

In the air

# Rock bottom

Ariel Wagner Parker

**Cavemen and women are not generally held up as a model of advanced society. But they surely didn't get anywhere near the rock bottom of primitivism touched in our own dear civilised age by Triumph International, makers of Sloggi, „the young underwear brand for boys and girls.“**

This old-established German family firm recently organised a „Bum Contest“, in which young women competed to have their bottoms judged the most beautiful in Europe.

Can you imagine cave people doing that?

No, neither can I. They had more sensible things to do, like hunting and gathering and keeping the homes fires burning.

I first saw this bum contest announced at a bus shelter (*bus, be, bum, bi, bo, bo ...?*) in *Avenue Pescatore*, a stop much used by young people from the Limpertsberg lycées. The large shiny advertising panel showed three young women in scanty panties, bottoms facing the camera. Under the title „Show me your Sloggi“, it announced a competition to find the most beautiful buttocks in the land.

The advertisement was objectionable – misogynist, coarsening and reductionist – but no worse than many others.



Despite the struggles of the Women's Movement (remember that?) in the 60s and 70s, women's bodies are still being exploited today, ever more relentlessly and cynically, to sell everything from motor-cars to magazines. I assumed however the bum contest was just a sales gimmick, an attempt to associate the idea of beauty and success with the underpants in question.

Wrong. It turns out to have been a real competition, with thousands of contestants, national finals and European championships.

I realised this recently when I bought a local TV magazine. On the front cover was an inset about the finals in Luxembourg: „Luscious Curves – Bum Contest“, it said, with a picture of a pretty young woman, butt bared for the camera.

Inside, under the caption „A lusciously rounded affair“, we are told that Luxem-

bourg has long been wondering who has the most beautiful bum (in red) in the country (really?) and that we now know the answer. 260 young women (only girls were admitted, although Sloggi makes underwear for boys as well) had entered their bottoms for the contest, sending in their best photo. The judges eventually trimmed the field down to ten finalists, who then spent an evening strutting their stuff for the audience and brandishing their backsides before the three men and two women. There is a distasteful picture of one of them bending forward, hands on knees, buttocks stuck out towards the judges. The „lucky“ winner would go forward to the Grand Final in Munich and could win 10.000 euros, a contract to model underwear and ... insurance for the prize-winning „Po“ (one can't help wondering what risks were covered ...)

I mean, for heaven's sake! Are we stuck in a time warp or something?

All those years ago, while the Women's Movement was protesting against misogynistic advertisements, it was also fighting to have the *Miss World* competition banned – and for similar reasons. We considered that treating women as mere „bodies“, judging us uniquely on our physical appearance, was incompatible with our being accepted as the equals of men, being treated as serious human beings and assuming positions

of power and responsibility in society.

So what can one possibly say now about a repellent and demeaning contest in which women are judged not even on their entire bodies but on just one part of them – and a part that is highly sexualised, the subject of complex erotic fantasies?

In the *Miss World* contest, changes of approach were eventually brought about: for some time now contestants have had to talk about themselves, and their ideas, aims and ambitions are taken into account by the judges.

The „bum contestants“, as I read, were hard put to it to utter a coherent sentence ...

What do today's feminists have to say about this latest slap in the face for not just female, but human dignity? There had apparently been attempts to discredit the contest as misogynist, but there were no protesters at the Luxembourg finals.

This is an issue worth fighting over, surely, but the signs are not auspicious ...

Some readers will of course dismiss me as a humourless harridan, who in the name of political correctness wants to stop young women having a good time. After all, they say, no one is forcing the girls to compete in the bum contest; it proves how liberated and emancipated they are, what a high degree of self-confidence and sexual freedom they have attained ... and anyway, it's all just harmless fun, everyone having a good laugh. Stop being so serious!

Blah, blah, blah. Round up the usual arguments. We know them from the discussions about the (ab)use of women in advertising ... but of course, the „Show me your Sloggi“ contest is advertising, isn't it?

But perhaps someone can explain to me exactly what is so liberated and emancipated about lashing out money on expensive underwear in order to take part in a competition designed to increase the profits of a multinational company.

And why a woman who is self-confident and liberated needs to have her bottom judged superior to that of her fellow women.

And whether it is really harmless fun to associate achievement and success (even at a trivial level) with one's sexual attributes; to encourage young women to present themselves to their peers as sexual objects rather than as human beings in all their complexity, with real feelings, experiences, ideas and all kinds of abilities;

Are they not compromising their present – not to mention their future – for the prospect of fool's gold?

Is all this really just a good laugh?

The TV magazine contains several illustrations of the contestants

and none of them shows any dignity nor inspires respect, affection or even interest. On the contrary, the women are objectified, just more products to be consumed.

Or is that perhaps the idea?

Take that idea one step further. On the same magazine cover was a large photo illustrating the main feature: a tale of two prostitutes in Luxembourg. It showed a woman in a red slip, ample breasts highlighted, legs crossed provocatively, and a bed prominent in the background. If it is doing nothing else, Luxembourg's great prostitution debate is certainly providing a perfect alibi for a media titillation orgy of half-naked women ...

Where will all this end?

For fear of putting the thought in the air, of giving some cynical ad-man the idea, I won't mention a nasty pun that occurs to me on the word „contest“.