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# **How Do I Look?**

**Viewing, Embodiment, Performance, Showgirls,  
& Art Practice**

Alison Jane Carr

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield  
Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2013

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# **Declaration**

I, Alison J Carr, declare that the enclosed submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and consisting of a written thesis and a DVD booklet, meets the regulations stated in the handbook for the mode of submission selected and approved by the Research Degrees Sub-Committee of Sheffield Hallam University.

I declare that this submission is my own work, and has not been submitted for any other academic award. The use of all materials from sources other than my own work has been properly and fully acknowledged.



# Abstract

My research explores the possibility of a revitalised language around viewing, pleasure and embodiment that can result from a consideration of the figure of the showgirl: her live performance, her representation in art, film, and images, as well as how showgirls articulate their own experiences and my own pleasures in viewing showgirls can yield in terms of a revitalised language around viewing, pleasure, and embodiment. I look at the showgirl, and the debates she has triggered, in order to unpack how the relationship between embodiment, spectatorship, and feminism has been seen in a range of literatures. In the process, I suggest what is closed down in these debates, and through my art work I point to the possibilities she offers.

I suggest that literature on the gaze, powerfully shaped by the significant works of John Berger and Laura Mulvey, has reduced the complexity in how the showgirl is seen. While the discursive contexts in which Mulvey and Berger wrote allowed for reflexive accounts of the gaze, their ideas have circulated so widely and forcefully as to become monolithic; taken too literally without putting into context. I felt an important aim was putting Laura Mulvey's essay, 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema' into context in ways that would destabilise its status as a monolith. I do this by looking at how technologies have shaped the critical and theoretical approaches to viewing the showgirl.

I avoid making the assumption that our culture with its prevalence of bodily display creates feelings of emancipation and empowerment for women. Rather, I am alarmed at the inadequacy of the critical tools applied to showgirls and showgirl culture particularly within popular feminism—tools that seem only to uncover a limited set of conclusions. These conclusions are that women are led blindly into practices of bodily display and femininity, that exposure of their body only signals a desire to please men and get ahead in financial terms, that women only feel jealously and competitive when they see other women represented or performing in beautiful or erotic ways. All of this presumes that showgirls and their audiences have no capacity to reflect, think critically, support one another, and move between performance contexts. Therefore, what is at stake within this research is the new feminist tools that are urgently needed for considering images and performances of bodily display; without such tools, we allow the proliferation and normalisation of abhorrent misogynist and reductive, polarised ways of discussing the body to dominate discussions of display and pleasure.

I use of a range of methods including producing art works, close-reading of art works and artefacts, watching showgirl shows, conducting oral history

interviews with showgirls, drawing on queer theory, considering performative styles of writing, and using films to provide structural devices. I end my thesis by positioning how art work can bring complexity and nuance to the discussion. Across the research, I create my own showgirl performance: in text and in art works.

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I would like to thank first and foremost my supervisors, Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Feona Attwood, without whom this would not be nearly as ambitious. It has been *almost* always a joy to work with you both! Thank you for giving me the freedom to pursue my ideas and hunches, and for insightful debriefing.

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I have had the pleasure of being shown a range of photographs and books from ‘out the back’, notably at the National Media Museum, the British Library, the National Fairground Archive, and the British Film Institute.

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Much of this research was inspired by the conversations and critiques I had during my MFA at CalArts. I am, and will always be, a CalArtian. Thank you to all of my cohort for *all* of our conversations. Even the ones that felt like World War Three. But in particular, Alexis Hudgins, Brica Wilcox, Lakshmi Luthra, April Totten, Ali Prosch, Megan Cotts and Meghann McCrory. Much of what I have written here are the thoughts I have had on the stairwell leaving CalArts—I am sorry I took so long formulating them! What I have written will be recognisable to Natalie Bookchin, Ellen Birrell, David Bunn, Kaucyila Brooke—thanks for all the useful leads and encouragement. Leslie Dick, occasionally glimpsing the potential you see in me has kept me going. Thank you, for all the help, and for being my friend.

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A range of showgirls on various stages inspired this project. And quite a few dance teachers too. In particular, at Constance Grant Dance Centre: Miss Judy, Tracey Southern, Jeni Ferguson, and Carolann Copley-Tucci, as well as Emily Talks at Hype, Lara Gothique at Velvet Burlesque, and Jo King at the London School of Burlesque. And for being in *The Artist* with me, thanks to the wonderful dancers, Lizzie Dodd and Hayley Watts.

If you are going to take risks in your art and research, you want a colleague like Dale Holmes insinuating you have not gone far enough or taken enough of a risk. Thank you Dale. What happened in Unit 12, stays in Unit 12.

For checking the interview transcripts over for accuracy, thanks Samantha Wood. For proof-reading, cheerleading, hand-holding, and lots of tea (and sympathy!), Katherine Angel.

There are many more I should mention, but I have tried to keep this brief. So, thank you to everyone else: Twitter friends, research friends, students and generous colleagues.

For looking after me (both body and soul) throughout, thanks are not enough to Dennis Carr and Greg Wells. But thank you, a lot.

Most importantly, this is for Sue Carr.

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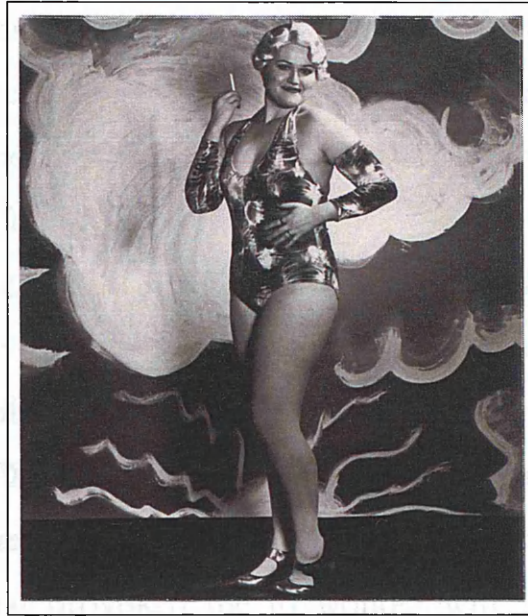
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# OVERTURE



In addition to the gaze [...] there is the seductive fleeting glance, the glance that overviews without detailing; there is laborious observation, a slow, penetration inspection that seeks details without establishing a global whole, there is a sweeping survey, there is the wink and the blink, speeded up perceptions that foreclose part of the visual field to focus on elements within it, the squint which reduces the vertical to the horizontal, and many other modalities. Men, but also women look in many different ways, and it is this plurality of these possible visions—depending on one's interests, investments, commitments, and beliefs—that dictates how objects are seen and even which ones are seen.

We must see that bodies are not simply the loci of power but also of resistance, and particularly, resistance because of their excess. Bodies exceed whatever limits politics, representation, management, and desire may dictate: the bodies of women, even the depicted bodies of women, are no more passive, no more exhibitionistic, no more the objects of consumption, than male bodies, animal bodies or natural bodies. And the ways in which women, as well as men, look, the ways in which they engage with images and representations of bodies is not singular or monolithic either. One can inspect, survey, peer, glance, peek, scour, one can focus on or look through. Art itself has in fact always elicited looks other than the gaze. This of course is not unknown by artists, whose work is commonly an attempt to engage with, and perhaps produce, other ways of looking that may move beyond the mundane and the habitual, and hopefully beyond the apparatus of the gaze.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, 'Naked' in *The Prosthetic Impulse; From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future*, ed. by Marquard Smith & Joanne Morra, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, p. 199.

At a car boot sale in the summer of 2005, I leafed through a tin of cigarette cards from the thirties. The miniature pin-ups grabbed my attention. On the front of the cards were women posing in lively positions and on the reverse were short biographies—some were swimmers, tennis players, and actresses. I picked out all the showgirls from the tin, ten in total. As I walked home I knew I wanted to restage the photographs, so that I could feel what it was like to be in these photographs with their costumes, lights, and poses. This chance encounter shifted the direction of my art practice: the showgirl entered in a dramatic way. What attracts me to her is her unembarrassed shameless bodily display. I recognised back in 2005 that nothing in my life was showgirl-like and that provoked me to wonder why it was so contrary to admit I was sad I was not a showgirl. I remain completely aware of the whimsical nature of such a reflection, but fuelled by a curiosity to find out why it seems so difficult for a woman to weave into her life her fantastical pleasures and desires. It has become a way in which I reflect on feminism: if women have reached a place of emancipation, then, surely, it is possible to own such desires, to speak of my pleasures, to draw on them so heavily. If it is beyond the remit of feminism, why is that? When did it drop from the agenda that women's pleasures were important?

Through the re-staged cigarette-card photographs I made following that encounter, I have been exposed to conversations on representation, feminism, desire and pleasure. Specifically, theories of the gaze have been brought to bear on my art; both John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema'. Berger writes of the ways that women are constructed as idealised objects to be looked at in the canon of Western painting and, linked to this, women have internalised their own surveillance, and are always aware of being observed, even when alone.<sup>5</sup> Mulvey writes on

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<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 45-64.

the male gaze as constructed through classic Hollywood cinema, which I will return to in Chapter One.<sup>6</sup> Whilst the discursive contexts in which Mulvey and Berger wrote allowed for fluid, reflexive accounts of the gaze, their ideas have circulated so widely and so forcefully as to become somewhat monolithic and as monoliths they are calcified ideas taken too literally without attempts to penetrate or put into context.

Sensing the impasse that Mulvey's concept of the gaze sets up, namely the stable associative chains of meaning that link together male-active-action-narrative-power and the ability to look and determine meaning, with the contrasting female-passive-image-object and capacity to embody visually pleasing aesthetics, I sought to negotiate these associations in my art work. In the video *Woman As Image* 2009, I paired appropriated imagery of Rita Hayworth performing 'Put the Blame on Mame' in *Gilda* with my own performance: a song and dance number setting a section of Laura Mulvey's essay to the tune of Kander and Ebb's *And All That Jazz*. My explicit intention was to force my way beyond the impasse of who looks, who performs, and to embody looking, performing, responding to theory and responding to showgirl performance simultaneously. This work prior to my PhD laid the ground for this research which functions as an extension of that work. I wanted to find ways to position my dance-based performative video art works and situate how they speak back to theory.

The opening epigraph from Elizabeth Grosz frames this research by extending the range of possibilities for viewing. She continues her critique of over-valuing the gaze, writing that 'seeing needs to be retrieved by feminists and [...] vision needs to be freed from the constrictions that have been

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<sup>6</sup> Laura Mulvey (1975), 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 14-27.

imposed on it by the apparatus of the gaze'.<sup>7</sup> Grosz poses a number of provocations I take up in this research. Uppermost, she looks to artists to lead the way into an expanded range of ways of seeing—and through this practice-led research, I am happy to oblige. But significantly, Grosz also suggests that it is feminists' responsibility to challenge the singularity of the gaze. This more precarious challenge I also wish to address: if new feminist tools are not developed urgently for considering images and performances of bodily display, then we allow the proliferation and normalisation of abhorrent misogynist ways of discussing the body or a similarly reductive polarised feminist critique, which I visit in Chapter Three.

I take a feminist position in this research. I provide this clarification with good reason. My art work has provoked responses that erase the feminist challenge in the work. Occasionally glimpsing approaches to feminism that construct hierarchies and therefore are dismissive of positions viewed critically has given me a sense of the seriousness of the stakes. If I do not articulate exactly what kind of feminist position I take as an artist and writer, I hand over the articulation of my art and art practices with which I align myself, to critical interlocutors. For example, Amelia Jones writes disappointedly that contemporary artists readily embody the position of the object, rather than following earlier feminist orthodoxies that rejected the tropes of woman-as-object.<sup>8</sup> For Jones, this shift is to be lamented: feminist art used to represent an important political challenge to the patriarchy, and now, artists readily embody their own objectification. I wish to challenge this reduction by teasing out what else might be happening in the art work. The sources I uncover in this thesis, both text and art, occupy a range of feminist positions. It might be helpful, to provide a definition of feminism to ground these divergent approaches, as slippery as this might prove to be. Denise Riley

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<sup>7</sup> Grosz 'Naked', p. 199.

<sup>8</sup> Amelia Jones, '1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art' *X-tra Contemporary Art Quarterly*, vol. 10, iss. 4, 2008, p. 17. Italics in the original.

succinctly encapsulates the tension of feminsim: ‘For both a concentration on and a refusal of the identity of ‘women’ are essential to feminism’. This thesis follows Riley’s line. I do not wish to suggest that the showgirl is an essential manifestation, but I do wish to enlarge the ways in which women embody and derive pleasure from looking at showgirls.

I wanted to give shape and form to *my own* ways of looking and being seen, to consider my own sense of pleasure—and pursue these steadfastly—rather like the rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland*. There is a playful element to this gesture, even a touch of whimsy. But *why not* be a little whimsical? My intuition is that a light-hearted playful absurdity will enable me to articulate a nuanced picture of possible feminist pleasures of looking, and challenge the positions that seek to close these down.

The showgirl will guide this research and be the focus of the investigation. Briefly, let me provide some definition of the showgirl and who she is. The implications of the word ‘showgirl’ depend on the context in which it is used. The word has variously been used to cover a number of differing practices, modes of employment and bodily commodification: singer, dancer, chorus-girl, stripper, model, or prostitute have variously been part her repertoire. My emphasis in these roles is the showgirl as a professional with a set of skills—it is her ability to produce moments of pure pleasure through performance that makes her a showgirl. She is currently enjoying resurgence in popular culture through scenes like new burlesque and pop stars like Lady Gaga and Lana del Rey. The tropes of her style change with fashion, what remains constant are a sense of excess, display, and charisma.

Part of her appeal is her embodiment of a certain kind of performative femininity, a gendered play composed to generate pleasure. Studies of femininity have tended to focus on femininity as the standards, procedures,

practices, and requirements placed upon women.<sup>9</sup> Here, I wish to elucidate the showgirl's performative femininity not as extensions of essential or natural gender nor in relation to gender-binary. However, I do want to challenge the assumption that performative femininity is any more or less based on artifice than other types of gender construction.

I use the word embodiment as a strategy for resisting the kinds of power we afford images. I am in search of my own carnal sense of pleasure, and sensing the physical presence in a showgirl performance that lets me access my own and the performers agency. We are both embodied, both sentient bodies that can resist.

The history and theory of showgirls has recently been given serious consideration.<sup>10</sup> The first scholarly showgirl text is Andrea Stuart's *Showgirls*. Her intention is to 'explore the tensions between the more passive connotations of being a showgirl, that is being an object on display, and the more aggressive act of showing her ability to make us see'.<sup>11</sup> Stuart writes of specific historical showgirls, unpacking their meaning and placing them into the wider contexts. Her examples are Mistinguett, Josephine Baker, Colette, Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, and Barquette, all of whom transgress normative ideas of femininity and give visibility to complicated and marginalised notions of gender, race and performativity.<sup>12</sup> Stuart clarifies:

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<sup>9</sup> Studies on femininity for example Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity*, London: Paladin 1986, Jane M. Ussher, *Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex*, London: Penguin Books, 1997, Efrat Tseëlon, *The Masque of Femininity: The Presentation of Woman in Everyday Life*, London: Sage Publications, 1995 and Samantha Holland, *Alternative Femininities: Body, Age and Identity*, Oxford: Berg, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Serious striptease, burlesque and theatrical histories that have also been written include: Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991, Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000, Jessica Glasscock, *Striptease: From Gaslight to Spotlight*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 2003, Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Andrea Stuart, *Showgirls*, London: Random House, 1996, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Stuart, *Showgirls*, p. 155.

The showgirl is always other. Whether she is black like some of the American showgirls who shared post-war Paris with Josephine, an ersatz Oriental like Mata Hari, or even European like Marlene Dietrich, who was presented to American audiences as the epitome of decadent 'European style', the showgirl has always been linked to racial difference, exoticism, the power of darkness and the corruptions of the blood.<sup>13</sup>

In *The Happy Stripper*, an academic theorisation of new burlesque, Jacki Willson considers how the current burlesque scene can be understood from a range of feminist perspectives.<sup>14</sup> In particular, she writes of the tensions between feminism and post-feminism around attitudes to femininity. Rather than resolving these tensions, Willson writes that burlesque's appeal might be that it offers a site for women to consider 'the point where solidarity breaks down' between the two different systems.<sup>15</sup> She goes further, suggesting that:

Young women need to be fully aware of the consequences of their display, yet they must not be cut off from their own bodies and the knowledge and personal strength that comes from experiencing and imaging their erotic pleasure. Feminism therefore needs to be equivocally poised between pleasure and politics, and female display must be complimented with a direct address to acknowledge this perceived contradiction.<sup>16</sup>

I noticed in a range of recent popular books on burlesque which narrate previous as well as the present scenes, an honesty in trying to articulate ambivalence around erotic and bodily display, and how women might access pleasure in being a spectator of burlesque. 'Most of the time, I was the only chick who wasn't on stage', writes Michelle Carr, of visiting strip shows which inspired her to found the hugely influential Velvet Hammer Burlesque, in Los Angeles. She continues:

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<sup>13</sup> Stuart, *Showgirls*, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> Jacki Willson, *The Happy Stripper, Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Willson, *The Happy Stripper*, p. 172.

<sup>16</sup> Willson, *The Happy Stripper*, p. 172.



For the most part, these poor girls did not look like they were having much fun at all. With us, not the usual gropey clientele, they could finally let their guard down and show off their skills, paid in howling appreciation. Nevertheless, I couldn't help but feel the humiliation when they had to crawl around on all fours to pick up thrown singles and their own discarded garments.

As a woman, I would naturally dream of myself up on stage. "What song would I choose, what would I wear, would I end up breaking my neck on that pole" ...and my fantasy version would invariably turn into an over-the-top Busby Berkeley flight of fancy.<sup>17</sup>

In *Pretty Things*, a book detailing the careers of 1940s burlesque queens through interviews, costume sketches, saved clippings and photographs, Liz Goldwyn, an avid collector of vintage burlesque costumes, tries to grapple with women's stakes in burlesque. She writes:

I was raised in the wake of women's lib, schooled to be independent and to downplay my sexuality in order to be taken seriously. In our postfeminist society, many women question whether we really have to choose one role at the expense of the other. In the early twentieth century, women went to burlesque shows to discover trade secrets of the stripteasers; and now, almost a century later, there lingers for many women a strong attraction to the burlesque queen persona of self-aware sexuality.<sup>18</sup>

Goldwyn raises a compelling point—but leaves it dangling. What does it mean to feel certain repressions or prohibitions in order to achieve types of success? What does it mean to look on longingly at women with altogether different lives, fewer opportunities?

I feel an affinity with these reflections on the illicit pleasures of watching showgirls—whatever gains feminism has brought us, for some women, there remains a visual seduction with the embodied glamour of the showgirl. While the range of textual approaches to the showgirl expands, I want to add to the field a sense of permission in claiming showgirl pleasures; owning it, developing a suitable language and reflecting on what it could mean.

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<sup>17</sup> Michelle Carr, *The Velvet Hammer Burlesque*, Berlin: Gestalten Verlag, 2008, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Liz Goldwyn, *Pretty Things: The Last Generation of American Burlesque Queens* New York: Regan Books, 2006, p. xiv.

The showgirl offers us shameless display. I wanted to extend this into a showgirl inspired approach to writing, thinking, looking, doing, and making art: shamelessly, aware, knowing and playful. And yet the showgirl holds a precarious position. What I would like to suggest in this study is that we do not close down the possibilities that the showgirl offers simply because of current general fears of objectification, sexualisation, and exploitation. While these may be present in the showgirl milieu, they *do* all exist beyond showgirl too. Although she does not expand on it, Willson stumbles upon the word 'meta-feminism' in conversation at a conference, discussing with young female scholars what post-feminism means. Meta-feminism, a feminism with a capacity for self-reflection, sounds like an important position: this research therefore, is towards establishing a meta-feminist position.

Placing my pleasure and desires at the centre of my research necessitated a sensitive selection of research tools that would leave my desires intact rather than deconstructed. Methodologically I focussed on the surface, on movement, on positioning, on voice and play. I did, however, read a broad range of literature in order to help me find the right voice, form, shape, and approach to my writing.<sup>20</sup> In particular, I gravitated towards textual approaches to critical theory with an interwoven performative voice and the use of 'I': not used in a confessional sense, but rather to grasp hold of slippery ideas like desire and embodiment a little better. For example, Peggy Phelan's writing on movement in Sigmund Freud's early analysis cases in which she also looks back at her own career in the New York City Ballet corps de ballet

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<sup>20</sup> The novels and short stories of Angela Carter and Leslie Dick, fiction writers, were also crucial in thinking through ways of producing text with the body featuring centrally: their pleasurable, performative qualities, but also their disobedient, uncontrollable, even abject nature too. Also key to developing a writing style for this study was my reading of Roland Barthes, particularly *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, London: Vintage, 1993, and *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. Also Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, Los Angeles: Art Issues, Press, 1993.

hold both a sense of her body as a site of practice, but also of thought: the movement between the two.<sup>21</sup>

Yve Lomax writes of the dance-floor. The event of dancing becomes a meditation on how the body might be transcended, on how something beyond the body might come into being. She writes: 'On the dance-floor there is something side-stepping embodiment, and this is the effect that results from those corporeal bodies that, in the living present, albeit spoken of in the past, bump, grind or gracefully intermingle'.<sup>22</sup>

In short book form, Sharon Kivland writes on her afterthoughts on presentations and journeys taken, evoking the motion and movement of being between, en route, passing through, and entwines them with anecdotes on Freud's cases: both the thrust of his writing, but also his footnoted asides. Kivland catches the inferences. In her account of regretting what she did not say in a presentation at the Freud Museum, Kivland realises in *L'Esprit d'Escalier* that what was left unsaid was art, thus, she concludes the book: 'Yet, for the moment, for the time of the event, and in writing my account in the only way I could, I addressed both architecture and psychoanalysis, and as this is neither architecture nor psychoanalysis, and I do not want to remain on the stairs, I must call this a work of art'.<sup>24</sup>

In *Unmastered* Katherine Angel collects together the experiences she recognises as having formed her sense of her own sexuality: relationships, unwanted attention as a teenager, prohibitions and permissions from her

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<sup>21</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, London: Routledge, 1997 pp. 44-72.

<sup>22</sup> Yve Lomax, *Sounding the Event: Escapades in Dialogue and Matters of Art, Nature and Time*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2005, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> I quote from Sharon Kivland *L'esprit d'escalier*, York, England: information as material, 2007, p. 28, but I was also thinking of *Afterwards*, Coventry: Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2009, *An Agent of the Estate*, York, England: information as material, 2008, and the *Freud on Holiday* series, York, England: information as material, 2005-ongoing. Furthermore, like Kivland, I have a feeling that we may have to call this thesis a work of art.

family, as well as academic conferences all complicate Angel's understanding of her desire. Angel organises these experiences into a highly structured literary form and condenses down to just a few sentences per page her incisive observations.<sup>25</sup>

These writers to some extent call into question how the body is articulated in language. In her new essay, 'Barking from the Margins: *Écriture Féminine*' Lauren Elkin critically positions *Écriture Féminine* (the writers Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) drawing attention to the feminist contestation in their approach to writing the body and breathing new relevance into their work for contemporary writers.<sup>26</sup> She writes, '*Écriture Féminine* is a form of writing that contests fixed meanings, opens up a range of possible interpretations that are always in play, and encouraged a disruption of the dominant (phallogentric) discourse'. Elkin recognises a renewed need for disruptive approaches to writing tailored to our current context.

Finding writing styles and textual approaches has been important, but likewise has identifying which aspects of showgirl culture to view. Dorothy Arzner, one of the only female directors in golden era Hollywood, directed the incredibly astute *Dance, Girl, Dance*.<sup>27</sup> I knew this film would be key to my research. Initially I started to work with appropriated imagery in video form. Then I tested out the video clips by presenting them with a conference paper that I danced in the style of the clips. Finally and most usefully, the film gave me the structuring strategy for Chapter One. In the chapter, I position ingrained ideas that pertain to looking at showgirls to emphasise the boundaries and limitations of these ideas. I present four 'Modes of Viewing' showgirls, linking together the technologies for viewing, theorisations,

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<sup>25</sup> Katherine Angel, *Unmastered: A Book on Desire, Most Difficult to Tell*, London: Allen Lane, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Lauren Elkin, 'Barking from the Margins: *Écriture Féminine*', *The White Review*, July 2013, no. 8, p. 148.

<sup>27</sup> *Dance, Girl, Dance*, [film] dir. by Dorothy Arzner, RKO Radio Pictures, 1940.

showgirls, cultural artefacts and art works. I end with a speculation of how we look at showgirls today, citing ‘the grab’ of our new Internet based technologies.

I put ‘the grab’ under investigation in Chapter Two. To enlarge our understanding of our current mode of viewing, in the chapter I write about watching eighteen live showgirl shows and reflecting on how they made me feel. Whilst I wrote this, I also photographed empty theatre auditoria, noting in particular the spaces for the audience, how the theatrical action is framed visually, an investigation I call *How Do I Look?: Viewing Spaces*.

Building on my attempts to create a video response to the film *Dance, Girl, Dance*, I extended and perfected this approach in *Video Letters*, a collaboration with Kerstin Honeit. Making short videos for one another and responding, we developed a style of low-tech immediacy. The project enabled me to think about dialogue as a strategy that can contain contradiction and ambivalence in ways that allow ideas and pleasures to be explored. The project gave me a freedom and lack of self-consciousness that made more apparent to me what a showgirl inspired practice might be, what it might look like.

In the third and final chapter, I contextualise showgirl interviews with the history of glamour, popular feminist critiques, theories of erotic capital, femininity, and temporality. The chapter is divided into five scenes, each one linked to my own video response to original scenes from the film, *The Artist* which becomes my own new video work, also called *The Artist*.<sup>28</sup>

Accompanying this research is a booklet of discs of my art works: *Video Letters*, *The Artist* and *How Do I Look?: Viewing Spaces*. I encourage the reader to turn to these art works whenever they wish, and how they are to be seen is

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<sup>28</sup> *The Artist*, [film] dir. by Michel Hazanavicius, The Weinstein Company, 2011.

up to the viewer: I shall not prescribe how *you* look, only offer these art works as the trace of *my* look. The booklet also provides an introduction and relevant context to the art works, and in it I step outside of my researcher voice, to speak as an artist.

The gestures underpinning all the chapters can be seen as operating in very similar ways to each other. My specific intention was to create highly worked writing structures that allow me to refute existing organising paradigms. This was essential for the success of this research: I found ways to provide stability for ephemeral encounters, showgirl reflections and feelings whilst at other times undercutting ponderous or monolithic theories.

The aims in this thesis are therefore threefold. I wish to pose the question 'how do I look?', by wondering if my ways of viewing can be named, described, and positioned in relation to other looks. As showgirls are my example of what I look at, I also would like to describe and reflect on showgirls: who they are, showgirl culture, art works with showgirl content or with a showgirl-like approach. Showgirls are also experienced professionals in being looked at, and therefore asking showgirls about this experience was important. Creating structures and strategies of research that hold a range of material, from monolithic theories, low theory, self-reflection, art work, artefacts, feelings, close-looking and sweeping glances, the ephemeral, fleeting, absurd, as well as earnest, political, critical: structures that allow for discussion, reflection, difference, movement.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, it is with self-conscious awareness that I write in ways that could be considered glamorous: concerned with style, surface, play, presentation,

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<sup>29</sup> I am borrowing the term low theory from Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011 pp. 1-25. Halberstam cites Stuart Hall as coining the term, and uses it as 'a way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations', by pursuing paths that lead to the 'frivolous, promiscuous or irrelevant' and away from the well-trodden serious paths of thought.

movement, and unashamed in order to find answers to the question ‘how do I look?’

# CHAPTER ONE

## HOW DO THEY LOOK?





Go on, laugh, get your money's worth. No one's going to hurt you. I know you want me to tear my clothes off so you can look your fifty cents' worth. Fifty cents for the privilege of staring at a girl the way your wives won't let you. What do you suppose we think of you up here with your silly smirks your mothers would be ashamed of? We know it's the thing of the moment for the dress suits to come and laugh at us too. We'd laugh right back at the lot of you, only we're paid to let you sit there and roll your eyes and make your screamingly clever remarks. What's it for? So you can go home when the show's over, strut before your wives and sweethearts and play at being the stronger sex for a minute? I'm sure they see through you. I'm sure they see through you just like we do!<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Judy O'Brien's (Maureen O'Hara) direct address to the audience in *Dance, Girl, Dance*, dir. by Arzner.



The film *Dance, Girl, Dance* directed by Dorothy Arzner, follows the collapse of a dance troupe and the dispersal of the dancers.<sup>31</sup> Bubbles (Lucille Ball) finds a job hula dancing in a burlesque theatre, whilst Judy (Maureen O'Hara), tries to audition for a ballet company, without success. We see the friendship of Bubbles and Judy develop and their two contrasting approaches to their dance careers: that of the burlesque dancer set to make money using her 'brains' by giving the audience what they want, and the higher-minded, ballet dancer with artistic ambitions, who practices her exercises every night before going to bed. Eventually, Bubbles finds Judy work at the burlesque theatre where she is performing—as the warm-up to her act. Judy's ballet is hilarious to the burlesque audience, but she takes the job, as she has no other options. Judy ignores their taunts and finally confronts their jeers, delivering a speech that challenges how they look. Judy sees the audience and recognises multiple motives amongst them. She admits that she is complicit because 'she is paid'.

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<sup>31</sup> *Dance, Girl, Dance*, dir. by Arzner.

A shift occurs when Judy stops dancing and starts talking. Judy chooses to pause her own display and articulates her own viewpoint. Her speech causes ‘Miss Harris’ to stand up and applaud her. Earlier, unknown to Judy, Elinor Harris has already defended her decision to dance in the burlesque house, telling her boss Mr Adams, a ballet company director; ‘That’s right, condemn a girl because she has to earn her own living’.<sup>32</sup>

When Judy speaks, which audience is being spoken to? The camera’s reverse shots isolate some of the audience members so the viewer can see the different types of looks they have. There are also key characters sitting in the audience to whom Judy unwittingly proves her talent: she does not know that Mr. Adams is visiting the burlesque-house to audition her. The orchestra complies by remaining silent whilst she speaks, and they are amongst the first to join in with applause. But perhaps most importantly, we, the cinema audience, are being addressed, and we ask ourselves: what type of spectator are we? I ask myself, *how do I look?*

How we look, how we understand looking emerges from the technologies we use for looking.<sup>33</sup> In this chapter, I consider the ways in which the showgirl has been viewed and how this relates to our understanding of her, in terms of theories and art practice. I use images appropriated from Judy’s speech to illustrate what I term ‘The Four Modes of Viewing the Showgirl’. Each image accompanies a textual tableau; together, these frame the modes.

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<sup>32</sup> *Dance, Girl, Dance*, dir. by Arzner.

<sup>33</sup> Although I do not reference, this chapter draws inspiration from work undertaken on ‘scopic regimes’, vision and visibility studies, and audience studies, for example, Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, Jonathon Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990, Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination*, London: Sage, 1998, and Alison Oddey and Christine White, *Modes of Spectating*, Bristol: Intellect, 2009.





## **Mode One: Observe**

An audience watches a spectacle on a cabaret stage, activated by the showgirl. The male theorist sits amongst the crowd, observes the audience's encounter with the constructions onstage and theorises them. He decodes the vernacular amusements, careful not to imply that he might feel the pleasure of the masses in these contexts. He can theorise in the face of spectacle. Does his theoretical position give him immunity from the charms of what he sees?

‘The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process’ writes Siegfried Kracauer, ‘can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from the epoch’s judgements about itself’.<sup>34</sup> Kracauer, the key theorist of Mode One, opens ‘The Mass Ornament’ with this declaration. Read the surface of mass entertainment, sit amongst the crowds as they are entertained, he seems to suggest, and through this, we will access a larger sense of the society. And this is precisely what he does. Written in 1927, his essay interprets the formation dancing of the Tiller Girls, the British dance troupe on tour in Germany, as analogous to Fordist factory assembly lines.<sup>35</sup> The kick-lines function *as* the production lines; ‘the hands of the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls’.<sup>36</sup> The mass of bodies, broken up into body parts through their synchronised isolated movements, create a meaningless spectacle: a mass ornament that is ‘the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires’.<sup>37</sup> The use value of this dance-spectacle is its aesthetic, drawn from the age of production line and it therefore ruptures from the past.

The lines of enquiry that Kracauer does not engage with are the working lives of kicking chorus girls. The workers that Kracauer writes of are the inferred workers. But the workers’ lives in front of him, he does not trace. These troupe-showgirls’ lives were quite unusual: young women, earning their own money, travelling internationally when such tourism was not common. The

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<sup>34</sup> Siegfried Kracauer (1963), ‘The Mass Ornament’, in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. and trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 75.

<sup>35</sup> Kracauer mistakes the troupe for American in the text. Peter Wollen writes ‘in reality they were an English group of lasses from Lancashire’, in his essay revisiting the Tiller Girls and their meaning in ‘Modern Times: Cinema / Americanism / The Robot’, in *Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture*, London: Verso, 1993, pp. 54-57. Whilst I do not quote Wollen directly, I greatly enjoy his writing for its capacity to reflect, re-tell, re-frame and to draw out fresh meaning from historical events, which has proved most useful across this research.

<sup>36</sup> Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 79.

<sup>37</sup> Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, p. 79.

experience of the showgirl on the stage is not of interest here.<sup>38</sup> They are mechanical parts animating a theatrical presentation.

