

wax OR mane ?

{ THE EVOLUTION OF **VAGINAL AESTHETICS** }
BY **LIZ GALINOVIC.**



Q &A – the fiery, sometimes controversial ABC panel show you attend the taping of if you want to throw shoes at a former PM or ask the same silly, ill-informed questions about refugees taking our jobs. Yet in a May 2011 episode, somewhat refreshingly, it was the place to go if you wanted to discuss porn and pubic hair. On this night, academic, author and anti-porn activist Gail Dines was questioned by an audience member as to whether there was any evidence that pornography is infiltrating society in an influential way. “There is evidence everywhere you go,” Dines answered. “Let me tell you one of the single biggest pieces of evidence that I know, that I see from my students, is that how many women do you know, in the audience, that basically have full bikini Brazilian waxes?”

An awkward silence seemed to ensue – either that or the cameras weren’t doing a very good job of capturing the slow and quiet murmur of necks as young women slowly, almost ashamedly, began to nod their heads. Dines pushed them further: “Come on, young women? Do you all know people who do? Yeah, it’s standard isn’t it? Yeah well let me tell you, ten, fifteen years ago this was basically unheard of. And when I saw that happening in pornography ten years ago I remember saying you are going to be seeing young women doing this now because the boys that they are having sex with are going to want them to do this because this is what they’re masturbating to and this is what they’re getting used to.”

Another panellist on the show, Leslie Cannold (academic, author, activist) went on to say what a superficial point was being made in comparison to the larger and far more damaging effects pornography is having on our society. That may be so, but Dines was simply pointing out what

she perceives to be *one* of the pieces of evidence of the influence of pornography in shaping our sexuality and our selves. It may not be as damaging as a new generation of young men confusing a cum-shot in the face with intimacy, but it is a beauty routine that has become a standard amongst young women – yet how many of them have actually thought about why they do it?

LITTLE WOMEN PORN-STARS

Women are always putting themselves through ordeals that will enhance their beauty – dresses so tight they can’t breathe in them, heels so high they’re cranky with foot pain an hour after walking out of the house – and these are just your standard Saturday night requirements. There’s also plastic surgery, botox, laser hair removal, chemical peels, plucking, shaving (what woman hasn’t slipped while using a razor?) and waxing. A full Brazilian wax involves spreading your legs before a beautician who applies hot



wax all over the genitalia before ripping it off with a force that makes removing a bandaid feel like a loving embrace. You come away red, swollen, and sometimes grazed. Yes, grazed – as if you've been dragging your vajootz across bitumen. Women will tell you that it gets less painful the more you have it done but these women are possibly so tortured by the ordeal they're having outer body experiences.

**“A NEW MAN SHOULD
BRING OUT THE
PRETTINESS AND
FEMININE IN A LADY,
GET WAXED.”
FEMALE, 27**

Studies have shown that many women, put off by the pain factor, will use hair removal cream or a good old fashioned razor. Slipping while shaving your legs is one thing, but your labia? It all goes to show just how important many women feel it is to have a bald vagina. But why? Throughout the process of “growing up”, we women learn certain things; we learn a menstruation process will begin; we learn you can't flush tampons down the toilet; we learn that we will begin to grow hair on our nether regions; we learn that in order to be attractive to men we need to remove that hair.

“I can't give a definitive history of the origins of the Brazilian,” Dines tells *Three*. “What I do know is that it has been normalised and mainstreamed by both porn and pop culture. As Reed Johnson said in the *LA Times*, ‘Fashion also is taking more aesthetic cues from porn, including the growing popularity of genital piercing and shaving,

which was popularised by adult film actors’.” Reinforcing her Q&A stance, Dines says she intuitively foresaw porn's predilection for “fully waxed genitalia” infiltrating mainstream practices because porn, she states, is the “major form of sex education” for men. “Because their sexuality is being shaped by porn, they are going to find hairless women more erotic and hot and be disgusted by real women's bodies. My students tell me all the time that their hook up partners – can't say boyfriends anymore since there are very few of these on college campuses – insist that they wax, and wax they do.”

**“BEARDED
CLAM: NOT
GROSSED OUT,
BUT LESS
PREFERABLE.”
MALE, 28**



SHE SAID*

(*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT THE INNOCENT.)

