pump, crying until she is put to the breast) as well as the behaviour of other customers who look on. The document also includes photos of the event and other marks on the page including the stain of a coffee

cup. It is an artwork in itself, ontologically different to the performance and essential for the continued discussion of the issues raised.

The performance is worthy of this lengthy description because it so courageously challenges the myth of maternal feeding as serene and labour-free. Marsh-McGlone not only challenges the harassment of women who breastfeed in public, but dares to tackle the issue of expressing milk, which is rarely if ever made visible in contemporary culture. In *No Keener Revelation* the technical and medicalised aspects of this are literally on the table. Ultimately, the purpose of the performance is to expose societal attitudes towards breastfeeding in which motherhood is idealised, but mothers who are living this experience are not cared for. It exposes the difference between motherhood as an institution, redolent with ideas about control of the woman's body, and motherhood as visceral experience.

The World Health Organisation reports that across 194 nations evaluated 40% of infants under six months old were exclusively breastfed (www.who.int, 2017). This means that the vast majority of women are understood as failing by this measure. The language of failure is rife within debates about feeding. Mothers who breastfeed are accused of failing to maintain public standards of decency, failing to wean their babies or toddlers early enough or failing to include their partner in the nurturing of their child. Indeed, women who choose not to breastfeed can understand this as a selfless act because it means that partners and family members can get involved with feeding the child (Murphy 1999). Mothers who do not breastfeed are accused of failing to give their baby the best start in life, failing to sacrifice their own needs to those of their baby, and failing to endure physical and emotional difficulties associated with breastfeeding such as feeding aversion. There is a sense that women could do better and many turn to social media platforms to share experiences with like-minded people. Facebook groups set up

specifically for and by breastfeeding mothers are awash with threads in which women express regret that they haven't managed to breastfeed for longer. Many recount stories of unbelievable stamina to breastfeed against the odds. It is not unusual for a mother's breastfeeding narrative to include painful feeds, expressing milk (including for newborns who are admitted to neonatal intensive care units and fed through a tube), dealing with tongue tie, mastitis, lactose intolerance and infection. Such posts are routinely met with encouragement and positive thinking from empathetic women who are quick to counter the narrative of failed femininity. Their comments champion the success of breastfeeding at all, no matter what the circumstances and for how long, and provide a vital channel for an alternative discourse of achievement.

Fear of mutuality

In recent years an alternative range of visual representations have become popular as ways for mothers to celebrate their own maternal achievements. These include breastfeeding selfies, which are photos taken by mothers while nursing their babies and shared on social media sites (figure 10). In this section we argue that 'brelfies' are being used as an empowering visual discourse of nursing, which challenges the narrative of failed femininity and enables affirmation of maternal subjectivity.

'Brelfies' are often accompanied by posts detailing the author's breastfeeding journey. They are used to mark the achievement of feeding milestones such as the first feed in a public place or the length of time a mother has been feeding for (six months, one year and so on). Brelfies are also shared as a way to mark the end of a mother's breastfeeding journey. When shared on sites dedicated to motherhood these stories sometimes accompany posts in which mothers express regret that the baby has weaned and the nursing stage is over. Celebrities have been routinely posting images of

themselves breastfeeding since 2013 when model Gisele Bündchen posted a photo of herself nursing her baby while being prepared for a photoshoot. Others followed including actress Alyssa Milano who posted an image of her breastfeeding her daughter on Instagram in 2014 (Giles, 2018). Whereas the image of Gisele was taken by someone else Milano took the image herself, thus coining the term 'brelfie'. The term gained traction in 2015 after Facebook removed an image of a woman breastfeeding, which provoked a protest in which many women posted breastfeeding selfies. Facebook then revised its policy of not showing female nipples to allow images of nursing mothers (Giles, 2018).