Exposing accepted, naturalised constructs, the '*what-goes-without-saying*' forms the basis for Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. The collection of essays includes 'Striptease': Barthes, like Kracauer, decodes vernacular entertainment in order to make apparent the structures that media, art and common sense 'dress up as reality'.<sup>39</sup> Barthes considers the meaning of stripping as a form of social control: an inoculation against greater voyeurism, the little bit of evil that produces the 'immune Moral Good'.<sup>40</sup>

The 'classic props' of striptease locate the female body in the domain of the object: 'the whole spectrum of adornment constantly makes the living body return to the category of luxurious objects'. Their effect lingers on even after their removal. The final item of clothing, the sequinned g-string, hard and shiny, 'drives the woman back into a mineral world, the (precious) stone being here the irrefutable symbol of absolute object, that which serves no purpose'.<sup>41</sup>

Barthes can see the labour in showgirl's bodies. The 'professionals of striptease', he writes, 'wrap themselves in the miraculous ease which constantly clothes them' and 'gives them the icy indifference of skilful practitioners, haughtily taking refuge in the sureness of their technique'.<sup>42</sup> Amateur performers fail to turn themselves into objects through their lack of technique and inability to correctly handle their props. Mastery of technique, dance ability, and adept execution of costume and props are professional

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<sup>38</sup> This omission has been well addressed by Kate Elswit, 'Accessing Unison in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility', *Art Journal*, vol. 68, no. 2, 2009 pp. 50-61.

<sup>39</sup> Roland Barthes (1972), *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, London: Vintage, 1993 p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> Barthes, *Mythologies*, p. 86.

skills. The performer must invest effort (tuition, practice, time, purchase of costumes and props) into turning themselves into objects. His observations on the technique and professionalism required to turn oneself into an object are particularly resonant, because of the recognition that the showgirl is more than *merely complicit* but also an agent, *choosing* to use her labour in the service of the viewer.

‘The Mass Ornament’ and ‘Striptease’ were written from observation: sitting amongst the crowd in the theatre. To observe, writes Jonathon Crary, ‘does not literally mean “to look at”’; rather it ‘means “to conform one’s action, to comply with,” as in observing rules, regulations and practices’.<sup>43</sup> Crary specifically uses the notion of the ‘observer’ in his study of nineteenth century vision rather than ‘spectator’, because of the latter’s connotation ‘of one who is a passive onlooker at a spectacle’.<sup>44</sup> To ‘observe’ also resonates with Mode One’s style of viewing. We can imagine them, respectively in Berlin and Paris—theorists of mass ornaments observing the crowds. A little distanced, perhaps, from the bodies onstage, and the bodies sitting around them, yet invested in social meaning.

Mode One showgirls perform live in music hall and cabarets; they are live entertainers. *Girlie Show*, one of the lesser-known paintings by Edward Hopper visually depicts a Mode One burlesque dancer, strutting out into the spotlight, her head held high. Floating behind her is a swath of blue fabric: a cape or her skirt perhaps? Her skin glows white in the light, but her head tilt gives her face some shadow. Here, Hopper continues the tradition of Edgar Degas and Walter Sickert, Mode One artists painting theatrical spectacle: the crowd’s faces, showgirls onstage, again, slightly distanced from the crowds by being the observer.

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<sup>43</sup> Jonathon Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1990, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 1990, p. 5.



## Mode Two: Gaze

The audience sits in the dark cinema and watches Hollywood films that rely on the erotically stylised woman to generate pleasure. The female theorist sees this scenario constructed for the male viewer and deconstructs it with psychoanalytical theoretical tools. Under scrutiny are the viewing apparatus, constructs of Hollywood, and the multiple gazes in operation, all apparently more complex through the apparatuses of representation: the camera and the cutting room.



The dark cinema, immersive and totalising, was the only place to view classic Hollywood films in the seventies. Music hall entertainment was on the decline. Film Theory had begun to enter the academy in a serious way. Psychoanalysis was being used as a theoretical tool. This was the context in which Laura Mulvey, the key theorist of Mode Two, wrote 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which has shaped the mode through its articulation of the male gaze in relation to cinema and showgirls. I shall focus exclusively on Mulvey's essay because of its wide-reaching impact—not because it was created in a vacuum; it was not, other texts did address the Hollywood filmic showgirl and spectator positions from feminist, psychoanalytic or film theory perspectives and developed theorisations of the gaze.<sup>45</sup> However, Mulvey's text has been singled out in particular and so I shall address the content and the process of singling out.

In terms of content, the essay applies Freudian and Lacanian theory to interpret how classic Hollywood film structures the gaze of the viewer and creates a masculine mode of viewing through its representation of the male gaze, which is both scopophilic and voyeuristic. Psychoanalysis proved to be a forceful tool in demonstrating a patriarchal organisation of the gaze and its

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<sup>45</sup> For example, it was written around the time that Christian Metz brought psychoanalytic and semiotic methods to bear on film (first in French, then subsequently published in English) in (1971) *Language and Cinema*, trans. by Donna Jean Umiker-Sebeok, The Hague: Mouton, 1974, (1968) *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, and (1977) *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, trans. by Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981. And Mulvey's collaborator Peter Wollen in his *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University press, 1970. Also the academic journal *Screen*, started in 1969, first published Mulvey's essay in 1975 (it was written in 1973). The journal was pivotal in nurturing new approaches to writing on film. Mulvey was a film-maker and part of London scene of experimental film co-ops. In the US, feminist sociological approaches to film were emerging in the early seventies. These authors address the showgirl, through their decoding of Hollywood stereotypes, whilst they attempt to understand the sociological implications of Hollywood questioning representations of women whilst acknowledging their own filmic-pleasures: Molly Haskell (1973), *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 1987, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Chicago University Press; Majorie Rosen (1973), *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream*, 1974 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, New York: Avon; Joan Mellen, *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*, New York: Horizon Press, 1974. For a full account the history of feminist film theory see Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed*, London: Routledge, 2006.

dislocation of a female spectator. The female star is constructed as an object to be looked at: 'In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*'.<sup>46</sup> Mulvey exposes the differences between the substantiated active male characters found in Hollywood films and the female character who is given the visual image *in lieu* of narrative power mirroring the social status of women at the time of creation in the thirties, forties and fifties. She writes:

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. For instance, the device of the showgirl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis. A woman performs within the narrative, the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude. For a moment the sexual impact of the performing woman takes the film into a no-man's-land outside its own time and space.<sup>47</sup>

In Mode Two, the pleasure of watching films is not owned, rather, pleasure infers a power dynamic, and therefore, the Mode Two approach does not articulate any personal desire for the filmic image. It is worth noting the similarity with the Mode One writers in reducing the showgirl subjects to a set of signs to be read. In Mulvey's essay the signs point to the psychic level of the gaze and therefore the showgirl on-screen becomes invisible, she functions as a cipher of passivity. Thus, Mulvey diminished the possibility of actually *seeing* the showgirl.

The most startling aspect to 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema' is how widely the text is read and applied across disciplines. The essay continues to be included in anthologies and a quick search of where and when it has been reprinted sketches out the conversations the text has moved through. For

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<sup>46</sup> Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', p. 20.

example, in the seventies it was included in *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*. In the eighties, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation; Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* and, *Feminism and Film Theory*. In the nineties *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism; The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality; The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*. In the two thousands, *Film and Theory: An Anthology, Feminism and Visual Culture Reader, Audience Studies Reader*, and *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*. Most recently in *The Gender and Media Reader*.<sup>48</sup> I have not addressed the frequency of citations, which continue to proliferate. Whilst the essay, and its terminology of ‘the male gaze’ continue to circulate, we must question Mode Two methods with regards our contemporary context, since cinema no longer occupies a privileged or exclusive position—I can easily watch classic Hollywood films on YouTube on hand-held devices. So, how does Mode Two stand the test of time?<sup>49</sup>

The showgirl examples of Mode Two are the glamorous, polished Hollywood screen icons, Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe and Cyd Charisse. In a sense, what they did do on-screen is not part of what Mode Two sees: they register as a location for the male gaze, and that is all.

The task of Mode Two art practice then, is to be seen, to make visible. Eleanor Antin embodies ‘Eleanora Antinova’, her fictional character, a black

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<sup>48</sup> Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary, *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*, New York: Dutton, 1977, Brian Wallis, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, Philip Rosen, *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, Constance Penley, *Feminism and Film Theory*, New York: Routledge, 1988, Patricia Erens, *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality*, London: Routledge, 1992, Lizbeth Goodman and Jane De Gay, *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, London: Routledge, 1998, Robert Stam and Toby Miller, *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2000, Amelia Jones, *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, London: Routledge, 2003, Will Brooker and Deborah Jermyn, *The Audience Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2003, Neil Badmington and Julia Thomas, *The Routledge Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, London: Routledge, 2008, Mary Celeste Kearney, *The Gender and Media Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Some of these issues Mulvey has addressed herself in *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, London: Reaktion Books, 2005.

ballerina who danced with Diaghilev, but toured America afterwards, in vaudeville and taking part in titillating silent movies—which subsequently resurfaced through an archivist’s diligent searching. The video works *From The Archives of Modern Art* gently pose questions of ethnicity and exoticism in high and low art, as well as being an act of remembering the lives of the lesser known stars, the unknown showgirls, the showgirls who did not fit.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Eleanor Antin - From the Archives of Modern Art - West Coast Video Art – MOCAtv’ YouTube clip, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHKNpdIELmU>> [accessed 5th March 2013].



## **Mode Three: Double-take**

A lone viewer sits at home watching, pausing and rewinding her VCR. As she views, she can take in the television screen and anything else in her peripheral vision. She has read Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and feels frustrated that her gaze and desire has thus far been overlooked. She uses her experience and reflections within her writing.

Mulvey's text undisputedly made an impact on the writing of theorists that followed, far beyond film theory. The double-take of Mode Three is therefore a reaction to Mode Two, critical of its focus on viewing assumptions; incorporating difference of desire and emerging queer theory. It is driven by the subjectivity of the author, her own identity and desires providing the force for her argument and destabilising the presumptions of Mode Two. Mode Three is characterised by its combination of acute contestation on the theories that have gone before and the sophistication of its use of methods and sources.

Judith Butler is the key theorist, and her work on gender exemplifies the double-taking of Mode Three. Her book, *Gender Trouble* positions gender as performative, resisting assumed notions of essential or innate gender which earlier feminist positions had tended to do.<sup>51</sup> She provides an extensive philosophical context; drawing on a broad spectrum of theorists, resisting a singular approach. Gender 'ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow', she writes, 'rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts'.<sup>53</sup> Gender, therefore, is a performance, an act, that is scripted, rehearsed, and repeated, that is 'produced through the stylization of the body, and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self'.<sup>54</sup> Rather than accept gender distinctions Butler's work makes possible a break in the dichotomous approach to gender. She illustrates her point by describing drag queens, and here I would point to the continuities between drag queens and showgirls. Drag 'plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Butler (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 191.

<sup>54</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 191.

the gender that is being performed', noting 'three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance'.<sup>55</sup> Butler does not use drag as an example because it is inherently transgressive, rather, because the meaning of drag illustrates the way that gender's meaning is contingent in social contexts.

*Gender Trouble* has become a foundation text of queer theory: a discipline of resistance. It problematises hierarchies of power particularly how they are maintained through heteronormative behaviour. Thus to queer is to re-look at the assumed, the normal, the accepted in order to discard, re-use, or to mess with. The subsequent Mode Two authors continue the work of queering: teasing apart gender and sexuality binary assumptions and identifying showgirl pleasures: sisterly affection, identification, mimicry, embodiment, and entertainment. Intertwined is the technological development of the VCR—'queering' film becomes technologically possible through the ability to replay particular scenes, fast-forward others—narratives cease to be monolithic and become malleable, open to interpretation and viewer interaction.

Repeat video-watching becomes a method for developing a different approach in Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca's essay 'Pre-text and Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'.<sup>56</sup> Frustration with 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and its exclusive focus on male visual pleasure provides the impetus for writing, which they make clear in their first footnote: 'We are using the term "pleasure" here to refer to enjoyment and delight. We are not using the word to connote a psychoanalytic framework for our analysis'.<sup>57</sup> Indeed their first few sentences read like a manifesto:

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<sup>55</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 187.

<sup>56</sup> Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca (1982), 'Pre-text and Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes', in *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader*, ed. by Steven Cohan, London: Routledge, 2002, pp. 77-85.

<sup>57</sup> Arbuthnot and Seneca, 'Pre-text and Text', p. 84.

As feminists, we experience a constant and wearying alienation from the dominant culture. The misogyny of popular art, music, theatrical arts and film interferes with our pleasure in them. [...] Howard Hawks' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, a 1953 film starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell as showgirls, is clearly a product of the dominant culture. Yet, we enjoy the film immensely. In this paper, we chronicle our search to understand our pleasure in this film. We argue that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* can be read as a feminist text. We believe that it is important to recoup from male culture some of the pleasure which it has always denied us; we hope that our analysis of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* will suggest ways to discover feminist pleasures within films of the dominant culture and indicate the kinds of films which might be most conducive to a feminist reading.<sup>58</sup>

Arbuthnot and Seneca proceed to scrutinise the film, interpreting it against a more conventional and perhaps superficial reading in order to locate their own pleasure and sense of enjoyment. As they explain, 'the destruction of opportunities for male objectification in this film gave us less pleasure than the construction of opportunities for our own positive identification with women in this film'.<sup>59</sup> The appeal, they find, is the genuine affection that the Monroe and Russell characters have for each other, noting 'the absence of competitiveness, envy and pettiness'.<sup>60</sup> They highlight the significance of the musical number noting that the male characters that they fall in love with do not have a musical role and therefore 'never convincingly share in the emotional energy between Monroe and Russell'.<sup>61</sup>

Rita Hayworth's dancing, writes Adrienne L. McLean, complicates 'almost all of our assumptions about classical Hollywood cinema's routine ordering of the visual world along the lines of sexual difference'.<sup>62</sup> She is 'not merely a leg, a gown, a face, or hair: she is a dancing human being whose three-

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<sup>58</sup> Arbuthnot and Seneca, 'Pre-text and Text', p. 77.

<sup>59</sup> Arbuthnot and Seneca, 'Pre-text and Text', p. 84.

<sup>60</sup> Arbuthnot and Seneca, 'Pre-text and Text', p. 82.

<sup>61</sup> Arbuthnot and Seneca, 'Pre-text and Text', p. 83.

<sup>62</sup> Adrienne L. McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom*, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004, p. 117.



dimensionality is presented to us kinetically'.<sup>63</sup> McLean, with a background in dancing, observes nuances in Hayworth's dancing that were not present for other writers. And for McLean, really seeing, understanding and interpreting Hayworth's body becomes a way to challenge 'Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema' by 'breaking apart and questioning the definition of the showgirl herself', as whatever 'has fallen away from Mulvey's model, the device of the showgirl has been left standing as a unitary cinematic strategy that de facto objectifies women—whether strippers or ballet dancers—and renders them passive, beautiful, and reassuring objects of the male gaze'.<sup>64</sup>

Golden era Hollywood stars and their effect on British audiences that experienced them in their heyday forms the premise of *Stargazing* by Jackie Stacey, which uses the collection of empirical material to broaden our understanding of audiences in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>65</sup> She collected the research by placing adverts in the magazines *Woman's Realm* and *Woman's Own* to reach a particular demographic that were movie-goers in the time period. In the book she structures the findings thematically, from cinema as escapism from the hardships of life during the war, the way in which the stars on the screen were understood through personal identification in style and looks, to how consumption was developed in women through messages from Hollywood in films and magazines. The words of her respondents run through the book, alongside theorisations and interpretation, producing a discursive account of history.

Richard Dyer writes on film, media, entertainment, visibility and representation across an extensive collection of books. His contribution to *Mode Three* is difficult to encapsulate, because it is possible to bring to bear a

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<sup>63</sup> Adrienne L. McLean, 'It's Only That I Do What I Love and Love What I Do: Film Noir and the Musical Woman', *Cinema Journal*, 1993 vol. 33, no. 1, p. 7.

<sup>64</sup> McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth*, p. 116.

<sup>65</sup> Jackie Stacey, *Stargazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, London: Routledge, 1993.

range of his observations here. For example, he has worked on camp, pastiche, close examination of the star image constructions, Rita Hayworth's charisma, Marilyn Monroe's sexuality and Judy Garland's appeal to gay men all of which could be applied to the showgirl.<sup>66</sup> However, it is his observations on entertainment that illuminate some of the tensions emerging across the modes. Dyer's double-take on entertainment is that it is so very rarely dealt with on its own terms often cultural artefacts are read in terms of the serious underlying implications and themes can be addressed, leaving entertainment overlooked.<sup>67</sup> Entertainment, he writes, 'rejects the claims of morality, politics and aesthetics' in 'a society that both considers leisure and pleasure to be secondary or even inferior to the business of producing and reproducing, work and family'.<sup>68</sup> The pleasure of entertainment is left unaddressed. Thus Dyer asks: what of pleasure? Can we have a 'radical pleasure', a pleasure of 'unruly delight', that is irresponsible, excessive, and hedonistic?<sup>70</sup>

The camp, excessive, ironic and queer form part of Mode Three's sensibility in what is seen and produced. Counter-culture films, or just bad films become cult classics, for example the films of John Waters and Paul Verhoeven's film *Showgirls*.<sup>71</sup> *Showgirls* is in some senses a misanthropic, dystopic re-telling of *Dance, Girl, Dance* or *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* or *42<sup>nd</sup> Street*. Nomi, a down-on-her-luck girl arrives in Las Vegas and works her way through dancer jobs: first as a lap-dancer, then chorus girl to the star of the

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Dyer (1979), *Stars*, London: British Film Institute 1992, Richard Dyer, 'Resistance through Charisma: Rita Hayworth and Gilda', in *Women and Film Noir*, ed. by E. Ann Kaplan, London: BFI, 1978, pp. 91-99, Richard Dyer, 'It's being so camp as keeps us going', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 110-16, Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, London: Routledge, 2002, Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* London: Routledge, 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, London: Routledge, 1992.

<sup>68</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, p. 6.

<sup>71</sup> *Showgirls* [film] dir. by Paul Verhoeven, Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, Paris: Pathé, 1995.

show. The twist comes at the end when Nomi seeks revenge for the rape of her best friend: the disorienting sisterhood of Vegas spectacle.

In her video work *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* artist Pipilotti Rist dances frantically in front of the camera. The video is out of focus, speeded up, has distortion lines and fuzz, but we can hear her sing 'I'm not the girl who misses much'.<sup>72</sup> She is not the girl who misses much, she tells us—a negation, a 'no'. Through the video degradation haze we can see her breasts are bared through her dress, which looks like a traditional dirndl without a top underneath. She bobs up and down. At the end of the video The Beatles take over the singing, 'she's not the girl who misses much', from *Happiness is a Warm Gun*; a story told through appropriation, Dada nonsensical performance and audacious energy and the claiming of the position of 'the girl', the one that can think, enact, move and sing.

Mode Three's double-take introduces looking as action, motion, with the possibility of reading against the grain. The audience can be a collective body rather than a theoretical construct. Arbuthnot and Seneca's first sentence quoted earlier also structures their endeavour as a model to be replicated by the reader, an invitation to try this mode of looking at home. What marks Mode Three are exclamations of pleasures drawn from research and considerations of the resistance in performance, and so speculating the agency of the showgirl becomes a possibility.

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<sup>72</sup> Pipilotti Rist, *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much*,  
<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJgiSyCr6BY>> [accessed 15<sup>th</sup> December 2012].



## **Mode Four: Grab**

This audience sits in front of a computer screen and observes footage of recent new burlesque performances shot anywhere in the world. She is a tech-savvy viewer able to navigate online archives, access other viewer's responses to video clips, search for online commentary and tap into current debate, and then blog her own ideas.

Mode Three's active double-take escalates into a tactile grab in Mode Four. Theresa M. Senft writing on 'camgirls' defined the 'grab' as a term that more adequately explains the interaction that the Internet invites. She writes 'I mean to clutch in the hand, to seize for a moment, to command attention, to touch—often inappropriately, sometimes reciprocally. To grab is to grasp, to snatch, to capture'.<sup>73</sup> Grabbing, she explains, 'occurs over the Web [...] during each stage of production, consumption, interpretation and circulation'.<sup>74</sup>

The 'grab' of the Internet carries over and bleeds into our social interactions, and this defines Mode Four, our current mode of viewing the showgirl. The Internet is blending into our lives with increasing seamlessness. We catch up with television-on-demand, access an absurd range of video from rare, archival footage, academic talks, documented live events, and strange ephemera on YouTube, with its facility to leave and read comments. We plan our social lives, the events we attend, online. We can now access extra information on any item, subject or event whilst we are there. Like a meta-commentary, smart phones and tablets with their cameras and Internet access are dramatically affecting our technological model of looking. Thus, how we articulate looking needs to be re-thought, with some urgency.

Lady Gaga and Lana Del Rey represent Mode Four showgirls, their personas and image constructions that carry across their music, videos, live performances and online presence—these showgirls are able to exist across the increasing live and online spaces, performing virtually through tweets and YouTube videos—dominating and owning the new platforms.

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<sup>73</sup> Theresa M. Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, New York: Lang, 2008, p. 46.

<sup>74</sup> Senft, *Camgirls*, p. 46.

The invitation to go gaga: to improvise a feminism, to act counter-intuitively as posed by J. Jack Halberstam, Mode Four's key theorist, is highly attractive. Halberstam's work continues the queer theory project, yoking together Modes Three and Four. *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal* 'is invested in innovative deployments of femininity and finds them to be well represented by pop performances characterized by their excess, their ecstatic embrace of loss of control and a maverick sense of bodily identity'.<sup>75</sup> Lady Gaga provides the theory's inspiration, 'she represents both an erotics of the surface and an erotics of flaws and flows, and she is situated very self-consciously at the heart of new forms of consumer capitalism'.<sup>76</sup> Halberstam celebrates Lady Gaga's bold sexual persona and bodily display, as well as the way she produces and manipulates her image across media. Gaga's appeal to legions of female fans provokes Halberstam to reflect on the way certain feminists hold fidelity to feminism's history. Instead, Halberstam urges us to think speculatively, improvising ideas as we go, responding to contexts, abandoning ideologies as they wear out:

Gaga feminism, after all, wants to incite people to go gaga, to give up on the tried and the true, the real and the authentic, the proven and the tested, and instead encourages a move toward the insane, the preposterous, the intellectually loony and giddy, hallucinatory visions of alternative futures.<sup>77</sup>

Susannah Paasonen writes on mainstream pornography online—obviously this is a variation from the showgirl, however, *Carnal Resonance* brings to the fore elements that parallel this research. Paasonen's points out the academic bias for researching 'the novel, the futuristic, and the potentially avant-garde while attending less to that deemed familiar, commercial, or predictable'.<sup>78</sup> In

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<sup>75</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2012 p. xiii. N.B. JJack has also published under the name, 'Judith'.

<sup>76</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, p. xiii.

<sup>77</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, pp. 25-26.

<sup>78</sup> Susanna Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011, p. 7.

other words, the marginal is often constructed as the other to the mainstream, leaving popular constructions unexamined, presumed natural.

She also notes that ‘the textual turn brought forth a certain tyranny of the semantic at the cost of the sensory and the material’ and critical frustration with this is often about the production of negative critique rather than ‘offering more life-affirming alternatives to the status quo’.<sup>79</sup> And so, she writes, ‘this book is part of a move toward the sensory and the affective’ that shifts ‘attention away from ideology, meaning, and signification and toward the sensory, material, embodied, and energetic’.<sup>80</sup> Paasonen begins to offer a new set of terms like ‘carnal resonance’ in which the body of the performer and the person watching is brought into the text.

How does being moved intertwine with how we see? Our new capacities for ‘grabbing’: documenting, instantly archiving, performing online our social and intimate lives creates the need for us to reflect on the roles of emotion and intuition, our need to perform and be seen in the discussions of image consumption. How does our looking inform what we see, how we perform in the world, how we navigate, record and speak back? How does pleasure manifest within this?

The Mode Four showgirl art work examples draw from and occupy YouTube. Circling back to Kracauer, artist Natalie Bookchin updates ‘The Mass Ornament’ in her video installation of the same name. As opposed to the Fordist kick-line, in Bookchin’s work we see hundreds of dancers alone in their bedrooms and other domestic spaces—the post-Fordist connected dancer. The self-videos are posted on YouTube, which Bookchin uses as her raw material. She choreographs the new post-Fordist kick-line and sets to the

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<sup>79</sup> Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*, p. 9.

<sup>80</sup> Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*, pp. 8-9.

soundtrack of two contrasting 1935 films, Busby Berkeley's *Gold Diggers* and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*—both representing defunct social and political ideologies.<sup>81</sup>

In *Pizza Shop Dance*, artist Sophie Lisa Beresford dances in a short strapless flared black dress in what looks like an empty late-night pizza shop. Staff do not pay any attention to her as she raves around the customer space dancing to 'Makina' music, a type of happy-hardcore sounding techno.<sup>82</sup> She dances with energy, vibrancy and complete abandon. Sometimes her knickers are briefly flashed. This kind of scene recalls Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*. It is night and this sort of food outlet is for the type of people that inhabit the city late at night. Instead of a couple, or the lone man with his back to us, we see Beresford. She is autonomous—she is generating *her own pleasure in her own body*. She makes space for herself in this scene, and she is unashamed—of her body, her expanse of pale skin, her clothes, her knickers, her taste in music. Dance, girl, dance!

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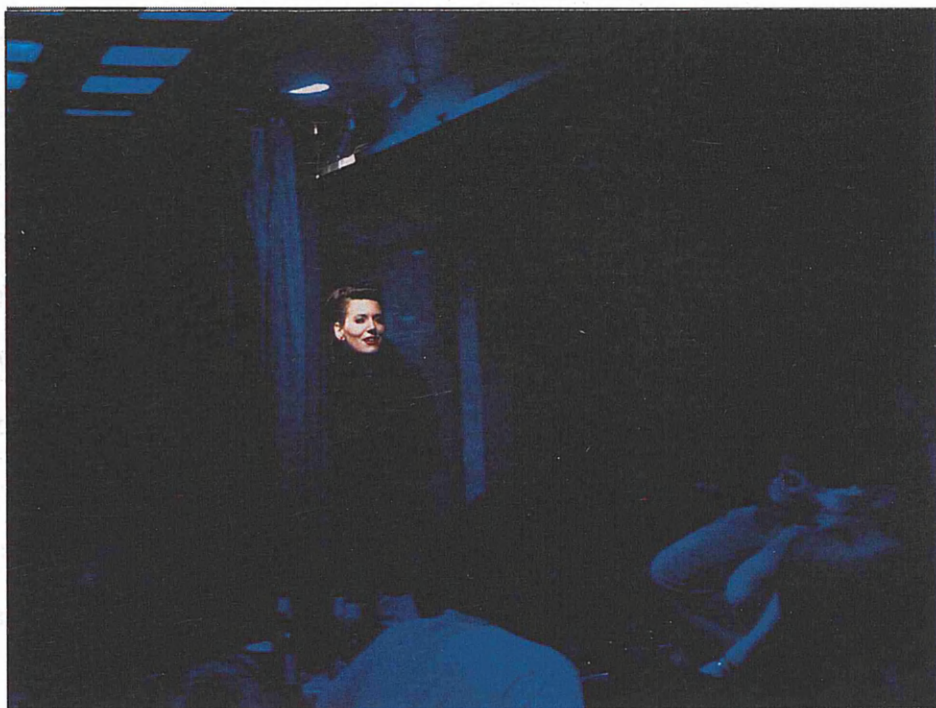
<sup>81</sup> Natalie Bookchin, *Mass Ornament*, <<https://vimeo.com/5403546>> and <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAIjpUATAWg>> [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> March 2013].

<sup>82</sup> Sophie Lisa Beresford, *Pizza Shop Dance*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=04nZyEMNVbE>> [accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2012].



# CHAPTER TWO

HOW DO I LOOK?:  
HOW DO I FEEL AS I  
WATCH  
SHOWGIRLS?



My notebook is out, but as soon as Beatrix Von Bourbon starts performing, I stop writing so that I can be present in the moment. I cannot remember the music. But I remember the tiny diamante pasties and merkin that her act finishes with. The strip is a perfect moment in which the performer owned the room, and thus produces a perfect moment of pleasure for me. All other thoughts and concerns do not exist for me in that transitory moment.

In *The Four Modes of Viewing* I presented the ways in which viewing technologies affect how the showgirl is seen and subsequently presented critically. Mode Four demonstrated a continued interest with images of embodiment, bodily pleasure and performance. The ‘grab’ of Mode Four has altered our relation to the live encounter, but with social media our constant companion, a more dynamic relation between the viewer and viewed is now possible. The Internet necessarily had an impact on the potential of the live encounter—we cannot extract the possibilities of the Internet from live, theatrical performance as it is embedded in our understanding of viewing to such an extent. Go to any music gig and you will see phone cameras filming—our sense of in-the-moment, in-the-present has become decentred. Connected to this, Mode Four characteristically involves self-reflection when critically considering the viewed subject. In this chapter I will build on the literature and methods of Mode Four by exploring my *own* mode of viewing and pleasures in the showgirl by detailing a selection of live showgirl viewing encounters. I will use my feelings as my research tool, detailing my experiences by paying attention to how they make me *feel*.

### **How *do* I look?**

Each viewing encounter started with preliminary research on the Internet in order to select the show, buy a ticket, locate the venue and find out any other contextual information readily available online. I then attended the show allowing myself to be moved, to be subject to the spectacle in front of me. I made notes throughout and jotted down responses after the show. Where possible I also took some photographs and video on my compact camera to jog my memory afterwards. At the show I tried to gather whatever extra material I could for example, buying a programme and picking up flyers. My feelings during the show would enter my notes at the time, but also my sense of what my feelings were developed over time as I recalled the show.

The shape of my memories has been affected by the seating of the shows: I found that where I was seated in theatre rows, once the houselights went down, I was unable to make notes as it was too dark. I noticed with these encounters my recollections of the show does not follow a chronology, rather, I remember my feelings of immersion into the show. Conversely, during shows that I was able to make notes in, my memories maintain a chronological sense—I remember the order the numbers occur—but my ability to lose myself in the spectacle was never as complete as when I could not take notes. This was something I observed and noted.

After seeing the show, I have returned to the theatres and venues where possible and photographed as part of my ongoing practice. Attending the shows sometimes led to interviews with the performers or online conversations through Twitter and Facebook. While writing of my encounter I watched show footage on YouTube and continued to find contextual information online or look up particular performers. Thus, each encounter represents a cluster of experiences.

My approach to writing about these encounters follows a formula: I describe the circumstances of the encounter, the architecture of the space, how the visual context including the audience made me feel, then I describe particular moments within the performance, noting the costumes, the technique and performativity of the showgirls and other performers. I have footnoted the date and cost of the visit as supplementary information. I report on my own direct observations paying particular attention to how I felt as I watched.

Each experience produced a different set of thoughts: the visual codes of the venues or the audience I found myself in all influenced my pleasure. Located among an audience, sometimes I saw myself represented elsewhere in the crowd, other times I felt uneasy at the company in which I found myself. I

was either part of a whole, unified audience or I was alone, attempting to find a location for my spectator-position. The live experience of being a spectator produced affective embodied responses in me. I held my breath. My pulse quickened. I cringed in embarrassment. I have come to recognise these bodily sensations as offering me an opportunity to critically reflect on what has caused my discomfort. Cringing is an embodied response to instances that I found intellectually problematic and thus embarrassing. Similarly I feel relaxed and without tension, focussed in the moment, without my mind wandering elsewhere, fully present when I experience complete feelings of pleasure. This state in particular causes me great problems in writing; I have found it far more difficult to describe embodied pleasurable sensations as I have found the existing vocabulary inadequate. Furthermore, in a state of pleasure I have found it impossible to think critically. It is only afterwards that I can reflect and consider the elements that gave me pleasurable feelings.

I bring to these viewing encounters my own set of experiences and expertise that activate my viewing. As dancing has been my hobby since childhood I pay particular attention to dance technique: as I am not a proficient dance-technician I make up for my technical failings through performance personality, trying my hardest to demonstrate my own pleasure and sense of joy through dancing. As a spectator, I am most interested in sensing the performer's pleasure. I am excited about showgirl-presence and personality. I am intellectually impressed by virtuosity, but I am emotionally moved by pleasure. Without either quality, I find myself distracted, my mind wanders and my attention is elsewhere: not in the shared moment.

As a feminist I am keen to see performed signs that signify the showgirl's embodied emancipation: her pleasure in being enjoyed by women, her relaxed attitude to her body, a generosity to the audience, a demonstration of her control of the moment. I want to feel sisterhood with other women—how

can I connect with the performer and register my approval and pleasure? The live encounter allows for a relationship to be set up between the audience and the performers, we can see each other, how do we negotiate our shared space? Live performances set up a dynamic relationship with the viewer, the encounter is unique; the performer may change her act tailoring it slightly for the crowd.

### **Why use feelings and reflections as a guide through my viewing encounters?**

Affect, ‘sensation and intensities of feeling and their circulation’, is the central lens through which Paasonen views pornography.<sup>83</sup> Pursuing her sense of curiosity, the physical, visceral and embodied responses that viewing provokes are enmeshed in her writing. Paasonen’s self-reflexivity animates the text. The concluding chapter commences with an account of Paasonen’s first exposure to porn as an eight year old in a friend’s garage, rifling through a stack of magazines. She writes, ‘For some readers, this narrative may seem like a feminist “coming to consciousness story” that develops from childhood fascination and subjection to sexist fantasies to feminist revelation—an awakening from false consciousness’.<sup>84</sup> The book represents a different approach, starting somewhere different to writing about porn, bringing the affects on the body of the viewer into the discussion. Maintaining a focus on my own feelings, this chapter does not take on the wider implications of affect, and yet, Paasonen’s text is extremely useful in demonstrating how feelings can be deployed as a strategy of resistance, opening up new sites of reflection.