There is no black and white conclusion to this – despite arguments to the contrary, men and women are not made from a single mould each. While some men admit that porn introduced them to the hairless vagina, others deny porn has had anything to do with their taste in cooch coverage. The same goes for women – some will admit they do it to please men, while others claim a whole variety of holistic reasons for wanting to remove all their hair. Sarah, a 20-year-old Arts Law student at Geelong University, cautiously admitted to removing all her pubic hair. She uses hair removal cream because she's afraid of the pain involved with waxing, but when asked why she did this she stated that it was because "Harry asked me to. It was what he wanted." Sarah was 18 at the time and while Harry is no longer her sexual partner, she continues to remove it all "just in case". Nina, a 37-year-old woman who has been single for a few years declared, with a cheeky smile, that "when there was rooting happening, I used to get Brazilians all the time".

Quite a few women admit to vaginal devolution (let's face it, in effect that's what it is) as a practice reserved for the mating game, something they believe men and/or both sexes feel will enhance

their sexual pleasure/attractiveness. It also seems to be something they give up on once in a long-term relationship. Despina, 35 and married, stated that, "once you're married you don't have the time to care", while Tina, 27, said that she used to wax regularly when she was single and dating, but since being in a relationship for two years she "rarely even shaves anymore". For these women, bald is better if you want to secure a man – but once you've got him, love conquers the dicey issue of pubic hair.

**"BALD IS
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FEMALE, 27**

**I HAVE DONE THE FULL
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FEMALE, 26**

But there is another group of women who claim it has nothing to do with attracting or pleasing men. That it is all about feeling sexy, feminine and clean. One 25-year-old screwed her nose up as she confessed she doesn't like "pubes sticking through the



fabric" of her underwear. Waxing every last follicle made her feel "cleaner". Mary, 28, said she "loved" her fully waxed genitals: "even if no dick [is] present, being hairless just makes me feel sexier and fresher." And a very forthcoming Maria, also 28, stated: "I get every single hair waxed once a month from lip to toes; bum, pussy, snail trail, bald, smooth. It is cleaner, makes you slippery like a slide and there's no plucking of hair from teeth when someone goes down on you. I like a bit of man-scaping too, it's easier to navigate and makes them look bigger. I don't feel like a little girl, I feel *tres* sexy. I do it for myself, but I've never had any complaints." None of these women knew why it was that in order to feel sexy they had to be hairless. If they did, would they still believe it was something they did for their own spiritual benefits?

**"I LIKE SMOOTH ALL AROUND THE SIDES AND ALL THE WAY BACK BUT I LIKE A LANDING STRIP OR I FEEL LIKE AN 11-YEAR-OLD."
FEMALE, 29**

It's entertaining to listen to women argue the pros and cons amongst themselves, immediately separating into two groups who look down on the other with a venomous disdain. Baldies contort their faces into expressions of disgust, thinking the other group is somewhat revolting for having pubic hair, however trimmed it may be. And it is, at the least, always trimmed – no contemporary young woman seems to sport a full bush. And the trimmers look at the baldies with disgust. Why, they ask, would you want to look like a little girl? And when you take

a step back and weigh feeling "clean", "sexy", and "feminine" against waxing off the very hairs that distinguish a grown woman from a prepubescent child, you come away with irony. And perhaps something mildly discomfoting. Is this what men want? Women to look like little girls?

HE SAID*
(*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT THE INNOCENT.)

In a time when taking photos in parks is tantamount to paedophilia, no man in his right mind would admit to having a preference for bald vagina because he likes his lady looking like Lolita. Instead, the oft-repeated reason is cleanliness. Milan, 28, said, "in all honesty I don't really care but when you're with a woman who hasn't groomed and has a bush, you can't help but think of her as dirty. As someone who doesn't take care of herself." Tom, 32, admitted to being "a little grossed out" by the bearded clam look. "I don't think



it's a good look, especially when you see a girl naked for the first time. Definitely reduce[s] the likelihood of us going down there ladies."

"I DON'T HAVE A REAL PREFERENCE. ALTHOUGH I REALLY DO PREFER BALD OR A LITTLE STRIP TO AN OVER GROWN BUSH."