Breastfeeding selfies are a fascinating and relatively under-explored aspect of contemporary visual culture. They differ from representations of breastfeeding found in healthcare literature, art historical representations of the Madonna Del Latte and studio portraits of nursing celebrities. The connection to selfie culture's obsession with the body is problematic and this is played out in brelfies that perform the visual rhetoric of heteronormative, cisgendered sexualised femininity. Furthermore, there is the potential to shame women who bottle feed and a propensity to essentialise infant feeding in contrast to the current formulation that 'fed is best'. Nevertheless, brelfies can be understood as micro transformations in a history of representations of nursing women. In breastfeeding selfies mothers are both subject and object, thus connected to a rich tradition of feminist artists, including Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann and earlier Claude Cahun, who have sought to displace the power relationship between feminised model/muse/object and masculinised artist/subject. It is significant that the form of the selfie gives nursing mothers control of their own image and they do this for a variety of reasons including humour (when the child is easily distracted or laughing), concern (for example, to ask others if the child's latch looks effective), achievement (for example,

feeding in public) and celebration/commemoration (to mark a feeding milestone). There is no need for another person to be present to capture a brelfie, other than mother and child (or children if tandem feeding or nursing twins), which heightens the emphasis on embodied mutuality. These are images in which mothers take control of their own representation as nurturers sustaining life and providing comfort. As such they are highly unusual, self-determining and affirmative of maternal subjectivity.

Zappavigna and Zhao (2017) have argued that selfies taken by mothers, not necessarily of breastfeeding, enact a shift from the narcissistic 'look at me' imperative associated with the selfie to 'look, it is *my perspective* on motherhood' (original emphasis). This enables a 'shift in analytical focus from the ideational to the interpersonal' which draws attention to the perspective of the mother as an important aspect of the relationship with the viewer (Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017, p. 242). Boon and Pentney (2015) also understand the positionality inherent in the brelfie as politically charged. The camera angle differs to non-breastfeeding selfies, which for Boon and Pentney has the potential to challenge patriarchal discourses of sexualised femininity. They draw attention to the way in which the lactating breast fills the image space, refusing to be contained.

Taken from above, these images offer a perspective from which the breast is writ large: A looming orb of maternal beneficence and generosity, the lactating breast almost overwhelms the infant. (Boon and Pentney, 2015, p. 1764)

The enormity of the breast in some brelfies makes the tiny infant look particularly vulnerable and dependent by comparison. The lactating breast represents nurturing as a powerful activity in contrast to its association with passivity. Such images are

reminiscent of Jenny Saville's paintings in their depiction of a woman's (part) body unashamedly taking up the available image space, her flesh exceeding the borders of the photograph.

An extension to this development is the Tree of Life picture (figure 11). This is an image created by using a filter on the PicsArt photo editing app to turn a brelfie into an abstracted representation. Tree of Life images depict the breast as a root system under the surface of the skin, which develops into the branches of a tree in the mouth of the feeding baby. As a visual form it emphasises the transference of nourishment from mother's breast to infant, but without the depiction of milk. As such Tree of Life pictures avoid any abjection associated with the passing of bodily fluids from one human to another. Read through Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, the breastfeeding body is in excess of its borders and is as such intolerable, even repulsive, because through the leaking of milk it threatens to dissolve the distinction between self and other that subjectivity depends on (Kristeva, 1984). The nursing woman is a reminder that our bodies are not hermetically sealed and that their boundaries are often breached. This may go some way to explaining the negative attitudes to public breastfeeding challenged by Marsh-McGlone. Tree of Life pictures are less threatening because their visual similarity to fractal imagery goes some way towards bypassing social anxiety about the indeterminacy of bodily boundaries (Shildrick, 1997, p. 34). Breastfeeding materialises this conceptual and symbolic leakage in which the maternal body's borders are breached, thus disrupting any clear division between self and other. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that in 2016 Tree of Life pictures went viral on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter as part of the #normalisebreastfeeding movement.