In contrast to Paasonen’s research, in this chapter I investigate the live encounter—I observe the audience and the performers. In the social

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<sup>83</sup> Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>84</sup> Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*, p. 252.

sciences, this type of research is formally described as ethnographic, and briefly, I want to consider how this might apply.

John D. Brewer defines ethnography as: ‘the study of people in naturally occurring settings or “fields” by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities’ that involves ‘the researcher participating directly in the setting if not also the activities in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally’.<sup>85</sup>

Following this definition, to some extent, this chapter is ethnographic (although I do try to negotiate meanings). Katherine Frank has written an ethnography of gentlemen’s clubs, *G-Strings and Sympathy, Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire*. She immersed herself in the community by becoming an exotic dancer and conducting her research from her access as a performer. Thus, she performed onstage, gave lap-dances, talked to regular patrons, interviewed particular regulars outside the club environment and chatted to other dancers in the dressing room. Through her immersion her perspective shifted. While designing her research in preparation for this study, and while she was already performing her dancing, she was forced her to examine her own assumptions about dancers.<sup>86</sup>

Frank’s ethnography examines the relations between patrons and dancers and the complex negotiations in the gentlemen’s club space, creating a broad picture of the characters that inhabit the space. The male participant’s voices emerge and Frank is able to uncover meanings and draw conclusions from an environment that maintains an aura of concealment and mystery.<sup>87</sup> Frank

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<sup>85</sup> John D. Brewer, *Ethnography*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000, p. 10.

<sup>86</sup> Katherine Frank, *G-Strings and Sympathy, Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002.

<sup>87</sup> Frank speculates why this mystique perpetuates even in the face of extensive research in her essay *Thinking Critically about Strip Club Research*, *Sexualities* 2007 SAGE Publications, vol. 10, iss. 4, pp. 501-517.

complicates this approach by interjecting fictional interludes in between the three sections of the book. She uses a first person voice to detail the experiences of dancers, giving them visibility and presence in the text. From the mundane physical preparations to more internal reflections the reader is shown an interior insight into the performers' experiences and feelings as a counterpoint to the ethnographic observations. Pairing these two different textual approaches creates a more holistic study.

Stylistically, the confidence to use my feelings and my subjective experiences came from a number of literary approaches to positioning oneself within larger ideas, testing them against personal feelings, generating theory out of experience. In *I Love Dick* (and all of her writing) Chris Kraus's makes sense of subjective experiences by hinging them to and testing them against different philosophical stances, art works, genres, remarks. Her style is erudite, contrary, embodied and engaged with literary form, the book an epistolary roman à clef. She uses her history of experiences to imagine fantasises, of intellectual recognition, sexual fulfilment, the type of visibility produced when coming out of the closet. Imagining a conversation with her desire-object, Dick, she writes:

Your face was like the faces of the lawyers in the topless bars when I started telling Buddhist fairy tales with my legs spread wide across the table. *Some Strange Scene*. Were they amused? Were they assessing their capacity for cruelty? Your eyes were slightly crinkled, your fingers wrapped around glass. All this encouraged me to continue.<sup>88</sup>

Autoethnography is a research method that draws on literary approaches to position personal reflection in particular research contexts. The emerging form is understood in a number of ways, from more recent dominant Evocative Autoethnography with its emphasis on personal narrative to Analytic Autoethnography that employs self-reflexivity in more social

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<sup>88</sup> Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006, p. 154.



contexts, maintaining a critical and theoretical position.<sup>89</sup> Although this chapter is driven by my self-reflection, I do not think I go as far as Evocative Autoethnography—it is not me I present, but the shows I view, thus, Analytic Autoethnography appears to have greater resonance with my approach. As such, my participation as a spectator is marked by my researcher status; is this different to other modes of spectatorship?

To further complicate the gesture underpinning this chapter, I read Jacques Rancière's theoretical *The Emancipated Spectator* literally as a practical guide to emancipate my spectatorship. Rancière revises theatrical spectacle following the logic of his 'Ignorant Schoolmaster'—must the action onstage have a particular political value to emancipate the spectator?<sup>90</sup> 'The paradox of the spectator' is that the performance viewed depends on a viewer, but that the usual critique of the spectator understands spectatorship as being the opposite of both knowing and action. Therefore, to be a spectator is to be intellectually and physically passive. However, in order for this to be true, we have to accept a number of presumptions, about good theatre and bad theatre, about political intent, about the playwright or director having a superior grasp of capitalist domination that must be transmitted through particular didactic means—either by forcing the spectators to get out of their seats and act or by closing down the opportunities for pleasure thus forcing

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<sup>89</sup> Sources which engage with defining what Autoethnography is and could be: Leon Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 35, August 2006, pp. 373-395, Margot Duncan, 'Autoethnography: Critical appreciation of an emerging art', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 3, no. 4, article 3, 2004, <[http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3\\_4/pdf/duncan.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_4/pdf/duncan.pdf)> [accessed 1st September 2012] and Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, (eds) *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002. Also the Evocative Autoethnography approach in R. Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank, and Merri L. Johnson, (eds) *Flesh for Fantasy: Producing and Consuming Exotic Dance*, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006.

<sup>90</sup> Jacques Rancière (2008) *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2009, p. 2. He defines theatrical spectacle thus: 'I use this terms here to include all those forms of spectacle—drama, dance, performance art, mime and so on—that place bodies in action before an assembled audience'. p. 2. His earlier text, Jacques Rancière (1987) *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991.

them to think. Rancière asks if we must perpetuate the inequality of the relationships, the status quo of the distribution of power. Where there are two positions, one representing domination and the other subjection, they can be reversed without threat to the system they inhabit. Rather he offers a solution to this impasse—that we take seriously the autonomy of spectacle, neither fully owned or understood by either spectator or producer, but offering both the opportunity to think: ‘the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect’.<sup>91</sup>

What resonates for me in Rancière’s writing is that viewing spectacle can be intellectual work towards emancipation. His description below rather neatly describes the work underpinning this chapter:

Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of the positions. The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. [...] She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way—drawing back, for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented.<sup>92</sup>

Paasonen, Frank, Kraus, and Rancière have all in their way given me permission to use my feelings as a way to investigate, be moved, reflect, think and write critically of my subjective experience—in order to reframe the showgirl, in my own terms. Furthermore, understanding and positioning the approach in this chapter through their approaches made clear to me the flaw in my writing: privileging my singular voice. Thus, in order to put my descriptions and reflections into context, I am inviting the subjects I write

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<sup>91</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2009, p. 15.

<sup>92</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2009, p. 13.

about to read this chapter and respond in footnotes, to answer back; to challenge my textual performance.

### **A note on structure**

My experiences are divided into two sections: 'Theatre' and 'Shows'. In the former, I write of static, long-term shows staged in theatres and in the latter section I visit temporary shows that change and evolve and are part of a larger scene. As the instances of showgirl vary across the multitudes of contexts, I shall propose some descriptive terms. 'Theatres' commences with examples of historical importance to the showgirl. I visit the famous Parisian theatres that continue to produce the high-production values 'traditional showgirl spectacles' and also shows with some reflexivity, that I call 'updated showgirl spectacles'. Next, I visit a range of shows in Las Vegas, and I encounter 'topless revues'. In Berlin I find an updated showgirl spectacle. I conclude this tour of venues in London, where I visit a historically important theatre that is now table-dancing venue and then finally a gentlemen's club, both 'strip clubs'. These last visits provide a counterpoint to my other examples because these venues exclusively address a male viewer and offer a slightly different service that differs to some extent from the solely theatrical.

Next, in the second section 'Shows' I will explore another line of enquiry: the new burlesque and cabaret scenes, in which the venue is not important, as the events are mobile. 'New burlesque' is one of the terms applied to the trend in burlesque revival that began in the nineties. Over the scene's evolution different styles and approaches have emerged. In particular, 'neo' has been used to describe acts that incorporate more abject or queer elements, 'traditional' for the more historically accurate and 'boylesque' for burlesque strips performed by men. With the scene's expansion and popularity, on occasion burlesque appears without any of its characteristic subversive

qualities, for example in the film *Burlesque*.<sup>93</sup> This I shall term ‘mainstreamed burlesque’. I use the term ‘avant-garde cabaret’ to define shows and acts that do not fit easily into the more narrow categories and also have an element of avant-garde transgressive swagger. London’s *Time Out* magazine launched the ‘Cabaret’ listings section in 2006, signally the growing popularity and providing a much-needed guide for the plethora of shows. All of the shows I visited are in London, except for two. This is partly because of the range of shows with varying formulas easily available in London, which is easily accessible to me. However, the new burlesque and cabaret scene is international, with local variations. In order to hint at this wider context and potential for different approaches tailored to the particular context, I visited a show in Los Angeles and Sheffield. I could quite happily extend this chapter to a global tour of shows, if time and money permitted.

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<sup>93</sup> *Burlesque*, [film] dir. by Steve Antin, Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2011.

# **Part One:**

# **THEATRES**

## PARIS: Moulin Rouge<sup>94</sup>

I had to join a queue that stretched an entire block and wrapped around the street corner on Boulevard de Clichy, a seedy neighbourhood, which still trades on the faded grandeur of its artist-quarter history, the night I went to see the late show at the Moulin Rouge. The queue was so long that sections of the street in front of bars and restaurants were roped off, cutting the queue into sections. After some time, we were ushered into the famous entrance and usher/maître ds led groups of people to banquet tables and brought champagne (included in the regular ticket price unless, like me, you specify the cheaper no-drink ticket). I joined the queue too late and I was seated at a table with a poor view at the side of the stage, with noisy table-sharers.

I scanned the programme before the show started. The date the Moulin Rouge was opened, 6<sup>th</sup> October 1889, is printed in the programme on its first and last page as part of an introduction and timeline respectively. Also in the programme is a page promoting the souvenirs on offer in their gift shop around the corner, including '1889', their fragrance sold as a perfume or scented candles. This emphasis on its Belle Époque beginnings is continued in the murals in the style of Toulouse-Lautrec that line the interior and the historic posters pasted onto columns and framed in their bar. All these signs remind the audience that the spectacle on display here tonight is an original—a source, not a copy. The cancan that you see tonight was performed *here* over a century ago. This is traditional showgirl spectacle.

Lower down the first page the programme reminds me that Edith Piaf, Jean Gabin, Frank Sinatra and Liza Minnelli have performed on this stage. But

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<sup>94</sup> I saw *Féerie* at the Bal du Moulin Rouge, Paris, France, 11pm 31st July 2011, €90, no drinks deal. I was given a tour of the venue by Mélanie Moya on 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2010. I also viewed a promotional video of the show on YouTube: 'Moulin Rouge Show Paris HD (Long Version)', <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iV7zRMXBoOE>> [accessed 31<sup>st</sup> July 2012].

also I can add other French stars like the author Colette, Mistinguett and Zizi Jeanmaire. It has also been immortalised in films such as Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge!*, and Jean Renoir's *French Cancan*.<sup>95</sup>

With steady streams of tourists willing to pay the expensive ticket prices to dine and watch the show, there is no reason for the management of the Moulin Rouge to re-think their formula. The unbroken lineage does not produce self-questioning or reflection. It simply continues. The current show, *Féerie* was first performed 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1999.<sup>96</sup> A show that remains the same for thirteen years suggests that it can do so because the audience is different night after night. The management are not appealing for the spectators to return to see the show again; they just need to recommend it to their friends back home. Their figures suggest they draw impressive crowds: 600, 000 spectators per year, 50% French, 50% International, 850 seats, 2 shows a night, 365 days a year.<sup>97</sup> This is not, therefore, about creating a loyal scene of locals who visit regularly. This is a mix of out-of-towners: national and international tourists. I could hear different languages around me, quite a few during the show, which was irritating. It made me wonder if they had been to a show before? Perhaps the demographic this appeals to is not used to being silent through entertainment, I wondered. The audience were smartly dressed, but with no unifying sense of what smart, or style mean, with some outfits that looked rather dated.

'Dance, Dance, Parlez Dance', the showgirls and boys sang as they entered wearing white sequined baseball caps, jackets and trousers and disco-danced

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<sup>95</sup> *Moulin Rouge!*, [film] dir. by Baz Luhrmann, 20th Century Fox, 2001, and *French Cancan*, [film] dir. by Jean Renoir, The Criterion Collection, 1954.

<sup>96</sup> Press pack from *Moulin Rouge* Press and Communication, 2010. Also in the press pack is information on the showgirls, 'The Doriss Girls', a troupe started in 1957 by Miss Doris. They have always been recruited internationally, with auditions organised in Las Vegas, London, Sydney and Paris. 'Some criteria are compulsory: a good base of classical ballet training for all them, the girls have to measure at least 1.75 m (5'8") and have astounding figures that will leave the spectators spellbound. The boys must be more than 1.85 m (6'3")'.

<sup>97</sup> Press pack *Moulin Rouge*, 2010. No source is given for these figures.

and high-kicked. The showgirls ripped off their matching glittery trousers to reveal glitter thongs. To maintain a formula for thirteen years, the product must be classic, and *Féerie* draws on what the Moulin Rouge is famous for: unrestrained use of feathers, sequins, bright costumes, bare-breasted women, elaborate sets, singing, dancing and the French cancan. I had already seen the costumes backstage on a tour I was given at the Moulin Rouge. The empty costumes and photographs of the show look ridiculous when unanimated. The spectacle works when you are *there*. The show comes together when activated by moving bodies and I felt waves of joy and pleasure as I watched. The show is tight: every step was perfect, no footwork mistakes. There was a sense of total unison, and no dancers looking out of the corner of their eyes to ensure that their line was even, their timing or steps were correct. The showgirls have uniformly taut bodies and look identical in height.

The stage cleared and three singers entered, with tall buns on the top of their heads and microphones attached to the side of their face. Their ‘tops’ were a few strings of beads that hold up a waterfall pleated, feathered skirt. They sang, high-kicked and twirled. The show works, the choreography is camp but I love the performance personality. The numbers are short and blend into one another creating a fast pace. The show is divided into four ‘scenes created to fulfil international audiences’ dreams!: The Moulin Rouge today and yesterday, the Moulin Rouge forever, Sandokan, The Circus, The Moulin Rouge from 1900 to ...’<sup>98</sup> I enjoy the first section, with its classic showgirl spectacle excess—the more is more froth, precise showgirl dancing and fast changes.

The second ‘Sandokan’ section perplexed me. Swash-buckling pirate men entered, the showgirls were dressed as their hookers with their hair down,

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<sup>98</sup> Press pack *Moulin Rouge*, 2010.



with sultry looks on their face. Next, safari suits and pith helmets and a harem of women. The programme describes this section:

What kind of adventures can happen to a pirate whose boat is anchored in Indonesia? Dreams? A perfect woman's love? ... Once in the land, one meets priestess, or a Gorgon in her temple surrounded by snakes ... one can even attend the Governor's Ball! Will Sandokan have the opportunity to offer his treasures to the lady of his dreams or will we be witnesses to a sacrifice of love?<sup>99</sup>

As I watched through the excessive prism of showgirl spectacle the Orientalism underlying the number became clear to me. The exotic fan-like headdresses, the leopard-like wailing women that attack the soldier guards, topless showgirls face-masks, the snake-headdressed Gorgon and then a blonde slave girl who jumped into a tank of water with two large snakes. It was clear that this is a spectacle of the exotic—and it felt distasteful. The excess in this case, served to make the Orient more Oriental—which felt like a celebration of colonial attitudes. I found it difficult to relax as I watched the Orientalist spectacle. I cringed as I watched. Through my exposure to particular contemporary art practices I have become so familiar with our contemporary post-colonial visual vocabulary that seeks to directly critique these types of reductive stereotyping of 'the other' that I was in shock at the lack of awareness of these issues at the heart of these numbers.<sup>100</sup>

The final two sections returned to what traditional showgirl spectacle does best and I could relax again. The circus sections featured clowns, pierrots and inexplicably, six live miniature horses. These recognisable tropes from

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<sup>99</sup> *Féerie* programme August 2011. Ellipses in original.

<sup>100</sup> In *Orientalism*, 25<sup>th</sup> anv edn, London: Penguin, 2003, Edward W. Said points out that representation of the Middle East and Asia by Europeans in art and literature relies on standard tropes of 'Orientals' as exotic and other. Since the book was written in 1978 (a similar timeframe to Mulvey's text and the appropriation of psychoanalysis into film theory), post-colonial critique remains important within any conversation of the implications of representation. Peter Wollen traces how the exotic Orient became a new vocabulary in fashion and theatre Paris in the 1910s in 'Out of the Past: Fashion / Orientalism / The Body', in *Raiding the Icebox*, pp. 1-34. He notes the importance of Diaghilev and The Ballets Russes and their performances in Paris. Moulin Rouge appears to have maintained this influence since then.

entertainment seem appropriate for camping through spectacle. The 'more is more' circus pointed to the construction, artifice and glitz of all entertainment. During an audience interaction section with a drumming act, nationalities were shouted out with respective cheers. Tonight the biggest cheers came when 'Mexico', 'China', 'Ukraine' and 'Brazil' were shouted out.

The cancan occurred in the final section, complete with all the showgirls cartwheeling and jumping into the splits. A high-energy routine with the dancers yelping for added effect. This number is visibly taxing for the dancers. It is exciting to see their professional, genuine smiles as you can see them fight for breath. None of them lost composure. An extra-flexible man was also part of it, although, I felt he was superfluous. The show ended with pink costumes with mirrorball squares on them, and high feather backpacks on the showgirls. I loved the show, I loved watching the dancing, even though the choreography could do with some refreshing here and there as some moves were looking a little dated. I loved so much of the show. I enjoyed the spectacle of the mass of bodies creating patterns and tableaux perfectly. I wondered in what way the tank of water and the mini horses added to spectacle. They seemed like unnecessary extras that added little except to the budget of the show. And, the Orientalist number troubled me and stayed with me. How could the traditional showgirl spectacle avoid trading on the exotic without resorting to lazy stereotyping and otherising?

## PARIS: The Lido<sup>101</sup>

As I queued for the late performance of the evening at the Lido, I saw little girls exiting the early show with their mothers. The Lido does have family appeal: the venue is large, open and spacious and located on the Champs-Élysées, a tourist-friendly luxury shopping boulevard as opposed to the seedy boulevard the Moulin Rouge is on. The Lido is less iconic than the Moulin Rouge and so it is interesting to see how it positions itself. The programme states that the Lido opened in 1946 and says ‘We are happy to welcome you to “the world’s most celebrated cabaret” and to share with you a moment of reverie and magic’.<sup>102</sup>

Although the venue is not the most iconic in Paris, the showgirl troupe are. The Bluebell Girls® are so named after their legendary founder, Margaret Kelly, nicknamed Bluebell because of her bright blue eyes. Miss Bluebell was responsible for hiring and choreographing the chorus girls at the Folies Bergère from the early thirties following her time as a Jackson Girl, a synchronised kick-line in the style of the Tillers. In her memoir on her time as a Bluebell in the thirties, Constance Tomkinson describes her, ‘Bluebell was no shy, retiring flower, but a hardy Parisian perennial. She was a capable woman, and under that fragile exterior lurked a will of iron’. She continues, ‘There was no nonsense about Bluebell.’<sup>103</sup> Early on, Bluebell decided she wanted to hire taller girls of five foot nine inches and develop more individual choreography. She migrated to the Lido 1948 where she began to collaborate with Donn Arden—a partnership that continued for nearly forty years with

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<sup>101</sup> I saw *Bonheur* at the Lido, Paris, France on 17<sup>th</sup> July 2010, €60 for bar seat. I also viewed promotional videos on YouTube: ‘Lido de Paris Cabaret - Bonheur Revue (Long Version)’, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcIJMP9R1g0>> and ‘Le Lido Cabaret in Paris ft The Bluebell Girls | FashionTV - FTV HOT’, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNn9SS9Fzbo&f>> [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> August 2012].

<sup>102</sup> *Bonheur* programme, Lido 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Constance Tomkinson, *Les Girls*, London: Michael Joseph, 1956, p. 47.

permanent productions in Las Vegas and global touring productions. Thus, the Lido and Jubilee! in Las Vegas showgirls are still called either 'Bluebells' or 'Nudes': not all the dancers are topless and the groups have slightly different steps. The 'Nudes' perform topless and have the most elaborate costumes and the 'Bluebells' perform with the briefest of tops and have the more complicated dance steps.<sup>104</sup>

The Lido has the largest auditorium of the showgirl spectacles in Paris and it feels expansive rather than cramped. This seemed to help make it feel friendly, relaxed, although still smart. I sat at the back, in the bar area, alone on the cheap-ticket bar stools. In front of me, still in the bar area were empty tables before the main body of the auditorium which is on slightly lower level. I was set apart from the rest of the audience as they had paid for a table and a meal. I saw audience members as I queued for the show and the toilet—better dressed in terms of style than at the Moulin Rouge. There were a lot of couples and a few men in suits in pairs, come for entertainment on a business trip, I wondered. A programme-seller toured the auditorium and on seeing my camera, she insisted on taking a photograph of me. She must have taken pity on me seeing the show alone. She had *seen* me.

The Lido's current production, *Bonheur* was created in 2003. The programme introduces the show's theme: 'Through a woman's quest for happiness—the show's central storyline—we take you on a 90-minute, emotion-packed journey to a land of spectacular fantasy and discovery'.<sup>105</sup> The show is divided into four tableaux: La Femme, Paris Je T'aime, L'Inde Légendaire and Reves D'étoile, which on their website is translated as Women, Paris, India and The Cinema. As the show started, chandeliers hanging and on stands at the

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<sup>104</sup> See George Perry, *Bluebell, The Authorized Biography of Margaret Kelly, Founder of the Legendary Bluebell Girls*, London: Pavilion Books, 1986, pp. 58-75, Constance Tomkinson, *Les Girls*, London: Michael Joseph, 1956, pp. 47-66, Paul Derval, *The Folies Bergère*, London: Methuen, 1955, Charles Castle, *The Folies Bergère*, London: Methuen, 1982, pp. 116-133.

<sup>105</sup> *Bonheur* programme.

banquet tables ahead of me retracted into the tables and up into the ceiling. In the first number, the Bluebells and the 'Lido Boy Dancers' as they are called in the programme, enter dressed in flesh coloured body-stockings with multi-coloured swirls, feather back-packs, bird like headdresses. This is not a flattering look for the showboys—seeing them as exotic birds makes me cringe. This made me compare their role to the showgirls: are showboys a site of visual erotic pleasure in the show, or do they serve another purpose? If they are performing the role of desire object, whom for? This thought continued as I watched the show, although, thankfully, their outfits did improve.

The next number was such a visual treat: the Bluebells wore pink large round fluffy powder puffs on their heads and held two powder puffs in their hands, and wore very little apart from a very long sequinned tie. The Lido boys were in restrained black top and trousers. This dance was charming, cheeky and flirty. 'Kick-ball change', I say the steps in my head as I watch; I loved watching this dance and decoding the steps. Most of the songs were sung in French and so some of the nuances the songs added to the numbers I missed. The songs were competently sung by a solo female star, Anki Alberstsson, her costumes were always different yet co-ordinated with the Bluebells and Lido boys. One number with an English refrain 'Sexy Chic' had a particularly interesting costume: the Bluebells in leopard print girdles and headscarves with sunglasses, seamed stockings, net tops and large feather plumes attached to the hips and the showboys in black net tops and black trousers. The choreography accented different dance styles in each number; in this number I could see hints of the Rumba in the hip movements. In a cat-themed number Broadway-style choreography was paired with fur cuffs, ears and tails.

The third tableau goes to India: 'From the temple of dance to rainbow horses, this dream-like tableau guides you on a fabulous spiritual discovery of India

through traditional legends and celebrations'.<sup>106</sup> The numbers in this section draw on the aesthetics of Hindu gods and Indian dancing—the costumes and dancing were beautiful. But I was ambivalent and confused by the number. Whereas at the Moulin Rouge I felt quite clear I was watching something Orientalist, I was less clear in this instance. Obviously an 'exotic' number is a standard trope of Showgirl Spectacle. I wondered if it is possible to demonstrate in the Showgirl form, a knowing use of the exotic, so that excess and pleasure of the exotic could be presented consciously. If it were possible, then perhaps this is what the Lido has done: but I am not sure.

After the trip to India there was a featured act, Franck Laure: a male acrobat wearing only a tiny pair of white shorts with no body hair, who performed on two long strips of material. He used these strips using incredible fluidity and strength in his body. I compared him to the Lido boys. Of the two forms of masculinity within traditional showgirl spectacle, Frank in his white pants had the power to be an object of desire. I think of showboys as being camp and I wonder how camp fits into erotic display—are they at odds with each other? I wonder, is camp erotic display for a gay male viewer, or is it something else, lighter, safer, entertainment?

The final tableau goes to the cinema. Cue a projected video kissing scene and inexplicably, the back of a seated figure looking rather like Charlie Chaplin, in a director's chair glide across the stage. This must be what the programme describes as 'Chaplin dreams of Fellini'. A section on Berlin cinema is particularly successful, quoting Marlene Dietrich, *Cabaret* and Fosse choreography with miniscule black hot pants, tops and bowler hats to create a larger than life, bigger and brasher spectacle than their original contexts.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> *Bonheur* programme.

<sup>107</sup> Specifically, Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*, [film] dir. by Josef Von Sternberg, Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1930, *Cabaret*, [film] dir. by Bob Fosse LA, CA and NY, NY: Allied Artists 1972. And the stylised movements of Bob Fosse known for his choreographing as well as

The styling, costumes and choreography were more innovative in comparison with the traditional tropes of the Moulin Rouge. The Lido is the only Parisian traditional showgirl spectacle to have dropped the cancan from its repertoire, a bold move signalling a confidence in their spectacle without it. The night I saw the show I noticed that the dancing was not perfect; the dancers' timing was not always precise, not always in total unison. And yet, I felt real pleasure as I watched at the Lido. I was happy, content and relaxed during the show even though the showboys and the Indian section got me thinking; I trusted the Lido. It felt friendly and familiar. The choreography was so fun to watch: intelligently composed with accents from a range of dance styles, it was fast, fun and theatrical! Oh! What I would do to get the opportunity to learn those dances!

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directing, which involves a highly athletic style of dance finished with straight arms, draped hands, legs in parallel or turned in, popping hips, clicking fingers and detailed coordinated movement, for example, eye movements looking up and down to the music.

## PARIS: La Nouvelle Eve<sup>108</sup>

Over the street and down a perpendicular street opposite from the Moulin Rouge is La Nouvelle Eve, built in 1897.<sup>109</sup> It is a sweet little Belle Époque theatre with a balcony. The curtains are blue and the walls are the same blue with stars. Sitting waiting for the show to start I made a note of the audience around me. A few middle aged couples, a smart young couple, a large middle aged group enter and break up to sit the men and women together. An American father and son sit near me, a large Indian family, a coach full of Australian students and a cluster of preppy Americans, also likely that they were students.

*Paris je t'aime*, their current show, was created in 2010. Their website positions the show quite explicitly, although the text translated into English is somewhat perplexing:

A revue at the Nouvelle Eve is on the borderline between “music-hall” and “cabaret”. It’s a clever mixture of feathers and conviviality. This lively show will enable you to participate, with humour and boldness. Here the concept of the Parisian cabaret is much in evidence. You’ll marvel at the enchantment of feathers and the splendour of The Woman. You’ll be entertained thanks to cheerful and fabulous attractions.

For *Paris je t'aime*, Lianne Scrivener, has used her dynamic choreography to successfully merge the typical Parisian revue with new artistic techniques.

Essentially, the revue is a puzzle, a kaleidoscope of influences, eras, and cultural images. Through six different scenes, you’ll discover a range of styles from the disco music of “Cupid” to the baroque of “Fire”, and the spectacular scene of the elastics, an allusion to modern day Pigalle.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> I saw *Paris je t'aime* at La Nouvelle Eve, Paris 27<sup>th</sup> July 2011, €88, including half a bottle of champagne.

<sup>109</sup> *Paris je t'aime* programme, La Nouvelle Eve, 2011. Also viewed promotional videos on YouTube ‘la nouvelle eve BA DEF’, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=js5aU-JayTI>> and ‘la nouvelle eve’, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yyiehoq10T0>> [accessed 3rd August 2012].

<sup>110</sup> Description of current show on La Nouvelle Eve website. I corrected two spelling errors from the original for consistency and comprehension, <<http://www.lanouvelleeveparis.com/en/presentation-19.html>> [accessed 4th August 2012].



The show started with a techno-beat song as the blonde-bobbed star, host and 'The Woman', Arta, is lowered onto the stage in a disco ball seat. She wore a beaded net top with large holes and a sparkly thong. The female dancers were in red tops with a cut-out heart shape on their sternum. The choreography looks more commercial dance than traditional stage dancing. The production of the show is restrained in comparison to the Lido and Moulin Rouge. The next number Arta entered singing, topless, with a tall feather headdress, red thong, long red gauntlets and a few strings of beads. The other showgirls have their hair scraped up, but no headdresses. They smile genuinely. I feel joy.

A male duo in black waistcoats, white shirts and trousers juggled with hats. They needed a member of the audience and addressed us in English and found one of the Australians to join him onstage. It seemed strange that he spoke in English on a French stage. A sign that the show is aimed at tourists, perhaps.

The dancers yelp like wildcats during their cancan number. A male dancer takes centre-stage during the cancan and performs cartwheels, tumbles and jumping splits. Why do we need this, I wondered? Why is the kick-line of showgirls not enough? Next is a Mr Bean type clown who performs physical comedy. With his simple, easy to understand slapstick humour this act could appeal to broad international audience from different cultural backgrounds.

A practical solution to the higher ratio of female to male dancers in one number drew my attention to gender construction within this traditional model of the showgirl. To maximise the number of couples onstage in a number featuring partner dancing, some of the female dancers were costumed

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Show programme consists mainly of photographs from the show, no description of the production. A brief history of the theatre at the back.

as showgirls in a floppy drop-waisted dresses, while some were in the same costume as the showboys. The outfits were identical across the female-showboys and male-showboys except that the women wore a slightly higher Cuban-heel lace up shoes. The choreography of the number felt fresh, dramatic and tango-inspired.

The numbers seem to race by quickly. One tap number that seemed too brief was *Jazz Hot Baby* with its cute blue leotards and oversized bows costume with pillbox hats.

Arta interacted with the audience. She asked how we are and made polite jokes. She repeated this in a number of different languages, and I thought of flight attendant demonstrations. This audience interaction section perplexed me. Arta found four male volunteers from the audience and got them to dance, offering them a bride as a prize. The winner was taken off-stage and returned with a showgirl holding a baby. I thought it was in very poor taste, the connotations of the bride-as-prize chillingly misogynistic.<sup>111</sup> I cringed throughout this section. So many elements of the show worked, and yet there seemed to be some dubious decisions made in the direction.

The show ends with Arta in a black turban with tall Mohawk headdress and the showgirls' black and pink feather dressed finale to Piaf inspired *Oui Je T'aime*. During the number I noticed their shoes: some dancers had slight platforms to create a more even line with the other dancers, who did not have platform soles on their shoes. I looked up the height requirements for the show, which is somewhat shorter at 5 ft 6 in. (I'm 5 ft 6 ½ in.)<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Is misogyny an international language?

<sup>112</sup> I found an audition notice online. The minimum height requirement for this show is slightly shorter than the bigger shows: 'La Nouvelle Eve Cabaret in Paris is looking for Professional Male & Female Dancers (min height 5'6") for their New Revue Show in 2012. It is a 7 month contract starting April 2012 until end of October 2012. Travel from London to Paris and accommodation during Rehearsals (3 weeks) is provided by the Company. Work consists of 2 shows per night (8pm

The show was tight and enjoyable. I took a while to relax and warm to the show. I was on edge, trying to trust the spectacle in front of me to deliver pleasure, but was unsure if it would verge onto too tacky. With each detail I tried to work out if it was dated, or traditional, or if it was updated the best way. I fought to locate the show as I watched. The choreography and costumes were a little dated, and reminded me of the Eurovision Song Contest. But against these visual signs, the dancers were excellent and I really enjoyed the personality of each of them; there was fantastic technical excellence and expressive individuality in their performing.

Arta sang with power, but she is a more charismatic dancer than she is a singer. I absolutely loved seeing the genuine smiles on the dancers faces. The show's star Arta, also being the compère was unusual because of how significant the role was within the show—and that this role was embodied by a woman felt progressive. The gender-fluidity of the dancers and absence of Orientalist references to other cultures again signified a knowing progressive spectacle. And yet, the bride-as-pride joke jarred. The show teeters on the edge of traditional and updated showgirl spectacle. As I walked home, I wondered, how can a traditional showgirl spectacle retain the best of its history and make use of the numerous contemporary pop culture references to it, so that in becoming an updated showgirl spectacle it reinvigorates the showgirl form?

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& 10pm) 6 night/ week. Cast of 25 Artists. Payment details: 75 Euros/day of work', <[http://www.starnow.com.au/Casting-Calls/Dancers-wanted/Live-performance/professional\\_male\\_female\\_dancers.htm](http://www.starnow.com.au/Casting-Calls/Dancers-wanted/Live-performance/professional_male_female_dancers.htm)> [accessed 4th August 2012].