MALE, 30

Mitchell, an IT nerd pushing 30 who prefers a little fluff on a woman's muff, raised the point that perhaps vaginal aesthetics are, like many things in society, cyclical. "Just like the days when beards were a sign of manliness, then they were a sign of being unkempt, now they're a sign of being trendy." But something or someone creates these paradigms. In the '70s and the '80s bush was big, as we moved into the '90s it became "disgusting" and "gross". Was porn the instigator? "Yeah I'd say it is," he said. "At least for this cycle. All the porn I've grown up on is completely hairless, back and front." In fact, according to one other man, women in contemporary porn are so typically hairless that "hairy vagina [now] has its own genre", much like "amateur" and "big Latino bitches". If a man wants to watch porn that features a woman with hair on her vagina, if he wants to see a *real* woman as she is naturally, he has to go to a *special* category, as though it is unnatural.

"ONCE YOU'VE HAD BARE, IT'S HARD TO GO BACK TO HAIR." MALE, 28

In much the same way as their female counterparts, men can be divided into the same two groups: the men who find pubic hair disgusting and the ones who like to know they're with an adult woman. Neither party seemed all that keen on trekking through a rainforest, but when it came to long term love all previously perceived defects became obsolete.

"Start with no hair as most preferable," one man said, "and work back from there."

"I PREFER A BIT OF HAIR. A LANDING STRIP IS PERFECT, SOMETHING TO GUIDE YOU IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION."

MALE, 27

There was just one difference between the men's camp and women's camp – that ultimately when it comes to the plunge, men don't really care what they're getting, as long as they're getting something. As one woman pointed out, "no one's ever been kicked out of bed for having a hairy vagina".



BRAZIL

A COUNTRY AT THE FOREFRONT OF WOMEN'S HYGIENE?

Googling "Brazilian wax" and "origins" dredges up a plethora of blogs and beauty websites raving about the benefits of this wondrous Brazilian tradition, one they claim harks back to Ancient Egyptian times. These sites claim that to have all the hair removed does not only leave you with a shiny giney of the most titillating kind, but that to have no hair is cleaner and more hygienic. For Dines, this a direct result of pornography's influence and one she didn't predict ten years ago. "I did not anticipate just how quickly the women's media would fall into line and start pushing this on women. Suddenly in women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and movies as well, waxing is about grooming, hygiene and good health. How ridiculous is this that having hot wax poured on what is the most delicate and sensitive area of the body is about being hygienic? Can you imagine the men's magazines telling men that in order to be hygienic, they need to pour hot wax on the tip of their penis? Certainly there is a push for men to be more 'groomed', but this is about trimming hair, not pouring hot wax on their genitals."

The hygiene argument is also a myth. American academic Magdala Peixoto Labre's work on the Brazilian wax phenomenon ("*The Brazilian Wax: New Hairlessness Norm For Women?*", *Journal Of Communication Inquiry* in 2002) revealed that the removal of unwanted body hair from such sensitive areas actually leaves the skin open for infection. And infections women do get; infected ingrown hairs, rashes, pimples and the niggling itch as the hair starts to go grow back. "I think you do it for both of you," offers a 29-year-old friend of *Three*, before she adds dryly, "but when it starts to grow back you realise it was really for him."

Labre also revealed that claims this practise originated in Brazil, where women wear the tiniest of bikinis, are false. "Growing up in Brazil," she writes, "my friends and I did go to beauty salons for a regular bikini wax, not a Brazilian wax. In searching the websites of Brazilian beauty salons, I have found that some do offer a more extensive bikini wax – for women who wear smaller bikinis. However, few bikinis are small enough to require the complete removal of hair." According to Labre, she had never even heard of such a thing until it became popular in the United States in the last decade, not long after it became the norm in *Playboy* centrefolds; hygienic, feminine and sexy in women's mags. And let's not forget those early episodes of *Sex And The City* when Carrie is mugged of her muff and manages to go from feeling like a vulnerable little girl to a big sexy woman. Cultural construction much?

