

# Los Angeles Times

## Breast cancer ads use lechery for good

By Dan Neil

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October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and a new crop of public service announcements leverage male lechery to an astonishing degree. The latest and greatest is a spot called "Save the Boobs," from the Rethink Breast Cancer charity, in which a voluptuous young woman in a white bikini walks into a pool party scene. Strip-club music kicks in and the camera slow-mo's her fleshy assets while the partygoers attempt to pick their jaws up off the ground. No discreet, quick-cut editing here. The camera stares, unblinking, unashamed, at the woman's figure.

"Breast cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in young women ages 25 to 49," says the text. If this were a Budweiser commercial, the bluestockings, psalm singers and family focusers would be going completely mental, but in this case the morals police have no grounds to object unless they want to come off as somehow pro-breast cancer.

In recent years, the increasing frankness of breast cancer PSAs has been a bright spot of adult sensibility in what is Americans' generally neurotic relationship to the female anatomy. Bear in mind that our national dialogue was brought to an inane standstill when Janet Jackson's breast was briefly exposed during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show. Compared to the "Save the Boobs" spot, Jackson might as well have been wearing a burqa.

Also, this ad -- and a couple more like it -- represent one of the few occasions when the male tendency to objectify the female body is put to good use, as opposed to selling beer and premium football cable packages. They seem to answer a question that must have nagged breast-cancer-awareness advocates: How to get men to care? With rare exceptions, men don't suffer from breast cancer. The earnest, sad-violins spots invoking moms and grand-moms of the past probably haven't gained much traction among men.

Feminist film theory has a name for the camera's eye here: The "male gaze," which is to say, the camera's view is that of the male spectator and unseen protagonist regarding the female as an object (cf. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"). This is the camera's-eye of pornography and it's inherently misogynistic. The "Save the Boobs" spot spoofs the male gaze and turns it into something positive.

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# The Underwire

Breast Cancer News You Can Use

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Similarly, British pop star Keeley Hazell did a PSA for breast cancer awareness last year in which, while she talks, the camera drops down to ogle her chest before she waves the attention back up to her face.

Another new ad -- this one for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation and sponsored by Yoplait yogurt -- is called "Pledge." While not as racy as "Save the Boobs," it's still pretty sassy. Over a montage of women cupping their hands over and under their right breasts, we hear their voices reciting, "I pledge allegiance to my girls, to my chi-chis, to my hooters, to my ta-tas, to my gazongas. . . ."

These ads make the equation explicit: More breast cancer equals fewer awesome breasts. Brilliant. Where do I send my check? The only people who could object to such ads are advocates for other kinds of cancer awareness. Women don't gossip behind their hands about the largeness of a man's prostate as if it's a good thing.

These breast cancer ads are tapping into a built-in constituency that doesn't exist for other organs. Unfair but true. Yet other advocacy groups do seem to be catching on, using sex to sell awareness. The other night I saw a spot from the National Lung Cancer Partnership. The conceit is a fashion shoot. A beautiful woman in a bathrobe walks into a dimly lit room (a photo studio?). She strips off the robe to reveal some great lingerie (La Perla? I'm just guessing). Then the camera zooms in until it's a full-frame view of her ample bosom. The camera shutter clicks and we're looking at an X-ray of her diseased lungs. "Lung cancer takes twice as many women's lives as breast cancer."

The take-away here? These ads represent a positive cultural change.

In her 1978 "Illness as Metaphor," in which she ruminated on her own breast cancer, Susan Sontag argued that in our culture, cancer was subtly regarded as a failure of character. "Passion moves inward," Sontag wrote, "striking and blighting the deepest cellular recesses." If these sexy cancer PSAs do nothing else, they underscore the notion that we've moved beyond blaming the victim.

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