## PARIS: Paradis Latin<sup>113</sup>

Over on Rive Gauche is *Paradis À la Folie!* at the Paradis Latin, also a smaller production created in 2010. Entering the Paradis Latin, a man in a camp pink top hat and black tails ensemble and with a thick layer of make-up greeted me. I thought of the emcee character in *Cabaret*.<sup>114</sup> The space is medium-sized but feels expansive because of the high ceiling and balcony that runs the perimeter of the second floor. The balcony was empty and I am not sure if it used as an audience space. At the far end is the stage. The room was filled with long banquet tables in neat rows perpendicular to the stage. I was seated on the corner of a banquet table, towards the back of the room, on the edge of a group of people. I found it very difficult to feel inconspicuous on a shared table—similar to the Moulin Rouge. The audience looked very similar to the Nouvelle Eve: both had a coach-load of Australian students, a lot of tourists, an extended Indian family and large groups of women. Again, they looked dressed up, but without much style. A photographer circles the room taking portraits at the tables. I decline when she approached me. A large group of French women around their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, sit at a table nearby. I tried to work out if they were celebrating a birthday or a hen party. They were dressed up, with sparkly accessories. The encounter with the top-hatted emcee drew into focus that this felt like a straight audience. The outlandish camp of his outfit contrasted with the rest of the audience. I reflected back on the other showgirl spectacles: are they for straight audiences? If they are, is that a bit strange? The performers and show creators are so frequently gay.

You will discover the extravagant and amusing world of a magical garden where joy and good humour reign! Let yourself be carried away by a variety of scenes, full of surprises and cheer! From magic roundabouts, masked balls and musical comedies to the great spectacle of modern ballets in the tradition of Parisian revues, without forgetting the unmissable French cancan! It is a show full of

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<sup>113</sup> I saw *Paradis À la Folie!* at the Paradis Latin, Paris, 28<sup>th</sup> July 2011, €55.

<sup>114</sup> *Cabaret*, dir. by Fosse.

typical rive gauche humour. Beautiful, sexy young girls, charming dancers and the most “dandy” master of ceremonies will ensure you enjoy the night of your dreams in the gardens of the Paradis. Sheer madness!<sup>115</sup>

There were no programmes at the Paradis Latin, however, they have an increasingly extensive online presence, with a website, a blog, a page on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Vimeo channels and an Apple I-phone / I-pad app.<sup>116</sup> As the Parisian cabaret most engaged with social media clearly this is a strategy of positioning and branding. Does this signify a confidence in their product, the most updated spectacle cabaret? Are they even going so far as to cultivate Parisians to visit, or patrons to return and see the show again?

The lights were dimmed as a range of different costumed showgirls and boys enter, all rose themed. Topless women wrapped in large petals as though they are roses enter, and later tip the petals down into skirts. Covered showgirls wore little rose tutus and long gloves. All the women had short, tucked-behind-the-ears brown hair and tiny tiaras. The showboys were in pink top hat and tails without shirts. An older man, in pale pink top hat, tails and a shirt, our star singer and compère for the evening, was lowered on to stage standing up on a swing. Another figure was lowered from the ceiling, this time, a topless woman with very long hair, a rose crown, a flower thong, and soft ballet shoes descends in a heart shape frame decorated with roses, scattering roses. She was joined by a showboy in only a laurel wreath and a leaf-like thong and they danced a pas de deux together. A female singer enters from back of auditorium in a rose coloured long dress with large rose neckline. She sings encircled with four showboys and then with the compère. The showboys dance for a moment, lots of jumping steps, tapping, cheeky,

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<sup>115</sup> Paradis Latin website, <<http://www.paradislatin.com/en>>, [accessed 5th August 2012].

<sup>116</sup> Paradis Latin website, <<http://www.paradislatin.com/en>>, Cabaret Blog.com by Paradis Latin, <<http://www.cabaretblog.com>>, Facebook, <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Paradis-Latin/110246662333897>>, Twitter, <[https://twitter.com/paradis\\_latin](https://twitter.com/paradis_latin)>, YouTube channel, <<http://www.youtube.com/user/paradislatincabaret>>, Vimeo channel, <<http://vimeo.com/channels/paradislatin>> [all accessed 5th August 2012].

cheesy choreography. The compère spoke to us in French, then English. All the waiters who previously had circulated in the banquet tables with wine bottles and food went up onstage, performing with full trays. The male emcee I saw on entering, was now in drag with a pink tutu, stockings, black waistcoat, white opera gloves, bowtie, blonde wig, a maid's headband and carrying a feather duster—the dandy master of ceremonies? Demonstrating a playful camp more explicit and knowing than the Lido's more innocent camp, I wondered, is this overtly queered camp? Are we all in on a joke?

The next section presented another aesthetic, this time, contemporary commercial pop culture. I wondered if they had chosen the best elements to quote. It commenced with a ballet class with girls in black leotards at a barre, then evolved into an Eric Prydz *Call On Me* music video style dance with female dancers in a mix of bright, tiny leotards, sexy bra tops and hotpants adding to the barre and moving into a workout inspired commercial pop routine. Next, the male dancers have a number to themselves dancing as though doing judo. The music reminds me of Daft Punk. A steam shower scene of four girls in stripteasing towels reveals more knowing choreography. The men also reveal their bodies in the shower with witty choreography. There are a lot of head rolls swishing long hair—hair is never down in the showgirl tradition. A street dance number is performed with full black body suits with skeletons. The street dance theme continues with Adidas-stripped tracksuit bottoms on the girls.

A large rotating fairground carousel dominated the stage for the following section. On the many corners of the carousel were topless showgirls with blonde pageboy wigs, as though ornate statue details. The carousel opened to reveal four women straddling motorbikes. They removed their helmets and shook out their long blonde hair before stripping down to a harness and thong. They danced on the bikes frequently arching their backs and swinging

their hair. The gratuitous movements and 'lads magazines' aesthetics did not feel directed at me; this section felt incongruous with the rest of the show and it made me contract into a cringe throughout. I found I was actually surprised not see any surgically enhanced breasts.

A solo act came out into the audience space and performed on a trapeze, away from the stage. 'Christopher' in white, sequinned shorts, armlets, and with shaved armpits performed an amazing gymnastic routine demonstrating his very strong, flexible body all with slightly internalised sublime smile. He reminded me of Franck Laure at the Lido.

Prokofiev's Montagues and Capulets music sets the scene for a Romeo and Juliet pastiche. A Court dance in adapted period dress to reveal bare breasts became a pas de deux scene from Romeo and Juliet as they stripped off their billowing clothes and continue nearly naked. This was followed by a hip-hop tribute Romeo and Juliet, the girls in trilbies, waistcoats and black trousers the boys topless in black trousers and trilbies. I realised I had not seen any body hair on any of the performers all evening.

I preferred their cancan to the Nouvelle Eve's; they had a better costume and choreography. The show ended with a white finale with the men in white top hat and tails and the girls without feathers instead with structured wire and net wings and tiaras. The performers were versatile, dancing a range of styles, all well.<sup>117</sup> I enjoyed their dancing, but I found myself negotiating what I saw to such an extent I did not become immersed in the spectacle. The show was

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<sup>117</sup> An audition announcement on their blog confirms this:

'Girls: height minimum: 5 foot 7, 1m70, Please wear sleeveless leotard and tights, no jazz trousers nor leggings, shoes: please bring demi-pointe ballet shoes, jazz baskets, jazz shoes, dance heels, pointe shoes and tap shoes

Requirements: Strong classical base, jazz dance, musical theatre, good partnering skills tap ability a plus Acrobatic and/or gymnastic ability a plus'. Monday March 5 2012,

<<http://www.cabaretblog.com/en/category/diary>> [accessed 5<sup>th</sup> August 2012]. I have never heard of jazz baskets before but presume they refer to basketball type trainers, usually called jazz trainers or boots in English.

over the top, bright, fast, and with a hint of knowing sexuality. At times I felt in on the joke, other times I felt nervous. As I watched I was amused (sometimes bemused!), but two aspects of the show lingered with me. It demonstrated both a normative sexual titillation and also a relaxed attitude towards more queer tropes. This pulled in different directions: sometimes it seemed conventional at others progressive or regressive. Incorporating references from mainstream pop-culture, their choices alienated me at times, particularly the performance on motorbikes.

However, during the show our top-hatted greeter moved back and forth between dragged up dame to camp masculine. This nonchalant overt cross-dressing is a safe version of queer, as though gender excess is part of the overall excess of spectacle. I wondered, how queer is showgirl spectacle? In the Paradis Latin and La Nouvelle Eve shows I sensed an adherence to the traditional showgirl spectacle: updated around the edges, but without breaking from the established conventions. Cross-dressing forms part of these conventions. The showgirl can be embodied by a biological male, or conversely, a showgirl embodied by a biological female may wear or draw on masculine dress. In *Showgirls* Andrea Stuart describes the appeal of the cross-dressed showgirl; ‘transgression, spectacle and a fascinating sexual ambiguity’ through unpacking Marlene Dietrich’s penchant for suits. Dietrich traces the impulse to 1900s musical hall actresses who parodied men through songs such as ‘Burlington Bertie’.<sup>118</sup> Indeed, masculine hats, ties, collars, gloves, canes and suit-jackets if, not necessarily the trousers have been and remain a key part of the showgirl costume repertoire.

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<sup>118</sup> Stuart, *Showgirls*, p. 155.



## PARIS: Crazy Horse Saloon<sup>119</sup>

Femininity, creativity, audacity...

The most avant-garde cabaret in Paris reveals its charms in an all-new show *Désirs*.

The new show *Désirs*, inspired by the endless theme of femininity, consists of a series of highly aesthetic and visual tableaux presented by the legendary troupe Crazy Horse dancers.

The classically trained dancers perfectly integrate the sensuous choreography of their performances and their spectacular bodies. Each dancer is bathed in richly colored and textured lighting designs. The colors and images from the stunning lighting effects are so overwhelming that it is hard to determine where skin ends and the colour reflections begin...

The result is a unique show that engages the mind as much as the eye!

Zula Zazou, Jade Or, Psykko Tico and Nooka Karamel: the Crazy Horse dancers with their memorable names represent the French elite of beauty and seduction.

The new show *Désirs* represents the eternal return of the legendary Crazy Horse de Paris...<sup>120</sup>

‘Femininity, creativity, audacity’ and ‘avant-garde cabaret’: these words resonated with my hopes for an intelligent, opulent, emancipated showgirl experience. The tantalising description of the Crazy Horse excited me. My expectations were high for a progressive, updated showgirl spectacle. I was full of anticipation as I went down into the jewellery-box red and gold Crazy Horse Saloon in Paris, to see *Désirs*, their current show, launched September 2009. The ingredients felt right. It is a small, intimate venue opened in 1951 by Alain Bernardin. Their show is cast of only female dancers (no showboys). I desperately wanted to feel pleasure here, to fit into the audience, to be part of the scene, to get it.

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<sup>119</sup> I saw *Désirs* at the Crazy Horse Saloon, Paris, France, 4<sup>th</sup> August 2010, €80.

<sup>120</sup> Press pack for *Désirs*. My emphasis. Also note the use of the phrase ‘avant-garde cabaret’. I read this phrase as having an affinity with my understanding of the terms, although after seeing the show, I do not think this is the right vocabulary.

As I watched the show, the excitement drained from me increasingly as the show progressed. I did not feel pleasure; I felt awkward, embarrassed and exposed to something more explicit than I was accustomed to. I was confused—is it me? Am I a prude? I looked around the audience, and women represented half of the crowd. I did not see shocked, bewildered faces in the crowd. It must have been me. I wondered if my expectations and viewing lens developed through the tropes and devices of new burlesque have meant I cannot access this experience properly? The audience represented a diverse age range, couples and family groups. I would not use the word ‘tourist’ to describe them, although, of course, I am sure many of them were, because their fashion style seemed smart, hip, metropolitan. Of all the Parisian cabarets, I fitted in here the most. However, I felt no affiliation. What I experienced, I did not see mirrored in the people around me.

The dancers were naked except for what looked like a small black square of strategically placed gaffer tape. Literally their taut bodies were impenetrable. The show ‘clothes’ the naked bodies with coloured, patterned lighting effects. In one number, *Legmania*, only legs performing were visible, like dismembered limbs. Throughout the show the bodies are dissected onstage by mirrors, props and choreography and they become literally objects onto which light is projected. It was too much. Where is the room for *me* to project onto these bodies? I enjoy seeing the bodies-as-objects become subjects in front of me, through the returned look to the audience and seeing the showgirl perform intelligently expressively through her face and using her whole body—but this was very different at Crazy Horse.

The featured act was a male tap duo, which came as a relief. Fully clothed, the two were fully spot-lit, used their faces, audience interaction, humour and a number of different tap dancing ‘quotes’ to create an entertaining number. Afterwards the return to the strobe-lit naked women extinguished

my singular moment of fun. The seriousness of the naked women was alienating; I longed to see some smiling faces!

The choreography repeatedly made use of the highly sexualised, over-arched back position that pushes the bottom out. I worried about the long-term health of the dancers' lower backs as I watched. This emphasis on a thrust-out bottom is oppositional to ballet training in which the bottom must be constantly 'tucked under'. However, dancers wishing to audition are told 'It is also essential that applicants are trained in classical dance and have genuine acting ability'.<sup>121</sup> The Crazy Horse aesthetic is particularly exacting, as though these performing bodies are objects to be measured, selected the moment they enter:

To qualify for the audition, applicants must meet the physical criteria set out by Mr Bernardin.

- Height: between 1.68 and 1.72 m;
- Proportions: required leg length compared to torso =  $1/3 - 2/3$ ;
- Vital statistics:
  - distance between the tips of the breasts = 27cm;
  - distance between the navel and the pubis = 13cm.<sup>122</sup>

To further eradicate the individual dancer's subjectivity or claiming of herself, she is renamed by the management:

On the evening of their first show, each young woman is given a stage name, thought up by Cristina & Svetlana. The two Show Managers consider the personality of each dancer—her origin, attitude, a characteristic or an anecdote relating to her. The dancers can refuse the first name that is given to them, but must accept the second!<sup>123</sup>

The Crazy Horse celebrated its sixtieth anniversary in 2011 and the release of a documentary by Frederick Wiseman, which generated renewed press interest

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<sup>121</sup> *How to Become A Crazy Girl*, available from Crazy Horse.

<sup>122</sup> *How to Become A Crazy Girl*.

<sup>123</sup> *How to Become A Crazy Girl*.

in the show. My worst fears for the health of the dancers' backs were confirmed reading *The Telegraph Magazine*.<sup>124</sup> The article reproduces the mystery of the construction of a 'Crazy Girl', underlining how she must remain a distant and anonymous creature following her transformation. She must undergo a month of training to 'learn the style, codes and tricks' of the 'lexicon of signature moves' in which 'pelvic thrusts are unthinkable, raised arms are avoided for being too Lido; legs are often crossed; backs arch to such an extent that chiropractors are an occupational expense'. Andrée Deissenberg, the current director, describes this process as 'the deconstruction of the classical dancer and the reconstruction of the Crazy girl', she says, 'You have to arch rather than pull in your butt, as ballerinas do. During that month, their bodies change because they use different muscles'.<sup>125</sup> Here, the body is a material to sculpt, finish, hone so that it may become uniform even down to a muscular level.

The *Final Fantasy* number features a solo dancer who commenced tied up in ropes and then used the ropes as props to perform on, a sort of auto-erotic bondage play in the form of a dance. I felt even more uncomfortable watching this, but I also questioned myself, why can I not get this, why can I not justify it? What am I missing? Maybe it was the sense that this was purely for titillation, that these moves were just moves. I wonder, if I had seen a dance like this in a different context, in which the performer were the initiator/choreographer of the piece and the act was delivered in a different way, I speculate that it would have a different effect on me.

My expectations were based on the promotional posters and the language used to describe the show that guided me to the assumption that the erotic display produced at the Crazy Horse would be accessible to me. I found the

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<sup>124</sup> Murphy Williams, *Blue Velvet*, *Telegraph Magazine*, magazine supplement with the *Daily Telegraph*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Williams, *Blue Velvet*.

subjectivity of the dancers was so obfuscated by the lights, choreography and stage direction that I was unable to relax. It was a topless revue.

As I walked away from the theatre that evening, I remember thinking that I had just lost my visual innocence. Despite all of my protestations of disgust, Crazy Horse lingers in my mind. I continue to try to negotiate my responses to the show, and of course, disgust does have an intertwined relationship with desire.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Maybe there is hope for the Crazy Horse dancers. I was interested to read an interview with Dita Von Teese in which she says 'Recently, I worked with one of my favourite Crazy Horse girls and helped her create a burlesque act for herself. It was amazing to watch this disciplined, technically brilliant dancer let loose and perform her own act, feeding off the audience! Burlesque performances thrive on the energy of the audience, and I think that the element of self-creation and having the power over your own stage time is something that many dancers don't get. I really just loved seeing her become untamed! I have formed some great friendships there at the Crazy. It's a very special place for me, and I feel honoured to have my place there'. Franceso Rizzi, 'Interview: Dita Von Teese', *Burlesque Bible*, 17<sup>th</sup> August 2011, <<http://www.burlesquebiblemag.com/?p=190>> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2011].

## LAS VEGAS: Jubilee Theater<sup>127</sup>

The Parisian traditional showgirl spectacle migrated to Las Vegas in the fifties.<sup>128</sup> The form flourished, becoming even more lavish and opulent, peaking with Donn Arden's *Jubilee!*, which opened in July 1981. Gradually the big shows declined and closed, leaving only *Jubilee!* standing.<sup>129</sup> *Jubilee!* is a carefully constructed spectacle of more-is-more excess: "There are 8,000 miles of sequins used on the costumes—that's enough to reach from Las Vegas to Paris and back".<sup>130</sup> The programme explicitly reproduces this excess, enmeshing quantities and dimensions into the explanations of the numbers:

The sixteen-minute opening of *Jubilee!* is based on Broadway composer Jerry Herman's "Hundreds of Girls". The entire show includes nearly 100 performers who wear more than 2000 costumes.<sup>131</sup>

What is the appeal of *Jubilee!*? How does it survive? The show has been described in news as kitsch and camp, though it actually produces something classic and authentic, even innocent.<sup>132</sup> In Las Vegas, where the casino-culture has created a unique mix of immoderation, from the gregarious architecture, huge advertising displays often with particularly sexualised images, the high number of strip clubs, through to the hedonism of the visitors, who seize the opportunity to behave badly, around the clock. The

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<sup>127</sup> I saw *Jubilee!* at the Jubilee Theater, Bally's, Las Vegas, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2008, \$35(half price deal) and also the *Jubilee!* Backstage Tour, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2010, the fee was waived. Also viewed: 'Jubilee! 30th Anniversary', <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qu2ID3rTi0I>>, 'Showgirls', <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8qIT1ntNHE&feature=related>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

<sup>128</sup> The history of the shows is documented in the University of Nevada, Las Vegas online archive, <<http://digital.library.unlv.edu/collections/showgirls>> [accessed 1st December 2011].

<sup>129</sup> For example, *Hallelujah Hollywood!* at the MGM Grand ran from 1974 until 1980, *The Lido* at the Stardust closed in 1991, see 'Lido de Paris at Stardust - Las Vegas', <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN4J90hWIFg>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> August 2012] and *Folies Bergère* at the Tropicana ran 1959 until 2009, which I saw in 26<sup>th</sup> March 2008, amongst others.

<sup>130</sup> *Jubilee Fun Facts*, sheet available from the press office.

<sup>131</sup> *Jubilee!*, programme, 2008.

<sup>132</sup> John Katsilometes, 'Same As It Ever Was', *Las Vegas Sun News*, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2011, <<http://www.lasvegassun.com/blogs/kats-report/2011/jul/29/same-it-ever-was-jubilee-remains-titanic/>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

showgirl-look has become a sort of mascot for the city, copied and reproduced to add a touch of glamour as a marketing gimmick or promotional tool. The excess of the showgirl look: exposed flesh, sequins, rhinestones, high-headdresses, feathers and heels, all create a highly aestheticised surface—something constructed, highly worked—fake, for fake Vegas.

However, this is not what the *Jubilee!* showgirl is, or does. She is a Bluebell. She is showgirl elite. She must have ‘strong jazz, ballet and tap technique’ and of course, be over 5 ft 8 in.<sup>133</sup> She must be strong enough to support the costumes, which weigh up to 22 pounds, and make it look effortless.

I wanted long legs because they show up better and I wanted the girls to look as though they were enjoying themselves. The ballet training is essential because it produces good posture and an elegant look. I’ve made my reputation on elegance and class...<sup>134</sup>

Furthermore, surgical intervention, particularly breast implants are commonplace in Las Vegas and are highly visible across the large advertising hoardings and handbills given out on the street. And yet, at *Jubilee!* fake boobs are forbidden, as they are at the European shows. This adherence to a natural body type is contradictory to the normative erotised bodies on display in Vegas. In other words, the show that exemplifies the classic Las Vegas showgirl, produces something quite contrary too.

I went to see the show while I was studying in California. I remember being in the very large, high-ceilinged red and gold auditorium with an imitation old-time traditional theatre. The red plush seats updated somewhat for an audience more accustomed to cinema viewing—the armrests incorporated a

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<sup>133</sup> Audition notice on Bally’s website,  
<[http://www.ballyslasvegas.com/images/non\\_image\\_assets/Jubilee\\_2012\\_audition\\_notice\\_poster.pdf?hootPostID=48dcbbb1a7dda85c2151db9458f86c8e](http://www.ballyslasvegas.com/images/non_image_assets/Jubilee_2012_audition_notice_poster.pdf?hootPostID=48dcbbb1a7dda85c2151db9458f86c8e)> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

<sup>134</sup> Bluebell, quoted on UNLV Digital Collection website,  
<<http://digital.library.unlv.edu/collections/showgirls/arden-bluebell-friendship-and-collaboration>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> April 2013].

cup holder. To access the theatre you have to walk through Bally's casino floor and past rows and rows of slot machines. Approaching the theatre this way it is hard to get a sense of the space from the outside. When you are inside, it is difficult to imagine how the theatre fits into the building. My experience of the exterior and interior of Bally's does not quite marry together, although this is how I commonly feel in the hotel casinos of Las Vegas. I do not remember the audience explicitly, although whenever I encounter audiences in Las Vegas, they are noticeable by their particularly informal appearance.

The show has four sections: Showtime, Samson and Delilah, Titanic, and The Finale. I loved the Showtime and Finale section unreservedly. They were such visual treats, with smart choreography, and a packed stage. Just amazing. Incredibly fun and over the top. Showtime starts with the showgirls performing a kick-line based routine in turquoise unitards, bowler hats, red bowties and buckle shoes. It is pretty amazing to see a very large kick-line executed with precision—this takes hours of practice on top of an excellent sense of timing and good dance technique.

The next two sections, Samson & Delilah and Titanic explore historic moments, theatrically camped-up and with pyrotechnic, elaborate sets and a ship that sinks, 'More than 3,000 gallons of recycled water cascade across the set during the scene when the Titanic hits the iceberg'. These mechanical theatrics do nothing for me and I was unmoved. I cringed a little at the excess of the set, this is not why I came. I come for the dancing! And the dancing was amazing.

The Finale really is a spectacle. The theme is 'a tribute to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers with an array of black top hats, tails and canes for the whole cast giving way to the most excessive use of feathers and sequins ever used,



ever. This continuous excess is so over the top, so ludicrous and totally beguiling. The Finale's end is the lowering of bridges way above the audiences heads, out into the auditorium space that the performers walk across. The scale of the show is so huge with such a large quantity of showgirls in ever-changing costumes that match perfectly, it makes it impossible to pick out particular dancers and watch them, they dissolve into the mass. This is a spectacle. The visual over-stimulation and excess is spectacular. It is impossible to not be overwhelmed.

## LAS VEGAS: Riviera Hotel & Casino<sup>135</sup>

Beyond the clarity of the large Spectacles in Vegas, like *Jubilee!* and also including the large number of Cirque de Soleil shows or big name performer shows there are a number of smaller shows that define another category—one that I struggle to understand—the topless revue. The *Crazy Girls* is one of these. On its website and advertising it describes itself as ‘The Sexiest Topless Revue’, the show has been running since 1991 thus qualifying as the longest running revue on the strip.<sup>136</sup> It is also proud to have been part of a film *Crazy Girls Undercover* (2008). To access the theatre inside the Riviera hotel casino you must pass the infamous statue promoting the show. All these details place the *Crazy Girls* in some kind of classic category. They also make me feel uncomfortable.

I entered late, during a video introduction to the show. My seat was in front of the tiny stage, in the elbow of the thrust and main portion of the stage. I was ushered to my seat in the dark, and so it was not until it was too late that I realised exactly where I was sitting. The surrounding tables held pints of beer and behind them were circles of men. Interspersed beyond them were couples. My female gaze was on display. I felt conscious that the dancers could see me and indeed they did look at me; the men around me could see me being looked at. My (female) presence in the front row was directly used by the performers. One performer in particular used me in a dance by wrapping the tie she had just removed from her neck, a gesture she must do to someone in the front row every night, but she seemed extra delighted to do it to a woman. Or am I projecting? Does she perform the same flirtation to

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<sup>135</sup> I visited the *Crazy Girls*, Riviera Hotel & Casino, Las Vegas, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2010, \$24.73. I also visited another topless revue, X-Burlesque, that I have decided not to write about, but does inform my (non)understanding of topless revues in Las Vegas.

<sup>136</sup> *Crazy Girls* website, <<http://crazygirlslv.com/news.php>> [accessed 5th August 2012].

interact with the audience member every time? Is this particular seat reserved for female patrons?

The show was composed of a troupe of all-female dancers that could be divided into two styles of performers. They either had very strong dance technique and performance-personality or surgically enhanced bodies. The former were surprisingly fantastic, displaying excellent training and undeniable talent. These performers had the power to extend out to the audience and invite them to enjoy the pleasure they demonstrated in their own bodies and through their gestures, looks to the audience, eye contact and broad, genuine smiles. However, a couple seemed to specialise in their boob jobs. Their silicone solid breasts with surgically scarred, puckered skin underneath them, cosmetically enhanced lips and movement vocabulary that omitted fast detailed footwork, instead relying on slow over-arched back movements, particularly on all fours. 'Eliset', the dancer that exemplified this most, came alive when performing the more sexually suggestive gestures, particularly in her face.<sup>137</sup>

I looked around the audience and realised that I was amongst mainly men drinking. They were not normal company I would keep. I wondered, is the show designed for them? However, I just do not know how to position or describe what I saw: some of the numbers quoted Broadway musical-style with a touch of *Sex in the City* single girl about town narrative, others used

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<sup>137</sup> The audition call out gives a sense of what type of performer they are looking for: 'Riviera Casino, Crazy Girls Showroom, Monday April 30, 2012, 5:00 pm sharp

- Las Vegas' #1 topless revue is seeking trained dancers for immediate and future positions

- 5'6" minimum height with full bust

- Excellent pay with option for benefits

- One show nightly

NOTES: Please wear bra, G-string or small booty shorts, and dance heels with NO fishnets. Come prepared with hair down, make-up done (no large lashes) & tan (real or spray)',

<<http://pagebizz.com/index.php/bizzsocial/events/viewevent/30-crazy-girls-audition>> [accessed 5th August 2012].

terribly cringingly tacky props.<sup>138</sup> One number used poles, but not to full-effect. A single dancer performed an amazing number and I tried so hard to focus on these occasional flashes of wonderful dancing. My visibility; being looked at looking, meant I never really could relax or enjoy the show.

Watching the show I felt confused. What is a topless revue? Is it a well-choreographed revue or something more explicit? Is it the same or different to a gentlemen's club performances? Is this exclusively for men? Each alternate act suggested a different conclusion. In trying to understand what I was watching made me tense. I was anxious that I might be in the wrong place. I wanted to explain myself to the other audience members: to announce that I was here as part of my research. I did not sense this was the experience of the audience members around me, from their faces and body language. I think they were comfortable and relaxed (although this could have been an effect of their beer).

During the show, I felt on display. This made me feel apart from the rest of the audience and disrupted my ability to receive pleasure because I could never really relax or enjoy the show. The performers seemed to interact with me differently because I am a woman and because of my visible location.

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<sup>138</sup> *Sex and the City*, [tv series], created by Darren Star, HBO, 1998-2004.

## LAS VEGAS: Saxe Theater<sup>139</sup>

The adherence to tradition that the long-running traditional showgirl spectacles demonstrate produces authenticity but forecloses self-reflexivity. How do shows re-evaluate their product? How does the form re-position what it does? Over my Showgirl Spectacle viewing encounters I have found myself wondering what the possibilities are for bringing the showgirl spectacle into the present whilst retaining the glamorous and classic style. Without the possibility of revisioning the form condemns itself to reproduce historical pieces without questioning their social and political implications. Do these relics have relevance in our cultural climate? Can the form offer more?

*VEGAS! The Show* tells the story of the most influential and exciting entertainers who made the city the “entertainment capital of the world.”

From The Rat Pack and Elvis to today’s hottest stars... this amazing cast of more than 40 performers, big band live orchestra and beautiful showgirls make *VEGAS! The Show* one of the biggest stage productions on the Strip in 20 years. You’ll see why critics call it the “best of Las Vegas all in one show!”

This spectacular performance will take you back in time to experience true Las Vegas entertainment the way it was meant to be. You will relive the best moments of the most dynamic singers, dancers, and unforgettable personalities to ever set foot on the world-famous Strip.<sup>140</sup>

Yes! *Vegas! The Show* proved it can. The show, which opened August 2010, shortly before I saw it, is a large-scale musical composed of collages from

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<sup>139</sup> I visited the *Vegas! The Show*, at the Saxe Theatre, Miracle Mile Shops at Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino, Las Vegas, 27th August 2010 \$33.50 (half price deal). I also viewed YouTube footage of the show: ‘VEGAS! The Show - Now Playing!’, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVsYD3f6s3g>>, ‘Luck Be A Lady - Clip from VEGAS! The Show’, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxEtrPyk\\_5c&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxEtrPyk_5c&feature=related)>, ‘Vegas! The Show – Press’, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zm8GLRadjl8&NR=1&feature=endscreen>>, ‘VEGAS! The Show - Circus So Lame’, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rh0ADI53R\\_c&feature=BFa&list=UU4QkL\\_6OBG3RnMygVL7ei4A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rh0ADI53R_c&feature=BFa&list=UU4QkL_6OBG3RnMygVL7ei4A)>, ‘Candyman from VEGAS! The Show’, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhgtRUGzX1k&feature=bf\\_prev&list=UU4QkL\\_6OBG3RnMygVL7ei4A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UhgtRUGzX1k&feature=bf_prev&list=UU4QkL_6OBG3RnMygVL7ei4A)> [accessed 10th August 2012].  
<sup>140</sup> *Vegas! The Show* website, <<http://www.vegastheshow.com/about-vegas-the-show.htm>> [accessed 16th August 2012].

former glories of Las Vegas. Created by David Saxe, a Las Vegas native and son of a dancer in the *Folies Bergère* and a bandleader for the Rat Pack shows, he describes growing up backstage at the talent-driven shows with live bands, and missing that feel. He wanted to create a show that brought back what Vegas was famous for, live bands, exceptional talent: the best of Vegas since the 1940s.<sup>141</sup> Thus, the show consciously quotes the history of the city, recreating eras, styles and paying homage to famous performers producing updated showgirl spectacle at its most reflexive.

Presented in the modest Saxe theatre, the interior was utilitarian, black seats without excessive styling but room for your drinks cup; very much reminiscent of multiplex cinema interiors. The audience was nondescript, not particularly dressed up, couples and groups on holiday in Vegas.

The show started with Ernie, the caretaker of the old retired neon signs from old Vegas, in his overalls, and he tells the story of the key historical moments—and we see them recreated in front of us—not impersonations, but rather bringing back the energy of previous eras. Part-historical narrative, part-showgirl revue, the singing and dancing was technically excellent performed by an exceptionally talented cast. The choreography was amazing, working with very specific dancing styles, like jive, mambo, the cancan and making them both very authentic but also fresh. The show was a composition of quotations; it was a description of a past, as though it is saying, ‘entertainers were like this’ and showing us the quality of their entertainment.

The numbers went by so fast and in the dark I could not make notes so I am unclear of the chronological unfolding. A Ratpack number *Luck Be A Lady* featured a startling red-headed dancer in a green dress, she moved slowly with

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<sup>141</sup> David Saxe in an interview on KLAS, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnT0la-H43o>> and also KTNV, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6VmfHP2Nsg&feature=relmfu>> [accessed 16th August 2012].

controlled movements and amazing strength and flexibility as she held her leg in extreme extensions, at one point she was playfully dragged across the floor on her back. The cancan was performed with added visual humour. *The Beat Goes On*, a Sonny and Cher number brought back the sixties with A-line dresses and go-go moves. Ernie, our caretaker-host embodies both Sonny and Sammy Davis Jnr in *The Candy Man*, a kick-line number with girls all dressed in candy-wrapper leotards. Significantly the showgirls were never topless, signalling, perhaps, family entertainment.

The most moving aspect of the show was when Ernie addressed us directly and told us about the Mafia racism. He paid tribute to Sammy Davis Jr. who, with the support of his fellow performers, entered through the front door at a casino in which he was top-billing. Acknowledging the overt racism that the black performers had to perform with in this type of spectacle was really affecting, I was in tears at this candour, but also sensitivity to address the shameful past and not gloss over it. I was impressed that the show reflected on its history and did not just represent it. I looked up the performer who played Ernie, and found Eric Jordan Young's website. I was interested to read about another show he has performed in, a one man-show on Sammy Davis Jr., 'Eric unravels the complexities of being an entertainer caught between his racial identity and his drive to transcend race as a performer'.<sup>142</sup>

All the performers had amazing talent and performance personality, with a couple of dancers whose incredible charisma meant I could not take my eyes off them. During the finale the dancers names were called out, and the dancers who were particularly charismatic I noted down; Carolyn Pace, always easy to spot with her magnetic dancing and bobbed hair and Tara Palsha,

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<sup>142</sup> *Sammy and Me*, <<http://www.ericjordanyoung.com/sammy-and-me/>> [accessed 16<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

recognisable with her red hair, the Lady Luck.<sup>143</sup> As I left I felt a definite spring in my step. I was moved and uplifted and impressed by the careful and skilful crafting of the show.