**"MY HUSBAND
LIKES A LITTLE
BIT OF HAIR,
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WITH A WOMAN."
FEMALE, 35**



ANCIENT ATHENS

SINGEING YOUR PUBES OFF WITH AN OIL LAMP

Pubic hair removal is not a new thing invented by Hugh Hefner. According to Tom Hillard, Associate Professor of Ancient History at Macquarie University, "genital depilation has been around since at least classical Greek times. [There is] a vase painting depiction of it with one woman assisting another. For a while, the scene was misread as same-sex titillation." Hillard refers to the work of Jean-Paul Descoeudres who was particularly interested in the 5th century BC depiction of a naked satyr between the legs of a naked woman. Hillard paraphrases Descoeudres: "The scene, Descoeudres says, is unique. The attention of the Satyr is riveted on the woman's pubic area, but which he is not grasping. His fingers, apart from the thumb and index finger are splayed out, as they are on his other hand. Not, then, 'frivolous love-play', says Descoeudres. The Satyr is not shown as aroused – as satyrs often are. But the girl is not enjoying herself, he says: 'on the contrary: her stance is insecure and seems to reveal feelings of hesitation and even apprehension.' She is holding her stomach, says Descoeudres, 'as if distressed or enduring pain'."

The Satyr is anointing the woman's pubic region after having plucked it. According to Descoeudres, "The practice for women to have their pubic hair removed must have been fairly common in Classical Athens to judge from passages alluding to it in Aristophanes comedies." (*Hedistos Daimon, Antichthon* 15, 1981) In fact, it is listed specifically as one of the things that enhance a woman's attractiveness in Aristophanes' play *Lysistrata*: "How? Well, just imagine: we're at home,

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**WOMEN'S
CHORUS IN
LYSISTRATA,
411 BC.**

beautifully made up, wearing our sheerest lawn negligees and nothing underneath, and with our – our triangles carefully plucked; and the men are all like ramrods and can't wait to leap into bed, and then we absolutely refuse – that'll make them make peace soon enough, you'll see." In 2011 women also expect some kind of grooming from their men, but in 411 BC when *Lysistrata* was being performed, the men sang the praises of sporting a healthy patch in the pubic region: "A sign of valour is such hair." Perhaps Aristophanes was a lightweight pornographer infiltrating his own time?



"EVERY WOMAN OUGHT TO BE FILLED WITH SHAME AT THE THOUGHT SHE IS A WOMAN"

The feminists (surprise, surprise) have a bunch of theories as to why society has pushed hairlessness of women as a norm and they all come back to objectification as a form of oppression. Specifically, the complete removal of pubic hair is seen as the symbolic rendering of an adult woman into a vulnerable childlike state – powerless as opposed to empowered. As Dines argues, "I think that much of this is about misogyny and policing women's sexuality. There is a general disgust in our culture with women's bodies, unless of course they are young, toned, depilated, plucked, scented, etcetera. Only then are women seen as desirable and sexual. Anything that doesn't conform to this limited image is met with ridicule and disgust. I think part of this is a fear of mature women on the part of men. If she looks young, then she is less threatening to them."

It's also a part of something much larger – the historical role of woman to attract man – which has been utilised and manipulated to create a billion dollar beauty industry. Labre highlights the way entertainment, media, cosmetic and advertising industries make money off of a woman's insecurity about her body, an insecurity these industries generate for that exact purpose by promoting a "narrow, Westernised beauty ideal".

"Women's bodies are carved up into parts that must be improved by products," she writes. "Hair removal products and techniques are a tremendous market, commanding billions of dollars every year. Advertisements for these products are prevalent in media targeting women, including women's magazines and television. These advertisements feature hairless, almost plastic looking bodies, which are presented as the ultimate in female beauty."

In order to feel good, to feel sexy, women need to love their bodies and as we're growing up we're not taught that our bodies in their natural state are beautiful, that we should use conditioner on our pubic hair and put it in plaits. Quite the opposite. Instead, and very quickly, we are introduced to a gruelling top-to-toe beauty regime, most of it to do with hair, and this regime will last for the rest of our lives.

"I'M JUST HONoured TO BE IN THE PRESENCE OF ONE AT ALL." **MALE, 34**



For many women, meeting these narrow beauty ideals is anxiety inducing. Who hasn't heard a friend apologise for fear of horrifying others because she hasn't had time to get her eyebrows waxed? Or declare, remorsefully, that she won't be able to have sex with her hot date because she hasn't had time to remove all or at least some of the hair from her vagina?

As Dines points out, the results can be tragic. "Sex is all about the pleasures of the body, yet for so many young women they feel so self-conscious about their body that they can't fully embrace the sensuality and erotic potential of sex. The result is all too often women being sexual objects to men and in a way, to themselves. To be an authentic sexual subject, you have to love your body, and how many young women do you know who indeed, love their body?"

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UNCOOKED
BOWL OF
RICE?"*

FEMALE, 60