However, Tree of Life pictures lack the specificity of breastfeeding selfies that have not been abstracted through the PicsArt app. They may be socially more acceptable, but the power of the brelfie lies in its depiction of a named woman feeding her child alongside her story, comment or tweet. The women posting these images are not generic and this gives visibility to a much more diverse range of post-partum body types than is the case in mainstream popular culture. As a networked visual form, in which images proliferate at speed and across a range of social media platforms, brelfies make visible the range of experiences mothers have of nursing, which challenges the monolithic view of the breastfeeding mother as serene, selfless and composed. These include images and accompanying text posts in which mothers speak of exhaustion, frustration, pain, joy, relief and celebration. In place of the institutionalised and instructional photographs found in ante-natal literature, or the detached pose of the *Madonna del Latte* (see figure 6), brelfies are often unashamedly affective. As a result, they have the potential to challenge an enduring cultural anxiety about the pleasures of nursing, which Åström traces back to Victorian discourses that connect extended nursing with exclusion of the husband: 'It is suggested that maternal feelings can easily become sexualised, and if the mother's sexual needs are gratified elsewhere, the husband is deprived of his rights' (Åström, 2015, p. 579). Breast is best only when practiced to the extent that it is dutiful rather than enjoyed. In a contemporary context mothers interrupt the viewing position by taking hold of the camera themselves and disseminating their own experiences of nursing. This makes for an affectively rich visual genre, which in some ways is far more useful for pregnant women than the disembodied (and somewhat ridiculous) knitted breasts used as instructional props at ante-natal classes. Such educational aids make breastfeeding appear neat and tidy and are utterly stripped of any indication of a fulsome, multi-faceted relationship between

mother and child. In place of instructional, sterile diagrams or disembodied props, brelfies offer the visualisation of a human relationship. Furthermore, the form in which breastfeeding selfies are disseminated, across Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, opens them up to ‘networked publics’ (boyd, 2011), thus extending Marsh-McGlone’s critique in a new direction.

Conclusion

Despite the forceful campaign to promote breastfeeding the cultural (rather than medical) fear is not that women will stop or reduce breastfeeding, but that they will succeed beyond what is deemed necessary or acceptable by familial and moral discourses that own the breast. To breastfeed beyond this point is to threaten the social order and to disrupt the idea that a woman’s breasts do not belong to her, which is so entrenched in European art iconography and brought into sharp relief in Renaissance *Madonna del Latte* imagery. What is required of mothers is that they are held in a *process of becoming maternal*, but absolutely not that they achieve it. Mothers are required to become more resilient, more able to cope with cluster feeding, more willing to tolerate physical pain and sleep deprivation, more prepared to put another’s needs above their own. It is as if maternal femininity must remain highly desirable, but ultimately unattainable – a message implicit in depictions of the nursing Virgin Mother. Practices that threaten this, such as the rise of the brelfie, defy this ‘could do better’ narrative by celebrating achievement rather than failure and expressing self-fulfilment as part of maternal care.

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Figures captions:

Figure 1. Ambrogio Lorenzetti *Madonna del Latte*, c.1325

Figure 2. Piero della Francesca, *Madonna della Misericordia*, c.1460–1462 (central panel of Piero della Francesca *Polyptych of the Misericordia*, c.1445-1462)

Figure 3. Niccolo Alunno, *Madonna della Misericordia*, c.1462

Figure 4. The Flemish School *The Lactation of St Bernard*, c.1480

Figure 5. Carlo da Camerino *The Madonna of Humility with the Temptation of Eve*, c.1420

Figure 6. Jean Fouquet *The Virgin and Child Surrounded by Angels*, c.1450

Figure 7. School of Fontainebleau *Gabrielle d'Estrées in Her Bath*, c.1598

Figure 8. Artemisia Gentileschi *Madonna and Child*, c.1610

Figure 9. Megan Marsh McGlone *No Keener Revelation*, 2013

Figure 10. Leanne Drake, *brelfie*, 2018, reproduced with kind permission from Leanne Drake

Figure 11. Leanne Drake *Tree of Life* image, 2018, reproduced with kind permission from Leanne Drake