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<sup>143</sup> Carolyn Pace responded to this chapter in a Facebook message to the author 28th September 2012): 'Allie, read bits n pieces of your work and I think it looks great!! Best of luck to you! Funny the timing of your message, I'm retiring from performing and have been reminiscing old photos, media and footage. Thanks for the mention! :) hope you're well!'.



## BERLIN: Fredrichstadt-Palast<sup>144</sup>

In the Paris and Las Vegas traditional showgirl spectacle, the sexuality is sublimated into the performance: the dancing and the spectacle, so the nudity is not acknowledged. To do so would be vulgar and the showgirl spectacle is about the production of elegance—so they dance as if there is no such thing as overt sexuality.

At the Fredrichstadt-Palast in Berlin, updated showgirl spectacle at its best, the sexuality was not sublimated, it was on the surface. This was a conscious decision made by the Dr. Berndt Schmidt, the artistic director since 2007. His job is to produce the extravagant large-scale shows at the large venue, his first was *Qi* in 2008 which featured two male dancers kissing followed by *Yma* in 2010, which I saw.<sup>145</sup> ‘Yma’, the star and compère, was a man in drag. In an interview, Schmidt describes his agenda and links this overt queering to tolerance:

A beautiful woman played by a beautiful woman? That is both normal and customary. That is *why Yma can* be the image of a beautiful woman—just that, too beautiful to be real. On the one hand, this toying with perception is an art, but on the other hand, it is also a philosophy of tolerance. Because if the one can also be viewed as the other in a different light, then you cannot get very far with preconceptions. What is important is that the performer who plays the role of Yma as a woman does so perfectly. In the ideal case, the viewer does not notice—or forgets or doesn’t believe—that Yma is a man. The aim here is not to present a garish travesty or crude jokes, but to create the perfect stage illusion.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> I visited the *Yma* at the Friedrichstadt-Palast, Berlin, Germany, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2011, €34, also viewed: ‘Showpräsentation Yma im Friedrichstadt-Palast’, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ixhPOiKn5E&feature=bf\\_next&list=PL8750FAB193606391](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ixhPOiKn5E&feature=bf_next&list=PL8750FAB193606391)>, ‘Yma Show Trailer German Deutsch - Berlins größte Show’, <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R98prt\\_eLw&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3R98prt_eLw&feature=related)>, ‘YMA – Friedrichstadt-Palast Berlin’, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzYadTN7syI&feature=related>> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

<sup>145</sup> Christopher Lawton, ‘Sexy Vegas-style show revives Berlin revue theatre’ Reuters, Thu Apr 1, 2010, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/04/01/us-berlin-revue-idUSTRE6302CV20100401>> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> December 2011].

<sup>146</sup> Interview with the director Dr. Berndt Schmidt, <<http://www.show-palace.eu/en/shows/yma/about-yma/>> [accessed 4<sup>th</sup> December 2011].

Schmidt, a Lady Gaga fan, wanted to create a show for an international audience: the show features recognisable English-language pop music and very little dialogue and therefore has been able to attract a larger number of visitors.<sup>147</sup> Looking around the audience at the start of the show, Schmidt's agenda is even more subversive: a mainstream crowd of Germans and tourists drably dressed.

The venue is large and formal. The show was staged in their large amphitheatre auditorium. As the audience took their seats, a very large head above the stage watched us, blinking, moving her eyes—a video projected onto a face shape. When the house lights went out, the audience were in total darkness: I could not make notes during the show, so recalled my thoughts in the bar afterwards. The show therefore, remains a blur of motifs in my mind, without a sense of the chronological unfolding. I do remember a great sense of performative personality and bright, smiling faces.

I recall that groin thrusting and open-legged sex moves were used in the choreography. I found this momentarily awkward to watch, as it is at odds with the theatre dance training I have received, however the choreography was a progressive fusion of jazz, ballet, tap and commercial dance and thus, the moves were used knowingly. I trusted their use. The choreography was intelligently composed, contemporary, fast-paced and witty. It reminded me a little of how I felt as I watched the dancing at the Lido, and looking in the programme I realised that some of the numbers were by staged by the same choreographer that worked on the Lido show, Craig Revel Horwood.

The costumes drew on a particularly contemporary visual vocabulary. German fashion designer Michael Michalsky designed the costumes and it is

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<sup>147</sup> Lawton, 'Sexy Vegas-style show'.

really clear that this injected new silhouettes and ways of moving and being clothed in the spectacle. I noticed that when the costumes involved a leotard, there were no-thong backs or g-strings and often included padding around the hips. Breaking with tradition, there were no feathers in the costumes. The wigs and hairpieces were like solid prosthetic parts, particularly some that extended in a tube from the head and down and out like a floating train.

The homoeroticism of the male dancers was overt, in one particular number featuring a lone topless female dancer and many male dancers wearing variations of leather shorts, single gauntlets, armlets, knee high boots and hangman's half face mask with mohawks attached. They moved in particularly athletic ways, commando crawling, rolling over each other and jumping. Full use was made of the male body throughout the show, including one number in which Yma sings *My Discarded Men* as we see male dancers strip off in real showers with water, as the showgirls came on with towels. I found this use of the body subversive and exciting. Both genders were used equally throughout the show, and thus there were not more female performers than male. Through email dialogue with the show's press officer I learned more about the composition of the company:

We have annual auditions for the dancers for the ballet company of the Friedrichstadt-Palast, the ballet company consists of 60 dancers (20 male, 40 female). The dancers need to have a classical training and be versatile in terms of mastering different dance styles. Every year we get many applications and about 120 dancers get invited to the auditions. The audition consists of several rounds, classical ballet, jazz, modern dance, tap dance etc. Out of those more than 100 dancers, a couple of dancers will be recruited, depending on how many dancers are needed that very year.<sup>148</sup>

However, for my own sense of pleasure, the showgirls were not used enough, because when I did see them lead a particular number, it was fantastic. Notably, an early number was to *Lady Marmalade* and the showgirls were

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<sup>148</sup> Ghazal Weber, email to the author, 9th August 2012.

draped over a barre in various poses wearing vamped up military / majorette style white leotards with jutting hips, gold buttons and epaulettes and white side cap. They clipped their fingers, stretched their legs out into six o'clock extensions and made slow, isolated movements in a Bob Fosse style. A Busby Berkeley-inspired high kick-routine that ended in water was mesmerising. In terms of technique, I saw some errors where the dancers were not always on the beat of the music at the exact same time.

In the finale, a jubilant, *This is my Life*, with the chorus, 'this is the dream of my life', the performers reprised earlier outfits and so the stage was full of various outfits from different numbers. A few of the dancers were without headgear or wigs and the dancer's own hairstyles were visible, which felt very unusual. It was easy to pick out my favourite dancer, with short hair, whose energy and punch within the dances moves was striking. At the end of the show, during the finale and bow, the names of the dancers were projected above them. The name of my favourite dancer still sticks in my head: Nina. The show was edgy, fast, exciting, bright, and contemporary with content that was both queered and sexual in ways that I had not seen work so effectively in updated showgirl spectacle, proving the model can be successful updated.

## LONDON Windmill International<sup>149</sup>

Tucked down a side street in London's West End is the historical Windmill International. Through my research I have encountered many stories of the theatre, its *Revuedeille* formula and proud claim 'We never closed!' during the Second World War. Indeed, the stories formed the basis of the film *Mrs Henderson Presents*.<sup>150</sup> Today, however, the Windmill International is 'one of the world's most exciting table dancing nightclubs'.<sup>151</sup> Let's call it a strip club.

As the doors open to The Windmill the atmosphere is electric, with over 100 international dancers performing very sexy erotic strip shows to arouse every mans [sic] senses. The Windmill girls are known as London's most stunning table dancers from across the globe. Brazilian, European, Asian... all nationalities waiting to tantalise your needs. The dancers strip down to their sexy lingerie and fully nude.<sup>152</sup>

It took me a while to be able to enter the Windmill International as I was advised that I needed to be accompanied by a man. This type of gender imperative both served as a clue to what type of experience I may have, and also represented a challenge: I wanted to find my place in a space that must see my presence as unsuitable.

After engaging my partner in chaperoning duty, we entered the former theatre, now with a lounge style layout, still with a stage area ahead of us. When inside, I felt embarrassed of my gaze. I felt conspicuous. The bar was so bright and open in front of the stage that it made me feel too visible, too seen. The other women in the venue were working and therefore underdressed. One other woman was part of a couple, brought by her male chaperone. A table of young women next to us confused me; they were

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<sup>149</sup> I visited the Windmill International 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, London, £15, waived.

<sup>150</sup> *Mrs Henderson Presents*, [film] dir. by Stephen Frears, Weinstein 2005.

<sup>151</sup> Windmill website, <[http://www.windmillinternational.com/?page\\_id=2](http://www.windmillinternational.com/?page_id=2)> [accessed 6th August 2012].

<sup>152</sup> Windmill website.

relaxing and drinking but knew the dancers, and they did not have male chaperones. I wondered if they were friends of the dancers, or off-duty dancers. In order to avoid catching eyes with either the men enjoying the company of the dancers at the tables and booths around the room or the dancers working, approaching the men, approaching us, that my eyes took in every inch of the venue, and also our small tray of complimentary vegetable crudities and dip. I felt so seen, and I did not like it.

The dancers circled the room, they all wore different short dresses and styled themselves very differently. One dancer came over to tell us the sliding fee scale for table dances that are performed upstairs in the balcony area. I could not quite believe what was on offer for the various amounts quoted to us (a sliding scale up to £300, for which, I believe she said, we could do *anything*).<sup>153</sup> We politely declined all offers. I felt unable to take up the offer of a lap-dance in this particular context, I could not get comfortable.

Periodically a dancer mounted the stage and performed. When this happened I fixed my eyes on her. The performances lacked energy, enthusiasm or engagement with the audience. Instead, nonchalant dance moves enacted without technique or interest in being looked at worked against the explicitness of the moves. Without performance personality, sexiness cannot be produced onstage, and as a viewer, I feel as though I am not performed to. Watching the indifferent dancing made me feel even more uncomfortable. We lasted one bottle of lager before we left.

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<sup>153</sup> An article in *The Guardian* newspaper elucidates the experience of the dancers and the boss at the Windmill. It also makes it very clear that sex is not offered at the Windmill. I therefore have to wonder what I heard, and what the dancer meant by 'anything'. Amelia Gentleman 'Too much to bare: behind the scenes at a lap-dancing club', [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/jul/20/lap-dancing-club-behind-scenes), Friday 20 July 2012, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/jul/20/lap-dancing-club-behind-scenes>> [accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2012]. Also Gemma Ahearne, @princessjack, a PhD student researching lap dancing in Liverpool responded in an email to the author 9th April 2013: 'I suppose I do find it problematic that in London: Windmill International you were offered sexual services. This is hugely irregular, and not what most dancers do. I cannot help but feel maybe she was saying this as a trick to get you to hand over lots of money, as the 'private room' is an urban myth, clubs know they will lose their licence if they engage in prostitution.'

## LONDON: Spearmint Rhino<sup>154</sup>

Following my experience at the Windmill International, I realised that I should visit a strip club for my research to find out if it is possible to relax or find my own place in such a space. I decided to visit Spearmint Rhino, because of their reputation for impressive pole-dancing. Spearmint Rhino are an international chain, that proudly claim: 'There is no competition for Spearmint Rhino Companies as the world's leader in upscale adult entertainment'.<sup>155</sup> Well, if you put it like that...

I visited Spearmint Rhino with another female researcher. We called them up beforehand to ask if we could enter without a man. We could, but we had to mention the conversation, take a name down, and mention it at the door. As we drew near to the door, a bouncer began to say 'sorry ladies', but we mentioned the name, gave our names, and were allowed in. As we paid, we were told you have to sit at a table, tables are free, but wait for the bar staff to come to you and take your order. We had to hang up our coats, as we did so, we could hear door staff downstairs speaking through ear pieces 'yes, I see them they are down here' before we were approached and taken to our table. Whilst this was happening, we felt that our presence was a threat, a non-fit.

We were seated very near to a raised stage area—a thrust stage / catwalk with a pole installed. The light was dimmed; the seats were velvet padded, golds, velvets, chandeliers, there was a softness to the décor, plush, not hard. House music pumped. We had been told we were not permitted to dance, or touch. Behind us was a podium with a dancer, across the room another podium and another dance area on top of the bar. Topless dancers gyrated slowly, coyly,

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<sup>154</sup> I visited the Spearmint Rhino, Tottenham Court Road, 13<sup>th</sup> April 2012, London, £15. I bought three lap dances, each £20, lasting a song each (around three minutes).

<sup>155</sup> Spearmint Rhino website, <<http://www.spearmintrhino.com>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

sometimes smiling, occasionally looking around, sometimes moving caught in an internalised state.

I watched the stage and the cheeky, confident energy of the dancer, in fishnets with a visible access hole, a trilby, and long black and blonde hair. Bad girl stripper chic. An underdressed waitress in a waistcoat, hotpants and fishnets took our order. She was friendly and helped us to accustom ourselves to our surroundings. We watched the next two dancers, both with thin long bodies. I was unclear what the limits of the acceptable body type in this context were. I looked up at the podium, and saw a dancer with a body closer to my own size 14 body and I smiled at her as I let my look linger. She held my gaze. At some point, I could not handle the looking any more, and so I looked away. I was in the position of a man, I *could* look, but I was not used to this kind of permission to look and so it takes some practice.

Men were secreted into banquettes, booths, around tables. The architectural details and high seats meant that scanning the room, I could not get a sense of the volume of men in the place. At the end of the night, when the club emptied out, I *sensed* that there were fewer men in the club, rather than visibly see their absence. The place had a calm to it, as though desires were sated. The needs of the men in the room were acknowledged and administered to, and so there was no desperate urgency I have felt in nightclubs. The formula is clearly thought through, with the needs of the customers in mind, as John Gray is quoted explaining, in an article in *The Observer*:

The Spearmint secret, apparently, is to give the punter a feeling they are unique. Whereas other clubs will offer table dancing, Spearmint has its own private booths. 'We believe a dance should be for the individual consumer. We don't want people to feel embarrassed. It's about getting value. It's a one-to-one experience. There's nothing seedy in it'.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Jamie Doward, 'Lord of the lap dance John Gray has already made millions out of three-minute sexual fantasies. And the golden goose that is Spearmint Rhino just goes on getting fatter', *The*



The dancers moved around the room, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs, holding hands. They sat and chatted to the men. We were not approached. A woman sat down next to us on the adjacent table. She shifted towards us to accommodate the large group of male friends she had come with. We chatted with her throughout the evening. She had been a stripper briefly: the proverbial college-student stripper. Contemporary intelligent pop songs played, like *Ill Manors* by Plan B, then a remix of *Hometown* by Adele. Our ex-stripper friend explained that the dancers pick their own songs, or at least, suggest what they would like. The dancers' names are announced and they entered the stage or there is a delay and an empty stage momentarily. There are different approaches to the stage, some walk on, grip the pole, and twirl around it leaning outwards, with gauche, internal, sexy expression, self-absorbed. A few dancers come onto the stage with a small towel and wipe down the pole—my friend explains the towel has alcohol on it, so as to remove the sweat off the pole and enable greater grip. A dancer doing this announces her impending attack of the pole. These are the exciting dancers. They run to the pole, jump, inch up it, invert their bodies, and push out into impossible positions, flexing their muscles. When a dancer dramatically drops from the top to the bottom of the pole—still perfectly in control—there are audible gasps across the room.

Watching the dancing onstage is the only part of the evening in which I am myself. I forced myself into the setup. I watch the dancing, the energetic, performative dancing engrossed, excited. This is a subversive pleasure. I am reading the setup against the grain, pushing my gaze into a situation not designed for me. My favourite dancer is called 'Aurora'. She dances

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*Observer*, Sunday 3 February 2002,

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2002/feb/03/theobserver.observerbusiness11>> [accessed 9<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

athletically on the stage and pole, she has dominion over her body, over her performance.<sup>157</sup> She owns the moment.

My researcher friend and I chatted to our new female friend and the dancers who tentatively approach us; they tell us, if a dancer wants to come to work, she must pay: £20 for a day shift, £85 for a night shift. Most of the girls are English. A couple of Italians chat to us. One is a chef by day. Then there is a Romanian. The women who sit with us speak freely, about their attitudes to the work, the conditions and dress codes: long dresses are encouraged but the dancers prefer short dresses. Some wear long dresses, but safety pin them up at the front to reveal their legs. One told me the rules we were given when we entered are not specific to us as women, everyone gets the same rules. Her nights come here, also lesbian couples. Apparently the club has a relaxed attitude and this is appealing for dancers. A self-selection happens—the dancers who are interested in chatting about their work, speaking with women, switching off from the hustle for a while, come and sit with us. I liked them. There may have been women who would not be interested in us, who are not open, warm, receptive to other women, but they do not approach us, so I cannot report on them.

I turned my attention back to the stage for a moment as a performer worked on a suspended hoop. She wore black heart-shaped pasties; normally a burlesque signifier.

A dancer came over to us and sat next to me. She said she had been watching us. Warmly she introduced herself, Leanne. She touched me lightly and told me to have a private dance with her. She was a little older than me. She had a

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<sup>157</sup> Gemma Ahearne responded: 'I like what you say about the dancer named Aurora, that she danced athletically and "owns her performance"'. I also should point out that here I use the word 'dominion', following a showgirl interview I draw on in Chapter Three, thus, its inclusion here serves as a foreshadowing or a spoiler.

warm and nurturing manner. She held my hand and took me to a sort of alcoved sofa, where private lap-dances were taking place. Before she began, she asked me if I had ever had a lap-dance before: I had not. She said, 'I'm sorry honey, I'm gonna have to ask you sit with your legs apart', as she moved my legs into place. I was in a black pencil dress with my legs apart, I felt so odd. She pressed her cheek to mine. I did not expect the skin contact, she was so soft, the light touch carries a frisson, and the touch leaves a tingle on my skin. I shut my eyes, feeling the sensations instead. I felt her breasts brush across my face. When she finished she asked me if I would like to her carry on. I would, but I say no. She took me back to my seat. My friend was not around. Leanne said she would come back to dance with her and she did. Leanne decided she would introduce us to lap-dancing that night, she made the decision. She scouted us out, she said she passed us a number of times—checking us out, feeling our vibe.

Later I was chatting to one of the men from the group next to us. Aurora approached us and sat down next to the man, to tempt him to have a dance. I said, 'if he doesn't want one, I'll have one'. She smiled at me, and said 'come on then'. She holds my hand and led me to a different alcove. She asked about me, why I am here, I tell her about my showgirl research, that I am more used to burlesque. I felt her touch, it was not as intense, and I kept my eyes open. I felt her long hair touch my skin. She smiled at me and met my eye. Hers was a visual lap-based performance. She told me she is 30-years old and said the older dancers are better as they know their bodies and are comfortable in them. Afterwards she tells me that her day job is as a ballet and contemporary dancer. I realised this is why she is such a charismatic performer.<sup>158</sup> She wants to teach dance on the Internet, to set up her own business.

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<sup>158</sup> Katherine Frank points out the power imbalances of talking to dancers in their environment, as well as the dancers impulse to keep talking and getting paid for it—the clubs being a context of

I sat alone at a table for a moment. A younger looking dancer sat with me and chatted. I talked about my research. She pressed me for a private dance with her. I look in my purse, two ten-pound notes were left, enough for another dance, but I did not want to spend the money. She remembered what I just told her about my research and she used it to convince me to dance with her. She is a mirror; she knew how to work me, to be what I want. I could not find a reason not to have a dance with her. When she danced it was a less intense experience. She kissed me on the cheek at the end; a goodbye. This was a strange moment, I was not in control, I got a dance, but I did not want to. Afterwards I realised I did not ask her her name. I know nothing about her. I did not really enjoy this interaction.

The rules of engagement across the entire evening were alien to me. My usual boundaries did not apply—I was a non-fit, this place was not designed to facilitate encounters for me, but that did provide a space for me to transgress. That was certainly exciting. I was uncertain as to whether I would encounter any women with self-possession, dominion over her body, her touch, her looks but I did. Throughout my research I have to negotiate my own boundaries and ambivalences. Watching women perform as objects is a strange terrain to navigate. Across the evening there were such a wide range of approaches to being a dancer, different approaches to style, dress, performance, interaction, flirtation, communication.

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hustling—and reporters and researchers lack of reflexivity in considering the politics of the space. *G-Strings and Sympathy*, p. 4.

# **Part Two:**

# **SHOWS**

## LOS ANGELES: *Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett*<sup>159</sup>

I had a look round for the shows taking place in Los Angeles whilst I was visiting. *Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett* sounded fun, re-creating 1930s Kabarett in Los Angeles sounded like something I would like:

Take the Kander & Ebb musical classic *Cabaret*, jettison the treacly and preachy Joe Masteroff book, and stage the results as a brisk and breezy, melodrama-free evening of simulated Weimar nightclub entertainment.<sup>160</sup>

Zombie Joe's Underground Theater in North Hollywood occupies an unassuming shopfront space. Entering through a modest anteroom reception area into a small black box theatre with basic seating, I wondered if I had come to some kind of high-school production. The set up did not *feel* professional.

But *Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett* ('Dirty German Cabaret') is one of my most fulfilling, pleasurable encounters. As the black box house lights went down and the spotlights went up, the audience were in total darkness and I could not make notes. I sat watching the singing and dancing enthralled. I the rest of the audience were non-descript casual LA-wear, locals, out for some live performance. I felt comfortable and integrated.

A revue-style show based around numbers from *Cabaret* with short, corny, comedy sketches with topical Hollywood gags between the songs. There were minimal sets and props; the focus was on the performers, experienced LA

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<sup>159</sup> I visited the *Zombie Joe's Underground Theater* 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2011, Los Angeles, \$15. Also viewed: LA Weekly Review, <<http://www.laweekly.com/2010-12-02/stage/theater-reviews-cinderella-schmutzigen-deutsche-kabarett/>>, 'Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett 2009', <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4TA\\_W8DgUo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4TA_W8DgUo)>, Jennie Webb, *Cabaret Review*, *Backstage*, <[http://www.backstage.com/bso/content\\_display/reviews/ny-theatre-reviews/e3i78f991b3cf206cbb9de0a9330b2ae513](http://www.backstage.com/bso/content_display/reviews/ny-theatre-reviews/e3i78f991b3cf206cbb9de0a9330b2ae513)> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

<sup>160</sup> Bill Raden, 'Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett', *LA Weekly*, Thursday, Dec 2 2010, <<http://www.laweekly.com/2010-12-02/calendar/schmutzigen-deutsche-kabarett/>> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

actors. A single male actor played the role of the emcee, the rest of the cast were women, in mismatched costumes composed of lingerie, fishnet stockings and buckle shoes and make-up with extended eyebrows, emphasised cupid's bow lips and pinched cheeks that gave a good impression of old photographs of 1920s chorus girls. The kick-line was physically mismatched with a range of heights, body types and even a large visible scar on one of the dancer's backs. The disregard for bodily perfection in Los Angeles with its extreme body ideals felt both transgressive and thrilling. Pairing this with historic quotations of the showgirl gave this avant-garde cabaret a thrilling edge.

The numbers were performed as an ensemble, with occasional solo spots for the big songs, *Cabaret* and *Mein Herr*. A small, blonde woman dressed up as Adolf Hitler and performed a burlesque striptease down to swastika pasties, to hilarious effect. A pleasure with this show was being able to recognise the references, the Bob Fosse accented choreography, noticing the simple, strong movements subtly infused with powerful sexuality just through the particular emphasis of the timing of the movement, the location of the weight in the body and also, recognising *Mack the Knife*, from *Threepenny Opera*. I noticed the woman with the curviest body, closest to my own physically—her confident, saucy performance personality was the most charismatic and when she was onstage I found it hard to take my eyes off her. The really well-executed dancing, perfect timing, fantastic choreography, sexy personas, the cheeking facial expression that sent up the lyrics or action, meant I just relaxed into some kind of altered state of pleasure as I watched. There is a complete, total pleasure to watching a line of dancers execute the same action in unison *perfectly* synchronised. As I watched I found myself deconstructing the steps, seeing how they are put together and imagining learning the choreography. I *really* wanted to learn the choreography, and I *really* wanted to be one of the dancers. The choreography looked so well thought out, not so difficult technically, but with exact timing, and alternately comic and strong sexy

phrasing. I know I could do this, although you can tell the dancers are well drilled. This is the troupe I want to join! After the show, I walked through the entrance and the performers mingled. I saw my favourite dancer, Ashley Fuller, who maintained a genuine, cheeky smile that gave the audience permission to fantasise, and I told her I loved her performance. She appreciated my praise.



## LONDON: *La Réve*<sup>161</sup>

Between Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square is the entrance to the Café de Paris. A gold entranceway with a velvet rope for the queue gives the impression of something VIP. The venue hosts a mix of nights from cabarets to clubbing to corporate events. I chose to visit their regular Friday night event, *La Réve*, ‘cabaret grand spectacular’.<sup>162</sup> *La Réve*’s shows are different every time, although there are regular performers who return. ‘Cabaret, Burlesque, Circus and Vaudeville’, the website tries to describe the kind of entertainment on offer, and covers all bases.<sup>163</sup> Continuing to browse at *La Réve*’s website, a history of the venue is sketched out, to add, perhaps, a hint of authenticity:

The Café de Paris, the main space of which was famously modeled on the ballroom of the Titanic, is one of the original homes of Vaudeville in the West End. Regular performers in the early years included luminaries such as Noel Coward, Marlene Dietrich and Louise Brooks, who made history when she introduced the Charleston to London at the venue in 1924.<sup>164</sup>

At Café de Paris you can have your dinner and watch the show or sit upstairs in the balcony bar and just watch. I chose the latter. As I waited for the show to start, I bought a cocktail in the balcony bar and watched the diners below, who were waited on by women in black bowties, waistcoats and skirts. Drinks, both upstairs and down were served by corseted waitresses, embodying a typical burlesque aesthetic. A female magician with bright red hair adorned with feathers, in a black and white stripy dress, mingled with diners, doing tricks at their tables.<sup>165</sup> The balcony runs in a circle allowing a

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<sup>161</sup> I saw *La Réve*, Café de Paris, London, 12<sup>th</sup> August 2011, £12.

<sup>162</sup> Text on a *La Réve* flyer, August 2011.

<sup>163</sup> *La Réve* website, <<http://lareve.co.uk>> [accessed February 2012].

<sup>164</sup> *La Réve* website [accessed 1<sup>st</sup> December 2011]. Having read all about the time that Louise Brooks introduced the Charleston to the UK, I was very excited to read this on *La Réve*’s website. Brooks being a particular heroine of mine: I take a photograph of her with me to the hairdressers to ensure the exact vintage haircut I am after.

<sup>165</sup> Later she was introduced to us as Laura London.

view to the floor below, over its gold art deco rail. The bottom of the balcony is fringed with gold and dappled gold columns prop up the balcony. Circular tables are dotted around in front of the small raised stage, and the layout is somewhat like a floorshow type arrangement. Behind the stage area hang swathes of blue curtains. To one side of the stage is a grand piano.

I took a look at the audience. They were dressed up, although without a unifying idea of what that means. I saw a lot of the summer's key look: long blonde hair, cream and pastel pleated chiffon baby-doll dresses, with ultra high heels. A pair of excitable girls having an infectious whale of a time near me were in black combat trousers and sparkly vest tops. Young men in suits and women in cocktail dresses sit round the dinner tables. It is a young professional crowd with money to spend, familiar with cabaret; although it has not affected how they dress.

Before and during the show the audience was engaged in different activities: eating, talking, and ordering drinks, moving around. There is no reverential audience silence and there remains a hum of chatter during the performances. Dusty Limits, the compère for the evening, dressed in three piece suit with spats, red tie and make-up, addressed the audience conspiratorially as though we were in a context of smoke-filled decadence, a room full of pan-sexual bohemians. I wonder if we, the audience, are performing a collective nostalgia by our presumed agreement with his anecdotes. He sings Cole Porter's *Let's Fall in Love*, but extends it adding additional lyrics. I note down, 'straights do it, strays do it', 'even Frodo and Sam did it', 'girls on the game do it', 'David Cameron on his own does it'. There was even a line referring to the recent London riots, which Dusty followed up in his banter afterwards. In a changing cabaret formula there is room to add topical satire.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Dusty Limit's responded in an email to the author 25th February 2013: 'All seems fine to me though the actual line you quoted is "I sneakily suspect Frodo and Sam did it". All the best with

The first act, Vicky Butterfly, performed to classical music, a Louie Fuller-inspired strip, in which swathes of wing-like material are twirled around to dramatic effect. This number drew on historical research and attention to detail in technique and costuming. I loved the performer's look; a black bob and two-inch heel buckle-shoes.<sup>167</sup> This was such an elegant start to the evening. I was completely enchanted, a moment of absolute pleasure in which my intellect was engaged.

Next was Richard McDougall, a smart, suited, not theatrical looking man in his forties entered the stage and sat down, rolled up his sleeves, got out cigarette—none left. He mimed rolling a cigarette, which transformed into a real one. The act moved between Mr Bean clumsy and mimed elegance and pivoted around wanting to smoke a cigarette.

The evening's entertainment seemed to fall into either intelligent elegance or addiction-fuelled stupor! The latter was perfectly demonstrated by Kalki

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it! What an adventure!'. I also read Dusty Limits's words in an interview reflecting on satire, the questions were put to him by a range of fellow performers:

Mat Fraser: "What role do we have as outsider performers in an oppressive world?"

Dusty Limits: To express what is often silenced, whether it be emotional, political, philosophical or something else. To create spaces where those who feel excluded can be welcomed and celebrated. In our small way, to speak the truth to power. That's really all we can do. Whenever people bang on about cabaret being innately political (which it mostly isn't) I am reminded of that Peter Cooke quote about 'those wonderful Berlin cabarets which did so much to stop the rise of Hitler'. Having said that, Cooke himself stuck the knife brilliantly into many pompous and hypocritical establishment figures, so perhaps he was underplaying it.

Amber Butchart: "How important is it for you that your work reflects and satirises current affairs?"

Dusty Limits: It's important, but it's not my primary aim. A lot of what I do is intended purely as entertainment. Having said that, British audiences love satire, so quite often I can do both at the same time. And having a satirical focus means I never run short of material, because human folly, especially in politics, is inexhaustible. The older I get, though, the more the follies seem to be feeble copies of previous follies, and the more I am inclined to look inwards', in 'Interview: The Award Winning Cabaret Star Dusty Limits Talks to Mat Fraser Trixie Malicious, Ophelia Bitz, Daniel Lismore, Amber Butchart, and Frank Sanazi', <<http://www.run-riot.com/articles/blogs/interview-award-winning-cabaret-star-dusty-limits-talks-mat-fraser-trixie-malicious-o>> [accessed 6<sup>th</sup> April 2013].

<sup>167</sup> Vicky Butterfly's responded in an email to the author 17<sup>th</sup> November 2012: 'It is great... a really interesting view on the whole subject. I'm afraid that I don't really have much to add to it: apart from to reinforce the point that our show had acts that were autonomous and were responsible for the creation of, as well as the performance in, the show.'

Hula, who staggered onto the stage, badly behaved drunk young woman, who happens to fall into hula hoops. She hulaed the hoops as she stripped down to shorts and crop top, loo roll stuck to her pants. Her tongue lolled out her mouth; she swigged a beer bottle. She had a Lily Savage swagger that worked in opposition to her performance of technically maintaining control of hoops. The act finished as she crawled offstage. I enjoyed this act and it made me think about young drunk women in the streets, the phenomenon particularly visible in large cities in the UK. Newspaper headlines are particularly keen to describe and judge the so-called binge-drinking bad behaviour. I cannot help but see this as a form of misogyny, disgusted with the visibility of female raucousness. Kalki's act seemed to suggest underneath the drunken swagger was self-possession, if not, exactly, control.

The elegance returned as Miss Miranda, with her dramatic femme fatale look took to the stage. She drank from a bottle, as music played that reminded me of David Lynch's films. She danced slowly almost as though she was hallucinating. She moved slowly as she stripped, then picked up large ostrich feather fans and fan-danced. I wrote down 'Miss Miranda is so confident. I'm excited and I feel alive'. Her expression looked as though she is experiencing an internal pleasure. Were we present in her pleasure?

Bourgeois & Maurice, a double act, were next. Georgeois Bourgeois, dressed in trainers, cropped harem pants, bolero jacket and cap, all silver-sequined, addressed the crowd with a confident, affected indifference, 'we don't like doing shows to ugly people, I don't mean that in a rude way, it's just we're going to do some songs for you and its difficult to concentrate on your lyrics when you're faced with a sea of munters'. He introduced his 'sister', Maurice Maurice, at the piano, wearing in short black, fishtailed long sleeved dress with aggressive protruding shoulder pads and a tall beehive wig. He continued, 'I used to be the CEO of HSBC, I know, it's one of those embarrassing jobs

you have to put on your CV, you know what I mean, and you look back and go oh why did I do that?’ and then seamlessly segues into the song, *I Can’t Live in London*. I have their two albums, and I knew the lyrics to the song, but they were updated to make them fit into the financial crisis context. I was really excited by this and I write: ‘I feel so happy. I am here now’. Their next song is new, ‘ooh tax me baby, take away my job and tax me baby’, a song to George Osbourne. Their final song is *Ritalin*, which Georgeos introduces as a song they developed on a schools tour in Tottenham, referring to the riots. He sang ‘do you like that little bit of Ritalin we gave you? Nice children, don’t talk back, nice children, take Prozac. We like happy faces, behind, those braces’. Bourgeois & Maurice constantly alluded to their histories, which shifted and are expanded upon. Their back-story of ‘experiences’ is part of the performance and satirically positioned their songs. They maintain their characters and confidence throughout their performances and this also carries over onto their Twitter presence.

Sitting at a table, Up & Over It, the next performing duo, poured out copious amounts of white powder, as though it were cocaine. They were both in bad wigs, the female performer wore a black bra and tights, and the male performer was just in boxer shorts. They proceed to Irish dance using their hands, scattering the powder in puffs. Their movements were fast and synchronised. They added in some footwork as they were seated, before they got up and Irish danced. Their technique was incredible, as though they were strayed Riverdancers. Their costumes and the set-up all implied bad behaviour. The friction between how they are styled and their technique was hilarious.

Brett Pfister, was the final act, and to a slow cover of Britney Spear’s *Toxic*, he performed on an aerial hoop. Casually styled in a jeans, black shirt and vest, he balanced and moved with amazing fluidity, flexibility and strength. He

removed his shirt and then upside down, his vest. He is in that moment, topless, in motion, demonstrating an incredible physicality. He performed the role of the object. It was amazing.

This was avant-garde cabaret, incorporating new burlesque acts. Although as I looked around the audience waiting for it to start, I wondered if it was mainstreamed burlesque. But no, it was something quite fluid, intelligent, thought provoking. I enjoyed the show; I found it invigorating and lively. I left feeling energised.

At the end of the evening, a group of three women, roughly my age, approached me and asked why I was writing in my notebook. I was visible to them. I guessed that as *La Rêve* is part of a scene, in which people feel a sense of either dipping into the scene, or belonging to and ownership of the scene, the audience is on display, and I was visible; I did not fit into the background—my presence was in the foreground and I was behaving unusually. As these women identified with me—we were similarly dressed-up (I was in a low-backed black satin shift dress and black two inch buckle shoes), they felt able to talk to me. I felt able to tell them about my research and they recommended where else I should go to see burlesque London.

## LONDON: Bourgeois & Maurice Band<sup>168</sup>

Seeing Bourgeois & Maurice at *La Réve* was not enough, I needed to see more of them.

Darker and slicker than a BP oil spill, London's award winning cabaret stars Bourgeois & Maurice are a musical cabaret duo with style as sharp as their wit. Part cabaret, part theatre, part catwalk freakshow they merge biting witty original songs with stunning films and a truly astonishing collection of outfits. Their music blends unashamedly catchy pop hooks with biting satirical lyrics, taking on a vast range of important human issues, from reptilian conspiracy theories to the eroticization of the finance sector.<sup>169</sup>

They are avant-garde cabaret at its very best: camp aesthetics, queered femininity, confident performativity, witty satire, I love them. So I see them at their Christmas show, in the basement space at the Soho Theatre. I was one of the last people to arrive and it was free seating, so I sat on a bar stool towards the back of theatre space. To one side was a bar, to the front of the stage were tables, then rows of chairs until the bar stool back row then a few high tables with bar stools beyond our row. It was a basic informal black box theatre and bar space.

Bourgeois & Maurice entered and introduced their band, a new addition to their double act, with a song *We Started a Band*. Georgeois wore a black sequinned dinner jacket, with a white shirt and oversized red pussycat bow. His hair a severe cropped bowl cut. Maurice was in a cream sparkly dress with large collar, looking demure vintage femme fatale, slightly offset with her signature beehive and red bow. Both have outlandish showgirl make-up, Georgeois with false eyelashes top and bottom. In their performances they

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<sup>168</sup> I saw Bourgeois & Maurice: *FA LA LA LA LA* at Soho Theatre, 6<sup>th</sup> January 2012, £12.50.

<sup>169</sup> Bourgeois and Maurice's website, <<http://www.bourgeoisandmaurice.co.uk>> [accessed 7<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

weave their personas, stories and stage banter into their songs. Their stage presence is therefore outrageous, over the top, and seamless.

I have become accustomed to their satiric bite, I feel as though there is not enough satire in my life when I am not listening to them. They sang a new song to a calypso tune, satirising the contemporary American politicians' denial of global warming. In their introductory repartee Georgeois referred to Sarah Palin's denigration of change, in response to Obama's election campaigning rhetoric of change. *Apocalypso* plays with the idea of the pleasures of change.

I sing along to a song from their album, *CHAOS* and *Tax Me*, with its easy to remember lines. Their next song is new, *We Want Love*, about the difficulties of loving someone else, when your self-loathing will always thwart a relationship. Georgeois shouts to the bar for a drink to be lined up, the spot light remains on the bar during the song. Their lyrics are so refreshingly real and un-sugar-coated, that it makes me wonder how I can stomach the candyfloss of pop music. Whilst I laughed out loud at their songs, something emotional lingers.

There's an interval and a costume change. Georgeois returned in a turtle-necked catsuit in an iridescent green, very lizard-like, for their song Lizard Men. Maurice was in a peach heavily fringed dress with shoulder pad protrusions that led to sharp extended points. They sang a biting new song *Privacy's for Paedos*, inviting us all to join in the chorus.<sup>170</sup> The jubilant song referred to the statement Paul McMullan, former *News of the World* reporter, had made to the Leveson inquiry, in which he defended the role of phone-hacking on the grounds that privacy is the space for bad people to do bad

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<sup>170</sup> 'Because privacy's for paedos | Secrecy's for sluts | I'm knocking at your window | Let me inside | Oh what have you got to hide?' *Privacy's for Paedos* chorus, thanks to Bourgeois & Maurice for providing lyrics.



things. *Tolerance*, was sung by Maurice and accompanied by Georgeois dancing a hilarious fast mime to the words. He said before they begin: 'it's amazing, you know, I'm not a trained dancer'. The new songs in particular seem to focus on the absurd and reprehensible in our culture. I feel better for laughing at them.

They returned for an encore. Georgeois changed into a bright neon pink with black spots gimp suit and jumped onto a bar table in the audience to represent a hyperactive child as they sang *Ritalin*. Their final song was *Forget You*. The words refer to the end of a song playing, but the emotional expression and performance are so heartfelt, it is impossible not to think about other endings: relationships, even life, 'and I wish that I could forget you, but you keep playing in my head'.

I love what they do. I wanted to think about satire. In these politically depressing times, does satire achieve anything beyond making us feel better, and should it? Although I cannot address these questions, watching Bourgeois & Maurice is such a complete pleasure: a visual treat, in over the top costumes, their singing is excellent, at times deadpan, at other times full of pathos, their performances are joyous, carefree but politically aware. They are a visual and intellectual treat. I laughed, I sang, I was moved. Nothing else existed as I watched.

As I left I finally got a chance to look at the audience. A mix of concept fashion outfits and unpretentious jeans and jumpers. I misjudged the gender of a dapper young man with an asymmetric bob haircut near me, I mistook him for an impeccable butch. This slip excited me.

I walk away with the kind of lingering glow and skip in my step you get from a good night out. Yes! I think, I need two sets of false eyelashes (for top and bottom) and satiric bite.

## LONDON: *La Belle & Bête Noire*<sup>171</sup>

I love Soho's Madame JoJo's, I remember walking past in the nineties, seeing posters of transvestite shows and gay discos. When I finally crossed the threshold and entered the small and intimate venue in red and gold Art Deco, I realised this is some kind of spiritual home for me. Just the building alone makes me feel this place is friendly, select, authentic, camp. I belong.

The venue hosts a number of different burlesque and cabaret nights, but I chose to visit the Thursday night *Bête Noire*. The evening was composed of two shows and the formula enabled different levels of access. 'Belle Noir' was the earlier show; '*Bête Noire*'s classic recipe of variety entertainment featuring sublime comedy, beautiful burlesque, breathtaking circus skills, mystifying magic and a healthy dose of the unexpected' and the later show, 'La Bête', was 'a dark and sensual journey into the twisted side of cabaret. Lascivious burlesque and striptease meet no-holds-barred comedy, uncensored performance art and all things subterranean and sexy'. Thus, the audience can opt for either show or stay for the duration for a full evening's entertainment at a reduced rate.

Waiting for the show to start I took a good look at the crowd, who were dressed in office-wear, burlesque dressed-up or student fashion wear. There were many groups of young women dressed in quirky, retro-infused style. A few straight couples were sitting around the perimeter. I sat on the aisle, third row back. Two men in suits sat in front of me, they took off their suit jackets, one of them had specs on string. They switch to the front row as the show starts. A young, hip, lesbian couple sat next to a straight, 50s couple on the front row. Does avant-garde cabaret appeal to everyone, I wondered?

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<sup>171</sup> I saw *Belle & Bête Noire* at Madame JoJo's, London, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012 £15.

Mr Meredith, our compère for the evening, enters in a puff of dry ice. He sings Oompa-pa, with lyrics describing cocaine snorting. His banter is about London life, ‘parking isn’t the problem, it’s pedestrians, clamp ‘em!’. He shamefacedly tells us he has just auditioned for *Britain’s Got Talent*, and successfully got through to the next round. ‘Cabaret is my wife’, he says but *Britain’s Got Talent* is ‘my dirty whore who’s just fucked me sideways’. He sings us his audition song *The Perfect X-factor Song*. It is a very funny, accurate parody, ‘this is the chorus, it repeats to reassure us’.

In another puff of dry ice and tinkly carnivalesque fairground music, Lydia Darling, enters. Dressed in black corset and bustle dress and Freddie Kruger gloves with fireballs on the talon like finger extensions, she eats their flames. She concentrates on her fire performance, but looks up with a cheeky smile and invites our cheers.

The duo Frisky & Mannish introduce their act by saying, ‘we are pop educators’, and do impersonations of Florence, from Florence and the Machine, and Peter Andre. They parody pop songs by taking them seriously as a form, to comic effect. They end with a hilarious over the top sexed-up performance of the children’s song *The Wheels on The Bus*.

‘Belle Noir’ ends with another turn from Lydia Darling. Her strap line is ‘One Woman Freak Show’ on the promotional material, which she lives up to by inserting a fondue skewer up her nose. The front-row suits got up and left. As they walk away, Lydia smiles and sticks two fingers up behind their backs, which they do not see. The moment is hysterical, in which the remaining audience feel one of a number of moments in which we are brought together as a unified presence. We, the audience members who do not leave, are on Lydia’s side. Lydia’s look is vampish pin-up blonde and the neo-burlesque

disgusting aspects of her act are totally incongruous to her look, which is part of the pleasure.

The audience changes a little during the gap between shows. The office-wear leave and more fishnets enter. A woman in a leopard print coat sat in front of me. I talked to Jade, the woman sitting next to me. She told me she wears corsets everyday, under her clothes, with heels and stockings, because she finds it fun.

The 'La Bête' part of the evening is ignited by British Heart, a boylesque act, who performs twice. First he enters dressed as a dirty mouse prostitute and strips down to naked except for a sort of tassel-like covering and jumps down from the stage out into the audience with a soap and bucket and invites audience members to scrub him down. Jade and I were his first targets. In this context, this interaction was totally fine. I did it! I sponged his proffered leg! British Heart completely controls and owns the moment to such an extent, he projects a lack of shame into the room. I laughed, hard! I was part of the audience. I was totally in thrall to his performance. What I found interesting was it drew so heavily on ideas around shame and the abject. He entered the stage with fake toilet debris; toilet roll, used tampons. He embodied and framed his performance with disgust and rejected material, but he worked with this narrative, owned it, made it funny, made it safe for us, the audience. I found his performance really joyful and celebratory. This is what avant-garde cabaret can do.

There was a break in the middle of each section of the evening, and after the break Mr Meredith returned to the stage, singing. After the 'La Bête' break, his music was not queued up correctly and he gave up singing in favour of jumping down from the stage and mingling in the audience. He immediately came to me, intrigued by my constant note-taking, 'what are you doing in your

reading book?'. He took the book out of my hands and read aloud the notes I had just made at the top of the page describing British Heart's act. He tells the audience 'tampons and condoms, mouse prostitute ends act pulling 'used' tampon out of his arse'. To my great surprise, I was not embarrassed. The rest of the audience just saw the end of the act, and what I had written was just a description. I had been outed for nothing more than taking notes. In fact, again, I had the sense of being visible for slightly unusual behaviour. Mr Meredith looked around and said 'that's what'll be in the papers tomorrow morning!' I felt a little guilty for appearing as though I am a journalist. Unfortunately, this text will not appear anywhere that fast.

## LONDON: Volupté<sup>172</sup>

The London cabaret and burlesque scene extends far beyond what I have managed to investigate here, ranging from innovative, bizarre nights to high-class dinner and show supper clubs. I knew I should see the latter and kept my eye out for interesting shows happening at the main supper club venues. Reading the show listings at Volupté I was excited to see a regular event called the Moulin Rouge, and I thought this would be the perfect opportunity to see the Moulin Rouge quoted in a burlesque show and compare the references to the original.

### Burlesque at The Moulin Rouge

Enjoy an all star cast of Showgirls and show offs for a night at The Moulin Rouge. Hosted by The Flame haired Queen of Cabaret, Ivy Paige and starring Burlesque Bombshell Bouncy Hunter, Showgirl dancers, The Paige Girls and a special Burlesque guest, this night is a sensational high leg kicking evening of dazzling dance numbers and sizzling songs! Featuring all your favourite songs from the film Moulin Rouge this show is perfect for a Saturday night out! Expect Feathers, fans, diamonds, sequins and showgirls!

These girls certainly Can Can!

Dress Code: Moulin Rouge!<sup>173</sup>

I was also particularly excited to see Ivy Paige was involved, as I have seen her compère before and her singing and banter are hilarious and she has an intimate, irreverent stage presence that I really love. It was difficult to get a ticket, but they had space for me at their later show. I had to time my day so I could wait until 10 p.m. for dinner.

When I arrived there was a rush on and I had to wait quite a while before I could be led to my table downstairs. I was instructed to wait in their upstairs cocktail bar until escorted down. Because of the cost of the meal, I did not

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<sup>172</sup> I saw *Moulin Rouge*, Volupté, City of London, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2012, £58.

<sup>173</sup> Volupté website, <<http://www.volupte-lounge.com/events/2012/1>> [accessed 7th August 2012].

buy a drink so I waited awkwardly in the bar, listening to snippets of conversation around me. A large group of women were led out of our waiting-room bar downstairs, walking past me and I overheard their analysis of a previous burlesque show they had seen. I wrote down what one of the said, 'she was lovely, so pretty'. This small comment put me in the wrong frame of mind. I do not approach viewing showgirls as a matter of looking for pretty or lovely ones—I take it more seriously, more holistically. A whimsical comment and already I felt disengaged from the rest of the audience corpus.

The dining and cabaret takes place downstairs in a long room, with neat rows of tables and an area cleared at the front for performing. I was seated at a table for two at the edge of the room. My table forms a row of tables for two, all occupied by couples. I am glad I am at the edge, just beyond where the action takes place. I did not want the performers to interact with me, as that would make my 'single' presence at a table for two visible.

Scanning the room I felt as though I had no affinity with the other people here. I started to speculate why that might be. The venue's location, in the City of London, might mean these are city workers. The cost of the evening also creates a natural selection: no students or lower (artist) incomes here. None of the outfits I see look vintage. A group of six young women at the table in front of me look like they are post-university, in their first job and dressed in Topshop. Behind me is a large group of women all with miniature top hats, the same shape in different colours attached to their heads. These register as signs that they are not part of a scene, rather, they are dipping their toes into the scene, just for an entertaining night out.

An unseen voice told us 'No flash photography, but the flashing of breasts is practically encouraged'. This phrase lingers with me. It makes me feel



uncomfortable. This is a false statement: if an audience member where to revel their breasts, this would be outside of the frame of the performance. It is within the performance construct that public nudity is permitted. This evening is not about *audience* nudity. If it were, what that be? A swingers' night? An orgy? This rhetorical disregard of the strict rules that make this type of performance safe and comfortable for the audience and performers put me in a negative frame of mind before any performers entered the stage area.

The voice announced the Paige Girls, three young women run out in sparkly dresses and dance to *Voulez Vous Coucher Avec Moi*. The choreography and dancing style draws on the Moulin Rouge style, but also the film directed by Baz Lurhman of the same name. I could see a slight tension in the dancers, which is typical when you are focussing on getting your steps right, but it does get in the way of projecting performance personality. The dancers seemed quite young, a little unsure of themselves. Their steps were technically competent, but their personas did not reach out to the audience, they were held back. This Moulin Rouge show occurs monthly, so this would account for hesitancy in remembering the steps.

The compère for the evening is Christian Lee—no mention of Ivy Paige. He interacted with the large groups of women. It turns out the large group with the matching hats were on a hen night. The group in front of me were celebrating a twenty-third birthday. On the other side of the room was another group of women celebrating a thirtieth birthday.

The Paige Girls all danced numbers together and had a couple of solos each. Tiny Teaser, the smallest and cheekiest, performed a fan dance *en pointe*. Jolie Papillon danced a cancan. Bouncy Hunter danced to *Whatever Lola Wants*. I wondered if the troupe had been put together with professional dancers who

do not perform burlesque independently. I looked them up afterwards and I was wrong: they are all burlesque performers, singers and dancers in their own right.<sup>174</sup>

So what was it? They all wore great outfits, had great bodies, their dancing was pleasant: well-executed jazz and theatre dancing with some striptease. But it lacked individual performative personality or interpretation, be that Fosse-sexy, bawdy, raucous or demure. They looked quite young, and this can be the difference too. None of them commanded the room. The evening provided tame entertainment and I did not feel any frisson of excitement. Nor did I feel connected to the audience. Rich food was part of the evening, which just made my role as a researcher more difficult: finding space for my notebook next to my plate, making notes on the action unfolding and trying to eat. Volupté puts on many different one-off shows and regular nights, so this night will not represent the entirety of what the venue does. But the show I saw was definitely mainstreamed burlesque.

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<sup>174</sup> Bouncy Hunter, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7v0NIUboNCk>>, Jolie Papillon, <<http://www.joliepapillon.co.uk/>>, and Tiny Teaser 'Professional Musical Theatre Performer. Burlesque Artist, Dancer and Singer. Also a Paige Girl', <[http://twitter.com/tiny\\_teaser](http://twitter.com/tiny_teaser)> [accessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

## SHEFFIELD: *The Velvet Burlesque present*

### *Cupid Stunts*<sup>175</sup>

It was a cold night and, standing outside the Library Theatre entrance, were a number of performers kitted out in their corsets and feather finery. I recognised these showgirls from the burlesque class I occasionally manage to attend, as they are my fellow classmates. They were welcoming the audience, ensuring they found the unassuming entrance underneath Sheffield's central library. The Velvet Burlesque show formula is unusual: a mix of professional performers who have travelled nationwide to perform, and a troupe composed of dancers from the class I occasionally go to, who auditioned for a spot in show. Shows tour South Yorkshire, its quaint venues, often the Penistone Paramount in Barnsley, with its elderly local audience that attends everything on a Saturday night. The front row with their purple rinses are both incongruous and fit in quite nicely.<sup>176</sup> Velvet Burlesque is about evangelising—taking new burlesque to the regions, showing them avant-garde cabaret acts and giving women who have never had the opportunity to perform before a place in the spotlight.

As I walked down the stairs of the Library Theatre, I observed the other audience members enter. A diverse crowd, people arrived in a variety of smart outfits; from reluctant boyfriends in check shirts, to dinner jackets and bowties, fishnets, large knickers and corsets, high stilettos and mini top hats. An unpretentious mix of ages and states of undress. Built in 1934 the theatre itself is tiny but perfectly formed: 'In the heart of Sheffield theatreland, the

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<sup>175</sup> I saw *Velvet Burlesque presents Cupid Stunts* at The Library Theatre, Sheffield, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2012, £17.50.

<sup>176</sup> In an email to the author 18<sup>th</sup> December 2012 Lara Gothique / Hell's Belle points out that 'Re. the "purple rinses"—they aren't actually a Penistone crowd, but a coach load of residents from an Old People's home in Chapeltown who come to most of my shows. They prefer to sit as close to the front as possible as their sight and/or hearing isn't too good, but a closer seat to the stage helps this'.

Library Theatre is an intimate, traditional 260 seat art deco venue with a licensed coffee bar'.<sup>177</sup>

Mr Meredith was (again) the compère. He entered in his gold and blue tailcoat. The first number was a Velvet Burlesque troupe one: *Lipstick, Powder and Paint*, and I know the steps; kick, kick, step-ball change. The stage is full and the women represent a wide variety of ages, body types and styling. They do themselves proud with their footwork, but where are their smiles—perform, ladies! Their timing was not uniform either, but this is not about precision, it is about a dozen ladies getting on a stage, who would not have the opportunity to do so, otherwise. The number was a fun, fast, humorous dance without any striptease element. The audience cheered and shouted loudly, obviously recognising the ladies performing, many of the audience having come to support their loved ones onstage.<sup>178</sup>

Next is Pinky Deville, also from class, now a solo-performer in her own right. Her act is flamingo-inspired with pink fans and feathery paraphernalia, to Aerosmith's *Pink* song. Her onstage persona is a work in progress, still developing. She is more confident tonight than I have seen her before, but she does not dominate the stage, as much as the song calls for a rockier confidence.

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<sup>177</sup> Library Theatre webpage on Sheffield City Council website, <<https://www.sheffield.gov.uk/libraries/librarytheatre.html>> [accessed 10<sup>th</sup> August 2012].

<sup>178</sup> Lara Gothique / Hell's Belle responded: 'I do agree with you regarding what you noticed with regards the V.B. troupe's performance, however I had asked them (troupe) to sing the lyrics to the song rather than smile all the way through that number (as some dancers always seemed to lose their smiles part way through the dance), however I do still have video proof that there were a good deal of smiles during that number. It's one of my main niggles, as well you know—I'm always at them for the PERFORMANCE side of things as well as the technique—some have it, but it's like getting blood from a stone from others ... shame, as some of my better dancers technique-wise are the one's I have most problems with regarding getting "show face" etc. from. Anyone can "get" the dance, but very few can "get" the performance. The troupe you saw at Valentine's was my class troupe rather than my Pro-troupe, who I use for "tighter" shows or other bookings—still, it's good to be able to teach people to do something they'd never dreamed of being able to do, and it's my bread and butter at the end of the day, so sometimes I need to include the class troupe to keep things a bit more balanced with regards that part of what/who The Velvet Burlesque is. I'd like to show them (troupe, etc.) the critique too, if you don't mind?'

Pixie Le Knot was next, a contortionist act that starts with a sweet tap-dance to *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*. She then got onto a table and continued to tap as she does extreme backbends. Her flexibility was impressive and her cheeky tapping persona is charming, the two together are adorable, she made me happy. Doloris Day, who was next, sang sweetly. The audience were rowdy and heckled Mr Meredith as he returned to the stage. They shouted out words of encouragement and appreciation to the acts and they prompted Mr Meredith to reposition his scanty wayward outfits, as they slipped down. They got up for toilet trips while numbers are taking place.

The Velvet Burlesque troupe returned for their Lady Marmalade number. Hell's Belle aka Lara Gothique, the impresario and director of the Velvet Burlesque cabaret, troupe and dancing class teacher, performs her routine *Hanky Panky*, wafting peacock feather fans to Madonna's song. She is so an *absolute* joy to watch, I can feel the audience enthralled by her. Her onstage persona is so large, vibrant and, confident. She may share the stage with her troupe, but her performances prove there ain't nothing like a pro.<sup>179</sup>

Next there was an interval and the little bar in the foyer was overwhelmed. Lara poked her head out of the curtain and announced the break would be extended so that everyone could get a drink. Someone shouts out 'We love you Lara!', someone else asks her to come out and flash us. Watching this informal announcement, I thought about how over the evening, the back and forth of voices to and from the stage manifested in unconventional ways across the evening. It gave the night a discursive, conversational feel. The audience spoke and were listened to. Lara considered the needs of the audience and spoke to us. This moment recalls Judy's outburst onstage in

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<sup>179</sup> Lara Gothique / Hell's Belle responded: 'Thank you so much for the compliments regarding my own performance—I'm very flattered!'

*Dance, Girl, Dance.*<sup>180</sup> However, Lara does not rebuke us—we are all on the same team.

Frankie Lynn danced a tango, ripping sections of her long dress off to make a short dress, then top, then bra. As she removed her bra a confetti of rose petals fling out as she spins. She danced wonderfully, using her whole body, flexibly using her back. The choreography really extended the movements beyond a straight tango into something modern-jazz infused. She had an assertive, diva-persona onstage. Frankie's performance really excited me. Watching Lara and Frankie was blissfully pleasurable. Both of them owned the stage and the moment.

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<sup>180</sup> *Dance, Girl, Dance*, dir. by Arzner.

## LONDON: Cellar Door<sup>181</sup>

The epigraph at the start of the chapter, details a moment of perfect pleasure that I experienced as I watch Beatrix Von Bourbon at the Cellar Door. I visited the converted men's toilets, 'an intimate bar beneath the Aldwych in a space just big enough for cats [...] to swing—imagine 30s Berlin meets New York basement dive' and put cocktails I could not afford on my credit card.<sup>182</sup>

The walls of the bar are mirrored and toilets are particularly interesting, the glass doors are clear glass until they are locked when they become opaque. The décor is contemporary, with references to burlesque, such as corseted stools. The bar features a couple of different acts each night, usually avant-garde cabaret performers and burlesque showgirls.

The place attracts hip crowds of different age ranges. Whilst I was there, a middle-aged man chatted to me, asking what I do. I told him. He began to *tell* me what he thought about burlesque, informing me how little effect it could have. I began to speculate on a politics of burlesque, perhaps, femininity and the potential for collectivising around specific issues, citing the Slut Walks as an example. He responded by telling me that as he could not see what all the fuss was about with the Slut Walks. As he saw it, it was a good idea to avoid dressing like a slut and going to bad areas, in reference to the initial comments by the police representative, who addressing a group of students in Toronto, which had sparked the initial protests. Hearing his prejudiced, short-sighted views, in which his sense of entitlement had blinded him of other peoples' experiences, caused an internal incandescent rage. I did not want to have tell him how totally ignorant, misogynistic he was and his

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<sup>181</sup> I visited the *Cellar Door*, 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011, London, free entry.

<sup>182</sup> Cellar Door website, <<http://www.cellardoor.biz/cellardoor.htm>> [accessed 13th August 2012].

sense of entitlement to tell *me* about my research and experience as a woman in that specific context, so instead I died a little inside.

I was gradually able to disassociate from him as the performers did their turns. Hannah Friedrick sang jazz interpretations of pop songs including *Material Girl*, *Wild Thing* and songs from *Jungle Book*, to hilarious effect. I was singing along and I was able to relax and make a few notes in my notebook. I drank another cocktail and started to chat to Beatrix Von Bourbon, the burlesque dancer, before she performed. We had tweeted each other earlier in the day. Then, as Beatrix started her second and final strip of the evening, I stopped writing and I closed my notebook, so that I could be present in the moment.

The strip really was a perfect moment and Beatrix owned the room. She performed for us, the audience, as an act of generosity. She was experienced and educated enough to be aware of what she was doing.<sup>183</sup> It did not feel sleazy or uncomfortable despite the number's conclusion in which the performer's nudity was in close proximity to the audience. She was prepared to be our object of desire for a moment, because she chose to be. And as I watched, still, not far from the middle-aged man, I thought, yeah fuck you, you have no idea what this means, what pleasure the performer is generating. You have no idea what this means!

Amongst the pleasure-experiences I have described, this was a very simple encounter: a tiny bar and a dancer with a fabulous heavily tattooed body in a great outfit. During the short act, my attention was focussed and nothing else existed. The formula was minimal, but completely accessible to me. I just felt

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<sup>183</sup> On her Twitter account she describes herself: 'Day job: burlesque/striptease dancer. MA (Cultural Studies). Writer (<http://bit.ly/iBK2Yf>). Shoe designer @shakeitdoll. Tattooed 'n stuff. <http://www.vonbourbon.com>'. [accessed 26<sup>th</sup> August 2011]. I've communicated with her through Twitter and we chatted at the Cellar Door.



happiness. I felt happy a woman could produce the moment. I felt sisterhood for the performer.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Beatrix's response: 'Your kind words have brought a slight tear to my eye. I've been in crisis mode with regard to performance for the past 6 months or so and have been dancing on the border of giving it all up. But, long story short, I realise that, instead, I just need to rebrand and truly get away from all the elements that are boring me (nostalgia for the sake of it, narrative as a 'justification' for striptease etc). Reading your experience of my act has made me feel like my intentions with performing have not been lost. It's been very easy recently to feel as though my acts are shallow and disposable—I've been feeling very much like a 'service provider' recently.

Anyway, I've got my mojo back and I'm about to start work on an act that's centred around ritualistic foreplay. It's a movement away from 'burlesque' and more toward performance act, I guess. It still involves stripping, but is not really a striptease. We'll see if anything comes of the brainstorming I've been doing. I've resolved to finish some old projects before I start on new ones, so it'll be a while before I really get going with this new act.

Note: Cafe De Paris - the architecture is modelled on the ballroom of The Titanic... so I hear.'

# CHAPTER THREE

## DOING SHOWGIRL: HOW DO I LOOK?



Traditionally, emancipatory practice has been tied to a desire to become a subject. Emancipation was conceived as becoming a subject of history, of representation, or of politics. To become a subject carried with it the promise of autonomy, sovereignty, agency. To be a subject was good; to be an object was bad. But, as we all know, being a subject can be tricky. The subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations. Nevertheless, generations of feminists—including myself—have strived to get rid of patriarchal objectification in order to become subjects. The feminist movement, until quite recently (and for a number of reasons), worked towards claiming autonomy and full subjecthood.

But as the struggle to become a subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged. How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why not be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things? A desire to become this thing—in this case an image—is the upshot of the struggle over representation. Senses and things, abstraction and excitement, speculation and power, desire and matter actually converge within images.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>185</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'A Thing Like Me and You', in *e-flux Journal: The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012 p. 50.

The showgirl is a sign. She is an archetype, a symbol, an image, an object, a subject. But she is also embodied and moving, and thus none of these terms fully contains her. She moves unashamed, she shows us her pleasure in her body, she invites us to project our fantasises onto her.

Showgirls circulate in our Western, consumer neoliberal image culture in a variety of ways. She adds glitz to films, pop videos, and television commercials. Depending on her styling, she adds a touch of vintage glamour or explicit titillation. We may not even register her presence, as she is frequently used as a curlicue to embellish the real action, in this context her charm adds prestige to whatever she presents, from other people to commodities: stars and objects. A contemporary formulation of showgirl has emerged within pop music. Lady Gaga and Lana Del Rey, amongst others, produce themselves in ways resonant with showgirls, constructing a personae and identities that they perform across their songs, routines, videos and outfits.

Given that the showgirl exists at the junction of such pertinent concepts, why do we not routinely ask her, how does she do showgirl? Over this chapter I wish to shed light on how showgirl is 'done': authored, produced, composed, performed and reflected upon. The voice of the showgirl is presented in large sections from interviews. My aim with these interviews was to assemble a new lexicon of words on performativity and bodily display that come directly from showgirls: experts in the field. I conducted interviews with ten showgirls of various kinds. I was curious to discover how they prepared for their work, what they wear, how they negotiate different audiences, and to hear reflections on showgirl work. I used oral history techniques of interviewing, in which I followed their story-telling, prompting them now and again in order to elicit thick description, but trying not to lead the interview. I position these alongside a consideration of the history of glamour, feminist

positions dismissive of the showgirl, theories of erotic capital, gender construction and femininity, to anchor the showgirl's words and map the critical contexts in which the showgirl's reflections intervene. Words and phrases within the interviews that are useful for the showgirl lexicon appear in bold.

I found the interview participants through a variety of ways: watching shows, attending dance classes and presenting my research.<sup>186</sup> I supplemented these interviews by reading and listening to other showgirl oral history interviews from archives, reading showgirl memoirs, blogs and tweets in order to get a broad range of showgirl voices and perspectives.<sup>187</sup>

The interviews opened up a space for both the participants and me to reflect on how they are seen and enjoyed onstage, how they perform, recuperate, respond and reflect. In the conversations I drew on my own experience as an artist in which gestures in my work generate meanings that I do not always understand in conscious or verbalised ways until I reflect on them. Thus, my practice as an artist who performs in her works directly affected how I approached the interviews and tracked my interviewees' thoughts.

Following the categories of shows I outlined in Chapter Two I shall apply similar terms to showgirls. 'traditional spectacle showgirl' and 'updated spectacle showgirl', perform in their respective shows, though here I combine

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<sup>186</sup> I knew I wanted to speak with participants who would have different experiences from one another, however, I was sad that there were others I wanted to interview, but practicalities of setting up dates meant they did not happen in time for this research. I would love to continue to conduct interviews with showgirls in further research, so hope they will happen in the future.

<sup>187</sup> I visited the Special Collections, UNLV archive, Las Vegas, August 2010. I read memoirs: Constance Tomkinson, *Les Girls*, Mary Logan, *Bring on the Dancing Girls: A Showgirl's Life in World War II*, Lewes: Book Guild, 1998, Elisabeth Eaves, *Bare: On Women, Dancing, Sex, and Power*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, Cody Diablo, *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*, New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Gotham Books, 2006 and burlesque magazine blogs: *Burlesque Bible*, <<http://www.burlesquebiblemag.com/>> and *21<sup>st</sup> Century Burlesque*, <<http://21stcenturyburlesque.com>>, and stripper blogs *Sassy Lapdancer*, <<http://sassylapdancer.blogspot.co.uk>> and *Adventures of Marie the Brave*, <<http://mariethebrave.tumblr.com/>>, amongst others.

them into ‘spectacle showgirl’, who performs in large-scale spectacles and is usually hired through audition. The ‘burlesque showgirl’ and ‘avant-garde showgirl’ perform in new cabaret contexts in which they produce their own routine and are hired as an act for particular events. The ‘burlesque showgirl’ has some element of stripping in her acts, and the ‘avant-garde showgirl’ does not do a burlesque strip, though there may be other forms of bodily display in her acts, as well as other skills, for example, singing. The ‘stripper showgirl’ performs in strip clubs—she performs on a small stage, usually on a pole and also provides private lap-dances to patrons for a fee, and so her role involves circling the club space in order to sell private dances. Add to this our current examples in pop music, whom I shall term ‘pop showgirl’.

Let me introduce the interviewees. Jazmin Barret is a tap-dancing burlesque and avant-garde showgirl half of the time, performing in Paris and Europe. When she is not performing she is a journalist. Maria Slowinska is an avant-garde showgirl, a cabaret jazz-singer and when I interviewed her she was part way through a cultural theory PhD in Berlin. Kitty Enters, based in London is an exhibiting painter, and has also worked in PR for the arts, and has her own bespoke stationery business. I interviewed her shortly after the first time she performed a burlesque routine in front of an audience, a burlesque showgirl. Chris Kraus, whom I drew on in Chapter Two, is an author and film-maker. She worked as a hustle bar stripper in seventies New York and drew on this experience to take part in the 2009 *Sex Workers Art Show* tour, a cabaret style show of spoken word, performance and burlesque. Amanda Marquardt is an independent theatre director, choreographer, dancer and singer who put together *Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett*, which I saw in LA, an avant-garde showgirl. Another avant-garde showgirl, Ashley Fuller, was a performer in the *Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett*. She is also an actress, singer and dancer, performing and teaching in LA. Jacqui Ford is my tap-dance teacher, in Sheffield. She teaches dance, but more recently works in casting and

chaperoning young actors for professional musicals. She was a spectacle showgirl for ten years, touring Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Beatrix Von Bourbon, based in London but regularly working in Berlin, is a burlesque showgirl. She teaches burlesque workshops and regularly contributes to burlesque and erotic blogs. Felicity Widdrington was a spectacle showgirl, touring Europe during the thirties, notably under contract to Miss Bluebell. Sam Wood is a burlesque showgirl and student on a BA (Hons) Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University. My intention was to speak to showgirls with varying levels of experience who have performed in diverse contexts.

After transcribing and compiling the interviews I began to cluster particular ideas together. I wanted to find a form and structuring strategy that would allow me to position themes together both critically and playfully. When I watched the film *The Artist* I noticed a number of scenes that visually presented complex, nuanced ideas that touched on the role of the showgirl, in this instance, making her way in Hollywood.<sup>188</sup> Briefly, to summarise *The Artist*, it is a black and white, predominantly silent film set in Hollywood in 1927 to 1932. The eponymous artist is a silent film star, George Valentin. The film follows George as he struggles to maintain his stardom after the introduction of the 'talkies'. Parallel to George's decline, we see the rise of Peppy Miller, a young actress whose career is launched in the 'talkies'. George and Peppy have a number of encounters and both follow the other's career. I identified the scenes that depicted significant moments in Peppy's ascendancy as a star, reflected on their meaning and used those reflections to draw together ideas from the showgirl interviews.

When I watched *The Artist* I was refreshed by the narrative. In the showgirl films of the twenties the luminous showgirls were contained and controlled by the plot and context, despite their frenzied dancing and sense of fun. In

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<sup>188</sup> *The Artist*, dir. by Hazanavicius.

Hollywood the trope of the back-stage musical provided a vehicle for bringing theatre-stars onto the screen. In *The Artist*, we have the behind-the-scenes of film-making as the vehicle—a level of introspection that Hollywood was not able to produce contemporaneously. Peppy is the character that the twenties screen-showgirls dreamed of being. Peppy's narrative arc also provides pleasures the originals could not. Her spirit, talent, sense of fun, and desire to change the system by making it more responsible and reflexive of its own history, breathes life into the screen-showgirls of the past. Peppy embodies them all, and she negotiates the studio system with a pluck her earlier sisters would have been reprimanded for. The silent form of the film playfully highlights that Peppy *has* a voice and she uses it. Peppy thrives within the system, calls it to account and feeds her own sense of pleasure within it—providing a template for how to survive within our own late-capitalist context. Peppy stands for a kind of resistance that is allowable within our system, she is the new regime that plunders old regimes, willing to find strategies for resistance in the unlikeliest places—and her sense of fun in doing so adds to her appeal. The film also represents an approach that resists nostalgia while it mines the technologies and aesthetics of the past.

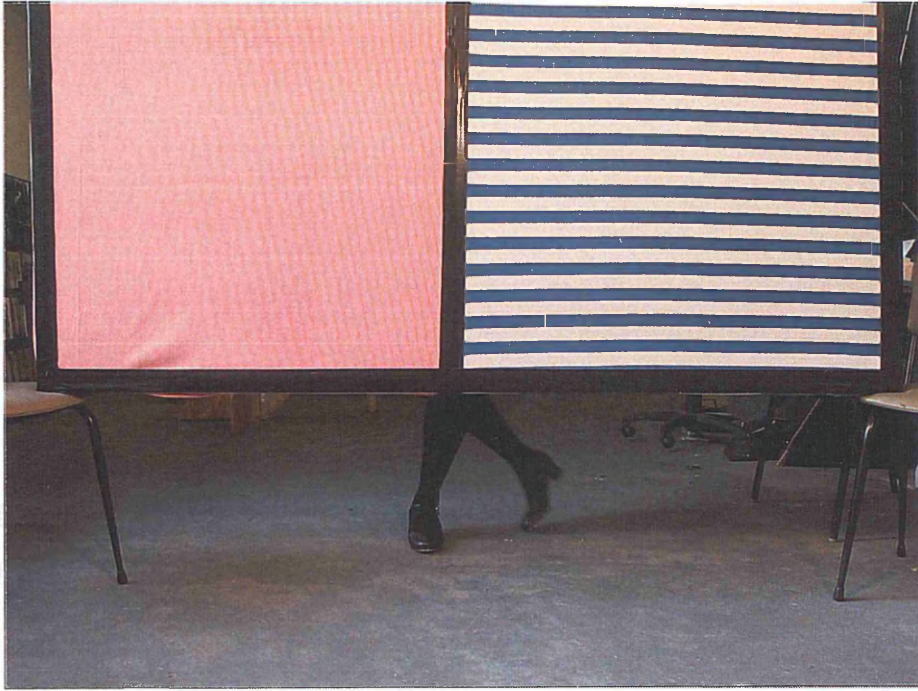
'Don't you think it's possible to do something and simultaneously study it?', wrote Chris Kraus.<sup>189</sup> Yes I do! After selecting five scenes from *The Artist* I restaged each scene in my shared PhD studio, creating five short videos in which I dance for the camera. Video stills illustrate the constellations of ideas that emerge from the interviews. Methodologically, by embodying 'Art Showgirl' through this chapter I am able to visually reinforce the reflections of the showgirls as well as demonstrating the importance of being and doing, looking from the inside, as a way of thinking and provoking thought: both a fortification of the showgirl, and the artist.

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<sup>189</sup> Kraus, *I Love Dick*, p. 153.



# Scene 1



Peppy gets her break into the movies through her own prowess and panache. Peppy, an unknown actress, goes to Kinograph Studios in order to pick up work as an extra. The casting director addresses the assembled extras saying: 'Listen up! Three girls who can dance'. Peppy jumps up and rushes to the front row in front of the casting director. Two girls Charleston at once and are chosen. Peppy gives a big smile, we see the director say 'can you dance' to which Peppy replies 'yes', doing a little Charleston and is chosen. We next see Peppy behind a set screen, only her legs visible. She practices some tap steps. George sees the dancing feet and joins in. Repeating the steps back, George copies Peppy's steps, encouraging her to do a few more intricate steps. We see her playful side and her tap-dancing ability. Peppy's career break comes to her because she can dance—she makes her own break on merit.

Before the showgirl ever takes to the stage, she must acquire a range of skills—skills that will enable her to perform onstage in an assured, visually pleasing way. Without confidence or stage presence, she will fail to turn

herself into showgirl—the showgirl becomes ‘showgirl’ through of the completeness of her construction. Particular performance skills can be learned: dancing and singing, but is this enough to produce the perfect showgirl moment? I shall now bring in the reflections of my interviewees, to help build up a picture of how the showgirl is produced in practice.

Jacqui:           You’ve got to be trained. If you’re not, you’ve got no chance. Yeah, you might have basic (*pauses*) dance ability. Some people are natural dancers. But you can’t do a proper show if you’ve not had training. [...]

You’ve got to have a **good personality onstage**. Otherwise you’re not going to get anything. You can be as good as you want, but if you’ve no **stage presence**. So that’s kind of what I try and teach now. Is, you know, you don’t have to be the best dancer. Some of the kids aren’t that great. But if you make up for it with your face, you know, it will pay off. ‘Cause that’s what people are watching. And if you look like you’re **enjoying yourself**, then it’s kind of—you know, it rubs off on the audience, doesn’t it?

If personality is what makes a performance, what role does technique play, the craft of dancing? How do you draw on your dance background in your burlesque acts, Beatrix?

Beatrix:           I think that its given me a really confident foundation because when I started performing burlesque I wasn’t thinking about the actual **execution of the act**, I was focussing on **the theme** and **the narrative** and **the content**, because I knew I could do the dance stuff, I didn’t have to think about it. So, at the basic level, yeah, it gave me confidence, but then beyond that I think naturally there are things that my body does while I perform that I’m not thinking about doing, yet they’re things that I was taught years ago. So, I’m very aware of how I place my hands and when I’m rehearsing I’m looking in the mirror to look at the lines on my body to try and make good shapes. I’ve got little pet hates for things a lot of people do that I think are ugly because I’ve had body lines hammered into me probably

mostly through majorettes actually, that involved a lot of being in sync with other people, I mean we had to lift our knees to a very particular height otherwise it was sloppy.

There's a particular way of doing what I call '**The Showgirl Stance**' that's a little bit lazy. So for me 'The Showgirl Stance' is in the legs you have a sort of one back leg that's pretty straight and then you cross the knee of the front leg over the knee of the back leg, so you have one leg in front of the other, the front leg at about two o'clock, if the back leg's at twelve and then the hips are off to the side of the back leg, the hand of the front, the hand on the, no the arm on the side of the front leg is on the hip and the arm on the side of the back leg is in the air in a presentation. The sloppy version is to bend the back leg as well as the front leg and that just looks awkward, it makes the performer look a little nervous. It's confident with the straight leg and just a bit playful. With the back leg bent and often if doesn't for me, it doesn't hit the right spot, it doesn't look finished. And timing of course, with a dance background, I know where the beat is. I know how to hit the beat, I did tap dance, so I know how to hear a rhythm and make a rhythm, so I never worry about being out of time with the music because I can't dance out of time!

Does your academic education also inform your burlesque? Is it useful to draw on something else, beyond dance and singing training?

Beatrix: The course that I completed was a BA in Cultural Studies and then I did my Masters in it as well. My BA was in Leeds and then the MA in Goldsmiths. When I started my education was being taught to me almost everyday and so of course it was influencing what I was thinking about and how I was thinking about burlesque. And I really wanted to draw on all the feminist topics that I was covering and reading and I wanted to celebrate my body and the shape that its in and I wanted to not stress about any lumps and bumps and just **be proud and sing it loud!** Kind of encourage other people to not have hang-ups about their bodies too. So, I was kind of mildly political in my head. I don't think I really put that directly into any of my acts, but I hoped that that would be an indirect inference. And I'm sure there would be other touches from my BA that were coming through

in what I was doing with burlesque, it certainly helped me learn how to research things and I learned a lot about semiotics and signs and symbols, so that's probably affected how I put together the visual aspect of an act as well.

Both Beatrix's physical and intellectual training inform her choreography, intention and performance of burlesque—they are a part of her. The stripper showgirl must draw on her skills too—her role involves performing onstage, but also she must solicit one-to-one dances. What did you draw on for your hustle bar work, Chris?

Chris:           Like anybody I was studying theatre at the time, so together with the theatre training there was a lot of movement and dance training not that I was a very good dancer. You know I would just get up and jiggling around or so, or do some interpretative modern dance moves it was just a, you know, it was ridiculous! (*laughs*) I mean it didn't look anything like what you see now in a movie or a video about lap dancing. It doesn't look like pole-dancing in *The Sopranos*, it didn't look like, there were no poles in the clubs, it was just a table and you'd get up in your high-heels and kind of jiggle around and it was talking, it was sort of old school New York thing because it was about talking. It was about kind of creating, it was a hustle, it was creating **a line of empathy** with that person and figuring out what's gonna get that person what their looking for, what's gonna get them to keep spending?

The stripper showgirl embodies a complex role: she dances provocatively, but she also sells dances and talks to her customers. For Chris, this role is about embodying what the customer will spend money on and that is produced through speech. In Lily Burana's memoir of stripping in the nineties she writes of her bodily preparations: 'By the end of the afternoon, I have spent three hours on my hair, an hour and a half on my nails, an hour at the gym, and another hour for tan and wax. I don't mourn this expenditure of time. Like **suiting up for battle, getting my glamour** on has a **galvanising effect**. After a day of being ministered to by capable hands, I feel ready to

take on the world, buffed to a high gloss and impervious to hurt'.<sup>190</sup> This description of the routine of getting ready physically reveals how tending to the surface of the body also helps to create mental protection strategies— 'suited up for battle' and the 'galvanising effect' of glamour. Preparation in this case involves the physical and mental production of self. Can glamour be used as a strategy for protection?

Maria: Its also I think, like to be honest, in a way, a concept of making yourself un— not vulnerable, really, like the more perfect you are from the outside, the less you feel maybe, insecure or weak, or subject to critique, or also to, I guess inappropriate approaches, which is interesting 'cos I find although the theory I guess maybe is that glamorous women are objectified. They might be. I don't know, but, but, but its still like the more glamorous when you go out and your really like you know glamorous in the sense that you're well dressed and your skirt is not too short, or whatever but your really like this elegant glamorous woman or the idea of her. Or the woman that comes to my mind when I think about glamorous women, no guy will probably approach you, they will look at you but no-one will talk to you, 'cos they'll be like oh (*sucks in air*) you know she seems cold or **unapproachable** or something, so it's also I think glamour is also a strategy of self— I don't know, not preservation, what's the word— thinking what would be, like safety, for your safety.

In Lily and Maria's terms glamour is a strategy of protection that enables them to move around their respective performance and presentation contexts more freely, knowing they have constructed themselves in way that make the feel indomitable. Glamour gives them a sense of protected freedom. Looking back at the history of glamour, it is apparent that glamour is modern; it took on its present meaning with industrialisation. As the urban metropolis expanded, labour patterns changed, from rural agricultural to city industrial

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<sup>190</sup> Shay Stafford describes the process of communal sponging on of body make-up in *Memoirs of Showgirl*, Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2010, p. 143. Lily Burana, *Strip City: A Stripper's Farewell Journey Across America*, New York: Miramax Books, 2001, p. 125.

work, which enabled possibilities for social mobility. The middle-class expanded and women became part of the workforce. New mass-manufacturing techniques meant consumer goods could be produced with ‘the aura of the aristocracy’ at a fraction of the cost. Thus purchasing became part of performing one’s status and identity.<sup>191</sup> This idea of glamour is continuous with Lily and Maria’s descriptions. Glamour is not about performing something in opposition to internal ideas about oneself, but rather it is used to extend, highlight and draw attention to notions of self.

Women’s entrée into the labour market was entwined with their embodiment of glamour.<sup>192</sup> New visible roles opened up for young women like barmaid, shop girl, typist, but Stephen Gundle notes ‘in the public imagination, chorus girls summed them all up’.<sup>193</sup> With good reason too, it must have felt as though chorus girls were ubiquitous as they performed their synchronised routines as part of ‘musical comedies, revues, vaudeville, burlesques and movies’, as Angela Latham writes, they were both ‘enabled as well as contained by their participation in “show business”’.<sup>194</sup> Whilst their wages were relatively high, their opportunities for progression within the business were limited.

Even the factory-working women were touched by glamour—they were marketed to as new consumers of fashion, make-up and the accoutrements of glamour. Kathy Peiss writes of working class women in New York at the turn of the last century and their pleasures in fashion and looking good. Part of their inspiration was aristocratic women’s high fashion, combined with

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<sup>191</sup> Stephen Gundle and Trini C. Castelli, *The Glamour System*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 187.

<sup>192</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism*, London: Zed Books, 2010, p. 163.

<sup>193</sup> Gundle, *Glamour*, 2008, p. 133.

<sup>194</sup> Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s*, Hanover and London: University Press of New England, Wesleyan University Press, 2000, p. 113.

‘admiring the style of prostitutes as well as socialites’.<sup>195</sup> Not a cheap enterprise, ‘maintaining style on the streets, at dance halls, or at club functions was an achievement won at other costs—going without food, sewing into the night to embellish a hat or dress, buying in installment’.<sup>196</sup>

With industrialised labour came the need for city-dwelling workers to be entertained for escape, which placed new emphasis on theatrical spectacle and of course, the showgirl.<sup>197</sup> She has become glamour’s most consistent avatar: her self-construction a product of the capitalist metropolis, her image as an unrepentant, unashamed figure in capitalism. Her evolution marks changes in the status and visibility of women: Folies Bergère’s Belle Époque showgirl-courtesans, Tiller Girls with their precision Fordist kick-lines, Ziegfeld’s All-American Showgirls, Busby Berkeley’s kaleidoscopic showgirl patterns, Hollywood’s showgirl superstars Rita Hayworth and Marilyn Monroe, retro burlesque stars Dita Von Teese and Immodesty Blaize, the pop showgirls Lady Gaga and Lana Del Rey, to name a few particular examples. Andrea Stuart writes that the showgirl’s appeal relies on giving the audience what they want and thus is a reflection of the time: ‘She is a cipher on to which her audiences have projected profound social anxieties, and a barometer indicating her era’s concerns’.<sup>198</sup>

Returning to present day, commerce continues to rely on the sheen of glamour: the picture-perfect world of advertising, the seductive use of packaging, the style of sales assistant’s uniform all sustain glamour’s embedding in capitalism. The recent television commercial for Baileys, ‘The

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<sup>195</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century*, New York & Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986, p. 66. In contrast Carol Dyhouse suggests that ‘in the 1900s in Britain ... women rarely bought new clothes: they constantly sacrificed their own needs, whether for clothing or food, for the sake of husbands and children’, in *Glamour*, 2010, p. 166. Peiss seems to be talking about unmarried women and Dyhouse about married women, however it is worth noting that fashion and style are locally specific.

<sup>196</sup> Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, p. 67.

<sup>197</sup> Stephen Gundle, *Glamour: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 7-10.

<sup>198</sup> Stuart, *Showgirls*, p. 2.

Cream with Spirit', reinforces the relation between the showgirl and commerce. Taupe-chiffon draped showgirls perform a Busby Berkeley-inspired number inferring fluidity, decadence and pleasure that Bailey's would like to be associated with their alcoholic drink.<sup>199</sup> The brand has also created a behind-the-scenes 'Making of' YouTube video as a companion to the advert. Key players in the production of the commercial speak to camera, explaining the artistic impetus, with cuts to the showgirls rehearsing in their practice clothes. Up until the last speaker: 'it's been tiring, it's been hard at some points' the showgirls are voiceless, yet it is *their* labour that is explicitly revealed—as though their rehearsal process metonymically visualises the hard work of the whole crew.<sup>200</sup> Revealing the labour of the glamour, the 'real' behind the façade is how celebrity culture presently circulates. The current tabloid appetite to catch stars un-made-up and unawares presents a rhetoric of authenticity, of revealing how much is done to produce A-list perfection. However, nothing is revealed except for another set of tropes of presentation of self. Part of being a showgirl involves negotiating these tensions, embodying glamour and authenticity, hinting at the continuum between interior and exterior. How difficult is it to embody glamour?

Maria: I do think glamour is a construction and even with people who maybe used— I don't know, like Dita Von Teese, who every time she steps out her door she has to be glamorous, maybe she gets used to that more and then the construction like becomes naturalised and maybe then it's less of an effort, but I think no-one or, I don't know, but I would assume very few people or close to no-one really grows up like that or has a natural perception of themselves, I think that's really like you have to learn that it's a cultural kind of, either **conditioning** I guess. Earlier it used to be like with parents telling you how to behave as a girl and what to do and not to do and how to act and not to act now that it's not that you

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<sup>199</sup> Bailey's television commercial,

<[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gP8w6Rx8R\\_Y&feature=plcp](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gP8w6Rx8R_Y&feature=plcp)> [accessed 28<sup>th</sup> November 2012].

<sup>200</sup> The Making of Baileys Cream with Spirit advert, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nq4tgw-9I0g&feature=relmfu>> [accessed 28<sup>th</sup> November 2012].



have to produce that yourself. Like you have to condition yourself and I don't do that all day long! Like, I can choose to be very goofy or a you know like walk around in like slouchy pants and not wash my hair for a couple of days but then I can choose to like be very perfect and then I'm very perfectionist about that like, about my looks but it is a lot of effort to get there and to fill that especially when you don't have a **prescribed script**, like when you're **improvising**. So, I think it's a role you just have to learn and it's a role that you, I will learn over time and that I will also learn how to step in and out of, so it's a bit acting but **it doesn't mean that it's artificial** it's still one part of my personality that I want to perfect.

In fact I started out, I think with a very clear image of what I wanted myself to look like onstage and to be so and I started from well not only, but I think, an important part of what I thought of when I wanted my performance to be, started out from the outside to the inside. So I had this idea that I would like to do some kind of fifties inspired performance in terms of costume and hair and music obviously because I do jazz and bossa nova which is both music sounds coming from like the fifties, forties, fifties to sixties, but the whole before the sexual revolution, before the Beatles kind of. So it was definitely inspired by that style. It's more difficult to actually successfully create that **smoothness** especially when you're not trained as a woman in order to behave that way actually so just the, even just looking glamorous will not make you glamorous if you cannot like act all the way through your performance like that which is hard especially when you improvise like I do not just singing but also talking like you know in-between pieces talking to people that is really the most difficult part because that's where it breaks open as I'm trying to be authentic but also trying to be glamorous I'm not quite achieving (*laughs*) that yet. So yes, it was inspired by the idea of glamour. Also I guess because I like myself— I like to— I do like to look at people made-up and looking nicely and I do like that look, the whole style of the fifties and early sixties but yeah I think from that its difficult to actually recreate and then also it only stays interesting to people when you have some sort of immediacy still. Like if its totally smooth and just is like **enclosed in itself** its not, at least its not funny which is also one thing that I'm trying to be so if its not approachable it's not funny, so yeah that's some of the difficulties I encounter.

As an avant-garde showgirl, the tension between producing and inhabiting glamour for Maria is something she is evidently highly aware of. Her reflections on how much to enclose herself or how open she should remain hint at the fine detail in performing an authored construction.

The detail is crucial in constructing the glamour of the showgirl, her face is elaborately made up and her exposed skin shimmers with make-up and tights, layered over with ornate, intricate costumes. In her memoir of her career as a Moulin Rouge and then Lido showgirl, Shay Stafford writes of communal sponging on of panstick body make-up.<sup>201</sup> Effort is invested in creating the glamour effect. Burlesque showgirls construct their entire act, often hand-making their costumes—sourcing particular garments and sewing details on by hand.

Sam:            I like to look glamorous (*laughs*). I think every burlesque performer likes to look glamorous. Its something that you just get really excited about when something comes together, if you have a piece that goes with this and that, an' I especially like to wear, one of my favourites its like a fishnet but- birdcage fishnet an' I put— I glued like Swarovski crystals on, onto the, just in like odd places, that's one of my favourite.

It always feels good, I think— I think the thing that feels, I think the costumes make it, if I wasn't wearing a good costume I don't think I'd feel as confident to take anything off.

For Sam, a younger showgirl, the costume embodies confidence—she makes the costume and wears it, but the confidence is not (yet) internal. So, Kitty, where is your confidence, is it the outfit, or is it you?

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<sup>201</sup> Stafford, *Memoirs of Showgirl*, p. 143.

Kitty:           Once you've made yourself up, and you've got your outfit on, you kind of, I think I am kind of Kitty. And I really like that because its—I think some people do it and they take on a whole new **persona** and its almost like they are acting that persona, whereas I think Kitty is just kind of me. Who is just an extension and so its not really, I don't have to step out of myself to be it. I just have to get on with it.

I think Kitty is, has always been there, and I think that's where my mischievous kind of sort of, I am a big kid, is actually, that's the Kitty side of me. Whereas the Kate- and actually one of the girls who was only like 20 or something who was also performing, she was like 'you're really quite, you know, so sort of lovely, but really hard sometimes' and she had no idea that I was sort of 33 and I had ten years PR and events and I'd been, I am actually a grown-up, whereas in a weird way, she was like 'its all you but you've got these different facets', which depending on whatever it is you have to do in the world. And I think everybody does that, they have like a façade potentially as to whatever their having to deal with at that moment that's the character that they are and its perfectly natural, its not like your taking on a whole new sort of, well I'm going to act that character for that situation, its just little nuances of your character, which come out at certain sort of times.

For Kitty, doing Kitty is a place to be a version of herself a self who pre-exists but has few outlets. Thus, Kitty *is* real. But how is this achieved? How is glamour embodied, made real? How do you feel when you are glamorous, Maria?

Maria:           It does make me self-confident and makes me more self-confident. But then I guess the goal would be to still feel glamorous even if you don't look glamorous so just like the outsides just the make-up and the dress won't do it. I guess it's the first step maybe or its my first step. But I'm well aware that it's just not like an outside thing, it's not just a role, it really has to be filled in from the inside, so and the confidence does have to come from somewhere else too so I'm also trying to come up with that self-confidence and to fill that I don't know, **vase** or the container that glamour can be. I have, I know **I have to fill it myself**.

So it's the feelings I or the, yeah the feelings are like I feel **composed** and I feel, I'm trying to really be inside myself also in a way to be able to take on all the looks that are going to come, to deal with that. But then I so, I try to be open in a way, like, like, **permissive** maybe for every thought or movement or whatever goes through me. But at the same time I try to fill out a certain image of myself that I have. And also of the image that I think other people might have of me, like an expectation on mostly visual or you know aesthetic terms. So the kind of way I want my voice to sound or the way I want myself to look or to move so it's something in-between in inside and outside. I guess and I try to bring these together and it's not really—it's actually quite difficult now I have to think of it. But sometimes I feel like if I just I stay inside myself more then that actually also transpires some how and yeah. I think, think you have to be pretty, to successfully be glamorous you have to be self-confident, so I guess self-confidence is what I was driving for at that moment.

Embodying glamour is a complex task. In order to successfully produce glamour, the ornate surface aesthetic must be animated and projected through internal confidence. There is a prowess required develop the necessary confidence which may have been hard won. What is more important, then, the exterior look, or the work you do internally to produce glamour?

Ashley: I think it goes both ways, for me, I had to get in touch with it internally though because of what it was bringing up for me, it might not be the same way for somebody who felt very, naturally felt very beautiful already in their body or wasn't concerned about it from you know where as I was like, I'm just not really sure this is gonna work until I tapped into my, that internal part of things but yes, putting on the make-up, going, 'cos it takes you back to a time period, you're looking at yourself, you're not you and then the, then the costumes that you, you know we for the most part were responsible for choosing, we had colour palettes and era that we're trying to bring to life so within that we got to choose so we're all picking things that you know, how do I feel in this, how do I look in this, does it make me sexy just putting it on? And certainly it impacts you. But I could take that energy with me and be in a big burlap sack and be standing there and feeling, I

mean I could definitely generate the energy but the make-up and the costume certainly help because you just feel the kind of icing on the cake, you feel beautiful, you, you, you have some fabric that's draping on you in a beautiful way.

The showgirls describe the process of construction that becomes so real and embodied it does not rely on surface alone. Andrea Stuart writes of the relationship that the showgirl has with her costume, it serves multiple functions, she 'constitutes herself through clothing. Those feathers and sequins and furs identify her to her audience, as well as seducing and bewitching them'. The audience seeing her glamour 'does not see the truth behind their revelations, the sweat that goes into the showgirl's appearance of ease, the utter contrivance needed to create the impression of such ravishing near-nakedness. These garments pretend to show us everything, displaying the breasts, framing the face, flattering the legs, but really they reveal next to nothing. There are hidden narratives beneath these sheer chiffons and lace, concealing, on occasion, the onset of age, a lack of talent, or the frailty of the flesh'.<sup>202</sup> We might challenge Stuart's notion of 'truth' under the construction following on from Maria and Ashley's descriptions of filling glamour, producing the construction from within, thus complicating the idea of a concealed truth.

A solo showgirl, perhaps an avant-garde or burlesque showgirl, controls her exposure, presenting to the audience what she wishes them to see, and how they are to see it. Sometimes she may be part of a troupe or collaborate, and will be negotiate an outfit. The spectacle showgirl does not have a say in her costume. She might inherit her costume or it might be made for her. Felicity, what were your costumes like, in an era before stretchy lycra?

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<sup>202</sup> Stuart, *Showgirls*, p. 170.

Felicity :       The clothes we wore were always very, very good. The materials were excellent. You had beautiful satin. Whatever they were made of, it was always excellent. And I—when we started the show, we'd always have to be fitted and, you know, alterations made. So that whoever had made them originally—I don't know whether it was for another show or what. But they'd come to us quite clean and then after we'd finished, they had to be cleaned again so they would probably be used by someone else.

The expensive and elaborate outfits can be physically very restricting. What is it like performing in restricting costumes?

Jacqui:           It was really nice to be part of a really fantastic—you know when the curtain comes up an' there's like a, 'Ah!' from the audience. That's like, you know—that was how you felt pretty amazing. I have to say the dancing wasn't great. Because what can you do in massive big costumes? They weighed a ton. You know, your arms would just—when—when I first started, it was like your arms were going to fall off. Because you had to hold them out with—and they were heavy. Big heavy capes or whatever they were. Costumes like I've never seen. You know, massive feathers. Everything. Handmade dresses. Full-sequined dresses with big headdresses and stuff.

Jazmin:           The first time I tap danced in a corset, it was in Geneva also. And it was—we'd—I'd already had a white one which was fairly loose. And then we had these red corsets that were really tight. And I really thought that I was gonna pass out. Because they were really tight. And we tapped really fast. I was—I said to Sandra, 'If I fall over, you have to like pull me offstage'. But it's a different way of breathing. You breathe here than there which is—which is nice. It's nice to be able to breathe also. *(laughs)*

Sam:               I think, especially with corsets, I've always had, I've always loved the feel of corsets, especially, I like the restriction you get an', you know when you sit

down an' your forced to sit up (*laughs*) and when you get the taxi you're lying down 'cos you can't get in properly.

Jazmin and Sam perform in corsets, undoubtedly an item of clothing that has come to be associated with burlesque. Indeed, audiences often attend shows wearing their own corsets. Chris, you performed in an era when the corseted burlesque showgirls were on their way out, part of another regime. Tell me about your preparations and costumes.

Chris: Well, I mean like any shit job, you know you try and let it take as little out of your life as possible, so the idea would be living my life up until a half an hour before I had to be at work, throw my clothes in the bag, get a cab uptown, and be Sally West for seven or eight hours, two or three or four nights a week. And the rest of the time not think about it. I mean I would buy I had to like buy the costumes I mean it wasn't, in those days they were not very elaborate costumes, it was all thrift store stuff that I used. I had like a ratty feather boa, I had a 1940s kind of little fitted jacket that I'd wear with spike heels, it was just like ridiculous kind of punk thrift store costumes but I mean I didn't give a shit about the costumes, really I didn't, it had nothing to do with my sexuality, it had nothing to do with me. It just had to do with looking a certain way and it was not very exacting, I mean the girls that I've met who are my students when I came here who did that kind of work, I could never have done that! I mean they had to be so into it, it was so professionalised. Some of them even had like silicone injections to be more competitive, I mean, I can't imagine doing that, for a job that has nothing to do with you that's just a kind of like money thing on the side.

So how did the experience shape your sense of your own sexuality?

Chris: Well, it was confusing. Because if that was sexuality, what was going on in the club, that had nothing to do with me. It wasn't something that in life I would even put my big toe in and so I'd see these girls you know at CBGBs and other rock clubs and they'd be stuffed into these bustiers with their tits flopping out all over the place, why would you do that if you're not getting paid? (*laughs*)

Chris's experiences suggest a discontinuity between interiority and exteriority that is increased and widened from her time as a stripper showgirl. A separation that proved to be a negative experience for her.

Jo Weldon, a stripper in the eighties, also reflects on her experiences and how they, at times, had a negative impact, 'my appearance was constantly evaluated and commented upon openly, with **a sense of entitlement** from the commenters'.<sup>203</sup> However, her reflections from this experience inform her practice as a burlesque showgirl and a teacher at of the New York School of Burlesque, which she founded in 2003. In her *Burlesque Handbook*, part practical know-how guide to burlesque, part introduction to the history and theory of burlesque and part self-help guide, she creates some valuable distinctions.

I have heard people say that burlesque is no different than strip-joint stripping, and while I'm not offended by being conflated with strip-joint strippers—I was one for twenty years, and so were some of my best friends, whom I still love—it really isn't the same thing. The way we **celebrate confidence and our love of our own bodies** in burlesque is something that doesn't come up much in the sales-and-serve-oriented world of strip joints—not because strip joints are so terrible, but because it doesn't come up most other places, either.<sup>204</sup>

Any pain, restriction and labour that constitute the showgirl are rendered invisible because when the composition is complete the signs of its production are concealed. Adrienne L. McLean observes the traces of the erased labour in Rita Hayworth's body: 'Hayworth's very visible legs bulge with the sorts of sinewy muscles seldom found in pinup photographs'.<sup>205</sup> Reading the materiality of the body and analysing its meaning she is able to understand its completeness: 'Hayworth's physical competence as a dancer—the demonstrated ability to employ her talented, trained and disciplined body

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<sup>203</sup> Jo Weldon, *The Burlesque Handbook*, New York: It, itbooks, 2010, p. 222-223.

<sup>204</sup> Weldon, *Burlesque Handbook*, p. 221.

<sup>205</sup> McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth*, p. 114.



in the performance and, equally important, enjoyment of difficult and expressive feats'. For McLean changing how we look at showgirl bodies dramatically shifts what meanings and conclusions we can draw from it; 'if women's skills *were* routinely discussed', she writes, 'then it would paradoxically become much more difficult to justify relegating women to the status of the object'.<sup>206</sup> This process of 'seeing' the labour of the body disrupts the body's status as an object, but to see the labour we have to address the materiality of the body, the structure that animates the glamour.<sup>207</sup>

The produced body, labour, glamour, factory-dreams, commodification, new America, old Europe, all coalesce in *Body Work*, a photo series by the artist Liz Cohen. Cohen purchased an East German Trabant car, and worked on it herself to turn it into an American El Camino. Both discontinued cars stand for the competing ideologies of the Cold War, and are affectionately remembered.<sup>208</sup> Cohen's staged photographs show her, bikini-clad, working on the car. The 'body work' is doubled, her body works on the car body and two bodies are transformed. As the Trabant became an El Camino, a translation of ideologies, from one set of dreams to another, so Cohen's body undergoes translation. The multiple gestures at work in her body intertwine complexly—she documents the process of transformation and car labour putting her labour into a performative context. She *works* in a bikini—we see

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<sup>206</sup> McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth*, p. 114.

<sup>207</sup> I was interested to know how McLean looks. In her writing she identifies very specific details of Rita Hayworth's dancing body, writing in a way that suggested she has a dance background. I emailed McLean and she was kind enough to respond: 'I never really wanted to dance professionally but loved all of it, and was a Meadows Fellow in Dance as a result of doing well especially in the teaching and research areas. I admired ballet the most, was more suited physically to modern, but adored tap—I taught that for several years at the university level. Personally, it was clear to me that I took up dance, precisely because of its connection to the body and joy in trained movement as such. It was nice that it did get me somewhere too—my interest in film is directly tied to dance (I saw dance for the first time in movies, not on a theatrical stage), and since my university days (I got my M.F.A. in 1981, and went back for my Ph.D. in 1994) I have never not thought about dance and film together, to somewhat productive ends.' Adrienne L. McLean, email to the author 23 November 2010.

<sup>208</sup> Liz Cohen, *Body Work*, <[http://www.laurentgodin.com/artists\\_detail.php?id\\_artiste=4](http://www.laurentgodin.com/artists_detail.php?id_artiste=4)> [accessed 17<sup>th</sup> January 2013].

her in the car workshop, undertaking the necessary actions but not in the male uniform, she is insisting on existing outside the male role and takes on the pre-designated 'girl on car' uniform. She inhabits the bikini with commitment, this is not ironic. She is the girl on the car, the artist, the mechanic, the performer and the producer. The nostalgia in both cars—temporality is confused, but Cohen remixes time and place to get us somewhere new.

Ameila Jones offers a critical perspective on Cohen's project, observing that the work borrows from the feminist aesthetics of earlier generations without the politics. She critiques the singular focus on a 'thin, white, young ideal' female body that she identifies as 'disturbingly reactionary' in her return 'to previous modes of presenting the female body as if it can be definitively known—and so owned either by the person identified with it, or by the person who gazes at it'.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Jones, 'The Return of Feminist Art', p. 17.

## Scene 2



Peppy enters George Valentin's empty changing room, and writes 'thank you' on the mirror, referring to their first tap-dancing encounter. Alone, in his room she imagines George embracing her, by slipping an arm into his dinner jacket on a coat stand, gazing up to where his imaginary face would be, underneath the top hat. She is caught! George has been standing in the doorway, watching Peppy play, with a bemused look on his face. He moves towards her, and says: 'If you want to be an actress, you need to have something the others don't'. She smiles and he looks at her face and adds a beauty spot above her lip. What becomes Peppy's signature look was thought of by George: while Peppy is self-produced, the added touch comes from George's direction. Does this affect the independence of her success?

Is the showgirl an autonomous construction? What is the role of men in authoring of the showgirl? To apply this, what is perhaps at stake in performing in provocative ways in our current image-drenched climate—are images always for men, always oppressive? A trend in recent, popular,

polemic feminism toward divisive reduction has produced a position that elides women's participation in titillating, explicit, erotic bodily display with complicity with misogyny. I would like to sketch out these arguments as through the course of my research I have encountered attitudes that emanate from these texts in particular, thus it seems a worthwhile to spend some time reflecting on them.

In *Female Chauvinist Pigs* Ariel Levy writes of women's collusion in 'raunch culture'.<sup>210</sup> Levy calls out the effect of the relaxed attitudes to porn, stripping etc, implicating herself in these shifts in attitude. She notes that she caught herself using the word 'chick' and wearing thongs, and plots how these casual attitudes seamlessly blend into larger narratives of misogyny so much so that women embody 'Female Chauvinist Pigs: women who make sex objects of women and of ourselves'.<sup>211</sup> Written in 2005, already some of her observations feel dated—I am not suggesting our current context is vastly more progressive, rather, some of what Levy points to—tiny midriff-baring outfits, thongs, porn-star chic have fallen out of fashion.

Levy's thesis is disturbing and relevant: what is at stake in women's participation in sexualised practices? How do we delineate between women's sexual experimentation for their own exploration against sexualised practices performed for status benefits, in other words, not for personal sexual titillation, but for what it symbolises to others. These are important questions. However, Levy's approach is problematic, with its lack of reflexivity, minimal contextual grounding and not identifying the reasons she chose particular examples along with her detailed physical descriptions of the women she encounters. For example, 'fine-featured brunette', 'a stunning thirty-year-old with long chestnut hair and the physique of a short model',

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<sup>210</sup> Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, London: Pocket Books, 2006.

<sup>211</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, pp. 3-4.

‘lovely green eyes and an upswept ponytail’, ‘their blowouts and lip liner’ all undermine the legitimate gravitas of the book.<sup>212</sup> Missed opportunities to ground the book by drawing on empirical research or analysing accepted theoretical positions were missed, for example, writing of a survey on women’s orgasms, she concludes: ‘Seventy percent of the 3,019 women who responded said they could not have an orgasm from intercourse, which flew in the face of the teachings of Freud’—how did this fly in the face of Freud? What did Freud say, where?

Natasha Walter draws parallels between the bright pink gendered toys for young girls and the ways that sexualisation manifests for young women, in her book *Living Dolls, The Return of Sexism*.<sup>213</sup> Walter fashions a compelling alarmist argument in which she exposes instances of lack of agency in the lives of women. In her haste to produce particular rhetoric she backs up her claims without rigour or reflection. In chapter two, ‘Pole-dancers and prostitutes’, Walter opens with a description of Ellie, privately-educated and with degree from a ‘respected university’ who became a lap-dancer for six months without forethought or research.<sup>214</sup> Walter also interviews Laurie Penny on her time as a burlesque showgirl while she was at university. While I do not want to belittle the experiences of Ellie and Penny, Walter does not provide her reasons or rationale for speaking to these two women. How did she choose her participants? How did she select them? Did she speak to any other showgirls, see shows, read academic research from strippers? How she came to her position is not part of the narrative. She does not reflect on the differences that might exist between her interviewee’s dancing experience and perhaps a more experienced performer who has developed a range of tools in order to negotiate her profession as well as reflections that may have evolved over time. Walter writes of the visual tropes of burlesque ‘vintage accessories,

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<sup>212</sup> Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, p. 47, p. 72, p. 73 and p. 91.

<sup>213</sup> Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, London: Virago, 2010.

<sup>214</sup> Walter, *Living Dolls*, p. 39.

such as feathered fans and nipple tassels,' and of the acts: 'burlesque can come in various shapes and sizes, and can wear more unusual costumes and construct more complicated narratives around the striptease act, burlesque is often seen as a truly creative way for women to take their clothes off'.<sup>215</sup> She proceeds to dismiss 'undressing-as-empowerment rhetoric'.<sup>216</sup> However, I am unconvinced she has seen and experienced a burlesque show or a lap-dance herself, which she does not state, but feels comfortable designating their meaning and status. This limits the scope of her critique and leaves me feeling as though she searched for participants that could support her position that women are the victims of sexualisation. This feels somewhat like feminist friendly fire.

In her own book, *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism* and an earlier article in *The Guardian*, Laurie Penny has written of her time in a burlesque troupe while at university. In her *après coup* evaluation of her experience, Penny focuses on the exploitation and sexualisation demands that were placed upon her from the director of her troupe. She uses her own negative experience as a platform to critique and dismiss burlesque, raising some incendiary points. Her arguments are difficult to counter because of her elisions and simplifications; in particular Penny raises the issue of class: 'I began to realise that what really differentiated my act from that of your average stripper wasn't the performance, or the costumes, but simply class'. What informed this realisation? She continues 'Like the majority of women who choose to get involved with burlesque, our troupe was made up of middle-class girls'.<sup>217</sup> What evidence exists to support this idea of the class background of burlesque showgirls? Of strippers? Of any kind of performer? The charge of 'class' is divisive: its impossible to prove or disprove, any

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<sup>215</sup> Walter, *Living Dolls*, p. 43.

<sup>216</sup> Walter, *Living Dolls*, p. 43.

<sup>217</sup> Laurie Penny, 'Burlesque laid bare', Friday 15 May 2009, [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/may/15/burlesque-feminism-proud-galleries), <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2009/may/15/burlesque-feminism-proud-galleries>> [accessed 30th November 2012].

evidence is anecdotal—however, in any discussion of class we must at least acknowledge how slippery class is, that we perform class in particular ways, fitting into social circles and passing as lower / higher class for a variety of complex reasons. More importantly, the showgirl's use of glamour means she is always performing a construction of status (both lower or higher). This is what glamour is about; exemplifying one's status through the surface veneer. The specific costume styling and the proximity to the audience or customer produce class-based *assumptions*. The stripper showgirl in her tight, lycra dresses and clear heels dancing on laps and poles produces performances that signal easy-availability. The burlesque showgirl with her sequins and feathers performing in the spotlight mingling with the audience only if interaction is a part of her act produces a performative superiority. Furthermore, to perform in provocative, erotic or titillating ways can elicit various responses with regards status to the same performance (particularly because of the polemic tools we have for considering such performances).

Penny is irritated that middle-class women are going to burlesque classes because in her reduction of the history of burlesque it 'lost all of its underground credentials the moment bourgeois gyms started offering keep-fit burlesque classes' she sees a devaluing.<sup>218</sup> This raises the question of which demographic Penny thinks should be able to attend burlesque classes.

In her newspaper article in *The Guardian*, she does admit to remembering the effect of hearing the applause as she performed: 'I remember how intoxicating this used to feel', but continues on in her reductive way: 'Burlesque stripping, like lap-dancing, is about performing—rather than owning—your sexuality. It's about posing provocatively for applause. The transaction is one way: you give, they receive. You pout, they clap'. How is this different from any form

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<sup>218</sup> Laurie Penny, *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism*, Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011, p. 13.

of performing: singing, acting, or dancing? What are the differences between performing and owning she alludes to? Penny uses the word ‘performing’ as though it infers that it is somehow not real: fake. *Why* is performing not real? What might produce ownership of your own sexuality? Maybe, experience and self-reflection—which, I would like to suggest, are possible in a showgirl’s practice. She surmises: ‘women can be forgiven for wanting to play with the small amount of power we have. But stripping of any kind can only offer passive, cringing empowerment at best. The sexual power-play of burlesque strikes no great blows for feminism’. Concluding ‘All it does is make us feel, for the space of a three-minute striptease, a little bit better about the hand we’ve been dealt’.<sup>219</sup>

Penny uses a style of writing rhetorically loaded, grandiose but ungrounded, for example: ‘The “tease” is a cry from the heart of the capitalist sexual manifesto. What is sold is precisely illusion: a campy, peek-a-boo frigidity that leaves the consumer dazzled and insatiate’.<sup>220</sup> She writes disparagingly and dismissively reducing the complexity at stake in the pleasures of viewing and performing the showgirl—making the presumption that showgirls engaged in performing do not critically reflect. This overlooks the multiple ways in which showgirls *do* engage in dialogue with each other and do reflect on what they do, for example, print and online burlesque magazines, online discussion forums, printed memoirs as well as personal blogs and also anonymous stripper blogs and tweets.<sup>221</sup> Is Penny unable to trust that women who engage in erotic display reflect on what it means? Is it impossible for Penny to imagine that women attending burlesque keep-fit class might do so in order to

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<sup>219</sup> Penny, ‘Burlesque laid bare’.

<sup>220</sup> Penny, *Meat Market*, p. 13.

<sup>221</sup> I have footnoted some examples earlier but also *Baby Oil and Ice: Striptease in East London*, by Lara Clifton, Sarah Ainslie, and Julie Cook London: Do-Not Press, 2002, which captures the stories of strippers in an era just before lap-dancing clubs. Books that tell the story of the unfolding of the new burlesque scene include Carr, *The Velvet Hammer Burlesque*, and Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-N-Grind*, Denver: Speck Press, 2004. Also, the Twitter hashtags #stripperproblems, #showgirlproblems, and #burlesqueproblems amongst others are frequently used for discussion, sharing, reflection, advice, support and jokes by the various kinds of showgirls.



cultivate a positive relation with their pleasures, desires, and sexuality, so that they may ‘own’ their sexuality?

All three authors attack consumer culture, capitalism and women’s participation in this system—as if women’s complicity *is* the problem. It is not. Complicity is one strategy of survival, even, we may wonder, resistance. There is no ideal place beyond capitalism, in which women can be free to be themselves—without the need for wearing make-up, enjoying femininity, embodying glamour or performing provocatively. As Mark Fisher observes, alternative and independent culture never maintains its outsider status, it always becomes incorporated into the mainstream. In this way, all oppositional positions to capitalism slip into capitalism, strengthening it and enlarging it, but sustaining it nevertheless. Thus, there is no place outside capitalism, no sustainable outsider position.<sup>222</sup> We must confront the conditions, which the capitalist system imposes on us. And within the system we continue to have misogynistic, repressive, dismissive attitudes towards women’s sexuality, desire and pleasure. This makes resistance within the system so important to nurture, so important to recognise. These particular writers’ position presume that there is some place outside of capitalism where women are free of social pressures that force them to take part in feminine practices of construction. My fear is that the focus on imagining what a feminist utopia might be like obstructs how we negotiate and problematise the image culture we are part of while also dismissing the types of engagement women might have with their particular types of gender construction.

What are these writers’ methods? They do not state how they formulate their opinions or find interviewees. By identifying “victims” without reflecting on what it means to perpetuate the trope of woman-as-victim, indeed to find victim-examples without making apparent the choices made in finding

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<sup>222</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism, Is There No Alternative?*, Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009.

participants, these writers produce arguments that, even despite their explicit intentions, in effect produce tools to attack other women. Friendly fire. At present we *are* surrounded by bodies on display. It is important to acknowledge that coercion, violence, exploitation and illegality are deplorable particularly when women are subjected to such abuses. To be clear, I am not suggesting that bodily display is either synonymous with abuse and victim narratives, nor are they beyond abuse and exploitation. What is vital is that we develop sophisticated feminist tools for recognising when and how erotic, sexual display is emancipatory, joyful and pleasurable for women.

Unfortunately, these texts do not begin to develop new ways of identifying the nuanced differences between emancipatory pleasurable practices and those that fall into the dominating narratives of misogyny. The insidious effects of these books are that women have no agency in the architecture of femininity and sexuality and are controlled on every level. They are taken seriously and are having perceivable impact on attitudes in informal and academic discussions as well as potentially in policy as these ideas become picked up by politicians (for example Dianne Abbott at present).

In *How To Be A Woman*, Caitlyn Moran brings humour and an excess of exclamation marks to the terrain of contemporary feminism.<sup>223</sup> Through reflecting on range of her own experiences from puberty, masturbation, child-birth and abortion, Moran sifts through the life-events diagnosing the feminist and not-feminist. In her chapter 'I Go Lap-Dancing!', Moran gives the feminist all-clear to pole-dancing classes: 'there's nothing contrary to the rules of strident feminism in gyms and dance classes offering pole-dancing lessons, and women attending them'.<sup>224</sup> In contrast strip clubs are not-feminist, but 'the bastard child of misogyny and commerce'; she describes them as cold,

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<sup>223</sup> Caitlyn Moran, *How to Be a Woman*, London: Ebury Press, 2011.

<sup>224</sup> Moran, *How to Be a Woman*, p. 173.

shameful places, reflecting badly on the men who go and the women who perform in them.<sup>225</sup> She writes, ‘One doesn’t want to be as blunt as to say “Girls get the fuck off the podium—you’re letting us all down,” but: “Girls get the fuck off the podium—you’re letting us all down.”’<sup>226</sup> Moran is clearly bemused at her own pronouncement that pole-dancing classes are OK, ‘Who would have thought! There seems no logic to it!’<sup>227</sup> She also approves of burlesque, noting the performers’ level of control and self-expression and also the presence of gay men, signalling that it is ‘culturally healthy for women’.<sup>228</sup> Referring jokingly to the metaphorical ‘rules of strident feminism’, Moran reveals her wish that there were such rules, and in this is the thrust of her book (underneath the jokes). But, there should not be such a book of rules (even though they would make life easier) because pronouncements overlook complicated anomalies and set up new monoliths. We do not need more monoliths—we need more problematisation.

With these critical discussions in mind, let us return to the voice of showgirls. *Is the showgirl an autonomous creation? Or is she co-authored in relation to a director, the audience, show organisers? Why burlesque, Jazmin?*

Jazmin: The reason I work in cabaret and in burlesque is because when I started tap dancing and started wanting to perform it was what was happening at the time, what was popular so at the time it was cabaret, so if I wanted to do a show, it was easy to do a show in a cabaret because it was rather than doing a whole show or a whole musical where you have to do the same thing every night, I wasn’t really interested in those kind of auditions or doing someone else’s show, but with cabaret I can say I wanna come and do a tap dance, I can do a three minute piece, I could try something out, I could just jump up and tap dance on the bar, and that was fine, that was good, that fitted in to this format.

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<sup>225</sup> Moran, *How to Be a Woman*, p. 172-173.

<sup>226</sup> Moran, *How to Be a Woman*, p. 172.

<sup>227</sup> Moran, *How to Be a Woman*, p. 173.

<sup>228</sup> Moran, *How to Be a Woman*, p. 176.

And then burlesque started becoming popular, so I continued tap-dancing but in a burlesque setting so there were—had to be clothes that were taken off at some point, *(laughs)* so it was just **changing the milieu**, the context of what I was already doing. And I remember once saying to, there was a girl-run burlesque or a lesbian-run or so burlesque in Sydney called Girlesque and I remember saying to them ‘so do we have to take our tops off, do we have to take some clothes off?’ and she said, ‘ah, not everything, but if not then I’ll probably run onstage at the end and deck you’, *(laughs)* so because its, because there is a skill which is tap-dancing, lots of people appreciate it because it stands apart from it and it means, you don’t have to, your not, obliged to be as sexual or as overtly—it doesn’t have to even if its in a strip—, burlesque-strip setting you can get away with being softer because you have skill.

Being a showgirl is about defining yourself in a context, with parameters set for you. Finding ways to perform what you would like to in front of an audience, and being flexible to adapt to particular ‘milieu’. Sometimes a showgirl choreographs her own routines, but other times she is part of a chorus and they perform synchronicity. Who owns the movements? Do you have to set the choreography to own the movements? How do you feel about performing choreography set by someone else, can you still use the movements to create your own performance?

Ashley: So in the beginning of the rehearsal process when you’re just getting the steps down ok. Like we’re all doing this, we’re all looking this way, we’re all, you know, arm goes here. But then, and sometimes maybe younger dancers are just trying to get it right, it’s when you shift into no, **now it’s mine**, so then you are, your core and your own energy, who you are, **infuses** you know, doing something like that *(lifts her arm into a pose)* with how you would do it, so everybody’s doing it slightly different, that’s interesting and it’s much more, yeah it’s just much more exciting and engaging and fulfilling for a dancer, to have that, so it is somebody else’s show, somebody else put it together, someone else choreographed all those

dance steps, but I think when maybe one thing that did help all of us is that instead of just your typical kind of chorus line, your chorus girl, we're given names. So you're given an actual character, for somebody like me, who has actually in a song they so oh Ava is erotic, so this is a clue for me to tap into that side of myself, so I think that helps, some.

The way you describe it, it sounds like your chorus line all did the moves differently, but when I saw your show you they were incredibly synchronised.

Ashley: If you want a chorus line to look like, to not have individual personality then you want all the high-kicks or whatever to be at the same level and you generally do look for similar height, similar body type, and that really doesn't interest me. *(laughs)* It's like, yeah, its almost, for me it can be visually appealing, but it's, it almost in a way devalues the person. It's just really, objects. Whereas this style, the, person behind, you know the person inside of the performers is fully there. Or a character that they've created. For me, Ava is kind of a character but she's also really me *(laughs)* so I'm really bringing myself to the table with her.

What you say about the visual appeal of the kick-line, the selection process that produces an even line, can be brutal for a spectacle showgirl. What is that like? How does it feel to be criticised and monitored?

Jacqui: We did one show a day. Probably 45-minute show an' the rest of the time you were just kind of shopping, laying by the pool. Do nothing. But, I did put weight on. *(pauses)* So, yes. And then I got a little bit bigger. And then I had to take a little bit of time off because I was a little bit of heavy girl *(laughs)* for a while. So I had about a year and a half where I was kind of like—kept going to auditions and they'd go, 'Mmmm. Yeah, you can dance. But come back when you're 8 stone 4'. That's what I kept getting told 8 stone 4. So obviously that was a kind of set weight for height. I'm 5' 6. So 8 stone 4 is obviously, you know, what—I don't know who decided on that weight. But anyway. So I took a bit of time off.

So I did 10 years with a bit of a break (*pauses*) here an' there. A break when I was fat and break when I was (*pauses*) injured. But there was a lot of pressure. Like some contracts I was on, we used to get weighed every week. An' if we'd put on a kilo, you'd have a \$5 fine. And if you didn't lose it by the next week, it would go up another \$5. So that was a bit of a nightmare—you know, you were always getting weighed and poked and prodded and kinda—so that's hard. That is hard. Because it kinda—I think it—psychologically, I—as soon as I stopped dancing, I lost loads of weight. 'Cause it's like, you don't need to be thin. But now I'm naturally thin. Whereas at the time, I always struggled with my weight.

Jacqui identifies the psychological implications of being observed and controlled by the management. Do showgirls view this negatively, the ways in which they are judged and compared? Betty Bunch, a showgirl in 1960s Las Vegas conceives of the obsession with looks as almost, somewhat, progressive:

The world of professional performing has a one-track mind for women: looks, looks, looks. But one of the singular charms of show business is the indifference we denizens feel toward anything except looks and talent. We don't care about your color, your faith, your pocketbook, your background, your education or anything except your talent. Oddly, looks are considered a **talent**. Like a really gorgeous girl, who can nether dance nor sing nor act, is still spoken of as talent.<sup>229</sup>

For a spectacle showgirl, making sense of the ways in which she is judged, critiqued and rejected is important, she must develop a pragmatic attitude to career success and failure to put judgements into context. For a burlesque or avant-garde Showgirl, her 'look' is up to her, is her creation. Does she create herself alone, or does she collaborate, drawing on the opinions of others?

Jazmin: I like working with people who—who are, say, 'Try that on,' and then, 'Try this'. It's the same with make-up. Like I can do my own. But I much prefer—I like working with people who do my hair and my make-up. So it's kind

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<sup>229</sup> Betty Bunch, *High Heels and Headdresses, Memoir of a Vintage Vegas Showgirl*, LifeStories e-book, 2011.

of a luxury, so I can think about something else. And also it gives you something else. It gives something else to your character. Because it's not you. It's not how you would make yourself up. It's how someone else sees this character. So it makes it more of a **collaboration** also.

Jazmin works with others to create her character. Collaboration is not only about character construction or performers working together to produce a show; Maria recognises that being seen by men and performing their fantasy and extending it, gives her an energy as a performer.

Maria: I talked to one guy recently and I found that conversation really interesting, he was the guy who organised the performance space where we performed in two or three months ago and he was very— the first few encounters that I had had with him were very well, a bit uncomfortable for me, because I felt very objectified and I felt like he had this very strong, I wasn't even performing, I was just myself. I mean, I did go there like dressed well and not just like myself at home in front of the TV, but he really very strongly gave me the impression that my idea— his idea of me was very this kind of you know good-looking sexy woman onstage, like a **projection basically for the male gaze**, which was what he was doing with me. But also what he was expecting from me, from my, from our concert, my band's concert there, so after we had performed he came to talk to me and said that he was really surprised because he had expected that only guys in his— in their fifties and sixties would be there, kind of expecting this young pretty sexy thing onstage who would sing sexy songs in a sexy voice, something like that. And he was really surprised that there were also lots of women in the audience and he said that he found it interesting that it actually worked for both 'cos he was observing the audience and he said well on the one hand the women really empathised with you or sympathised and they could identify with what you were saying and with your songs and with your kind of perspective on men and on life as a woman, so with the lyrics basically strongly, or mostly also I guess with the persona but what carries this part is definitely the lyrics that I write. While on the other hand the guy was saying well on the other hand you still had this, you gave away, or you offered this kind of **projection plane** for, for the male gaze and there

was still men who are like ‘oohh’ you know I like like staring at you, kind of. So it worked both ways and I actually I like that very much and I found that very satisfying because I guess in a way we both, I wanna achieve both things in a way, it would be even nicer if the guys would also get like both levels, but, but surprisingly to me it actually works both ways and usually the women are actually, the women actually laugh most, so the laughs that I get are mostly from women or as far as I can tell. And the guys are I guess also satisfied (*laughs*) pleased. Yep. I do want both, definitely, I think I even I need that male gaze, I feel like I if I don’t have that kind of you know objectifying, it doesn’t have to be objectifying, but the sort of, if I don’t feel that, that I’m attractive to men, if I don’t feel I can put myself out there and flirt with men in the audience I’m lacking some sort of energy, like some sort of input or motivation to act so I really I like this kind of interaction and the kind of risk also involved in that, it’s difficult too, it’s not always easy like to be there and really flirt, not just pretend to flirt but really interact with people in the audience, but I do need that.

Maria’s reflection is so startlingly honest of her relation to men in the audience. This is a really generative collaboration of showgirl and male viewer. It can however, go wrong. There are a few specific contexts with an exclusively male audience. And if they have not seen many women, let alone showgirls, what’s that like, Jacqui?

Jacqui: One contract we did was in Belize. It was for the forces. So we went out. It was horrendous. And I would never ever do it again. But it was one of the best experiences of my life, in a way. We were only there for 12 days. We flew into Belize and then we got flown by helicopter into the middle of the jungle. There was—(*laughs*) we did a show—I mean, what were they thinking? We did a show for men who have not seen women for how many weeks? (*pauses*) The daytime was fine. (*pauses*) We were playing football with them outside. We had a laugh. It was great. During the show, there was—there was us dancers. There was a singer. There was a comedian. There was a band. So there was quite a lot of us that were all together. During the show, course they’re getting drunk and de de de de de. By the end of it, it was almost a riot. (*pauses*) Because you just parade some girls in



front of these men who haven't seen women for how many months they've been living in the jungle. It's not a good scenario. Mix that with beer. We ended up—they'd put us in—you know one of those *(pauses)* army hut things. *(pauses)* We ended up surrounded. They were trying to knock it down. We were screaming. We're in wardrobes. Like inside this thing. And this whole thing was just shaking. There was how many people outside trying to get in. It was—that—that was scary. I have to say that was scary. *(pauses)* We were on our own. Anyway, they got caught. They were locked up. And we were then put in the *(pauses)* sergeants' mess, I think, with an armed guard. *(laughs)* That one was scary. But *(pauses)* that was such an amazing experience. When do you ever get flown on an RAF helicopter into the jungle? Get to do, you know, all these things?

I mean, I was 17 then. *(pauses)* You know, it was kind of a scary time. But good to have done. So, yeah. Don't let me make it sound like it was horrible. Because it wasn't. It was amazing.

Artist Jemima Stehli adopted the position of the stripper in her photographic series *Strip*. Power in the art world is questioned as she draws parallels between stripping and exposing oneself to the (male) art world interlocutors. She stands with her back to the camera in front of a seated male who is identified only by his job title, 'Critic', 'Writer', 'Curator' or 'Dealer'. We see a long cable-release is visible in his hand. In each photograph Stehli is in a different state of undress caught in the act of stripping. The precise moment the photograph was taken during each strip is controlled by the seated male, his power doubled through the status of his job in the art world. But he is the pawn in Stehli's game. This is her scenario; it is her art practice, concept, intellect, skill, and her body that she displays. She is active. The seated male is unable to not look; he must play the stooge. His level of complicity or discomfort contributes to the tension in the photographs.

Men do not have a pre-existing position from which to view showgirls. In order to be a showgirl spectator, we must all negotiate, improvise how we

look, men included. The male gaze is not about men, but how we construct the paradigms for viewing, and thus it is a theoretical gaze. And theory must be applied, updated, re-written in order to maintain relevancy. Jo Weldon writes:

One of my biggest problems with some of the discussions about the male gaze is the assumption that because the male gaze says it is so, we must treat it as if it is true. I don't even believe all men have the male gaze, much less that if it did indeed dominate, it would be the primary way to define the social impact of my actions.<sup>230</sup>

What I wanted to address in this scene is how the role of men connected to showgirls is constructed. The feminist arguments I point to re-configure earlier feminist tools, for example, the male gaze, objectification, fears of sexualisation and consumerism—re-working arguments with a contemporary hysteria. Thus we have differing ideas of what the male gaze is. Maria's use of the term describes the energy generated by men as they watch her perform. For Weldon it is the critical tool applied to her. It circulates as a monolith, it has become the tablet of stone onto which particular feminists project onto. As a paradigm—it has lost its relevance. As a description of an energy felt by showgirls as men watch, it still has some use. And from the experiences of my interviewees, there are contexts in which showgirls have strategies and tools for negotiating, pleasing, sating a male viewer, and other times, where, they do not.

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<sup>230</sup> Weldon, *Burlesque Handbook*, p. 230.

# Scene 3



George has just seen the studio boss who has told him his days as a star are numbered, he must make way for the new ‘talkies’. Next, we see George alone in his dressing room. He knocks over a glass. The sound of the glass knocked over is audible. George moves other items on his dressing table, lifting them up and dropping them to hear the noise they make. He stares at himself and lets out a cry—but nothing comes out. George is mute. He opens his door and looks out, onto the studio lot. A single showgirl giggles as she comes towards him, wearing a tiny cone hat, a glittery leotard with a tiny skirt, and bow-tied shoes. She is joined by other showgirls until they fill the screen—laughing together as they walk towards the camera, arm-in-arm. The showgirls have it all: voice, body, looks, costume, and community. How do showgirls create themselves in relation to other women, and support other women’s self-creation? How do women view other women?

The ‘male gaze’, whether useful or not, gives us a framework for discussing how men watch women. The ‘female gaze’ has been written about, without

the same traction as the ‘male gaze’. I shall avoid using the phrase female gaze as this returns us to particular technological ways of looking. Because we need new phrases and new tools more in tune with our technological context, I avoid using terms that emerge from earlier modes of viewing.

Familiar narratives of women looking at women reproduce competitiveness, jealousy and hatred between women.<sup>231</sup> In spring, 2012 a media furore was created when the journalist Samantha Brick published a couple of articles exposing that women hated her for being beautiful: ‘If you’re a woman reading this, I’d hazard that you’ve already formed your own opinion about me—and it won’t be very flattering. For while many doors have been opened (literally) as a result of my looks, just as many have been metaphorically slammed in my face—and usually by my own sex’.<sup>232</sup> Tracking the comments online to the article, and follow-on television interviews and discussion, Brick’s position elicited a toxic outpouring. Much of the commentary responded to Brick’s assertion she is beautiful. Very few responses reflected on the idea she put forward that women hate beautiful women. While this was a sensationalist *Daily Mail* article and must be read within this context, a set of lingering notions of a pettiness to women’s own responses to images of other women disturbed me.

Against this, a type of showgirl community takes on a gravitas. How do showgirls develop their own spaces and perform in ways that open up sites of fantasy for other women to enjoy?

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<sup>231</sup> The films *Showgirls* and *Black Swan* spring immediately to mind, but also *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Working Girl*, *The Women*, etc, etc.

<sup>232</sup> Samantha Brick, “There are downsides to looking this pretty”: Why women hate me for being beautiful, *The Daily Mail*, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2012, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2124246/Samantha-Brick-downsides-looking-pretty-Why-women-hate-beautiful.html#ixzz2ECfDuSCB>> [accessed 5th December].

The phrase ‘safe spaces’ reoccurs in academic research across disciplines to define geographic, conceptual or online spaces that allow for play and negotiation without judgement. Applied in studies of sexuality it has been used to define homosocial contexts in which women can experiment or step outside of their usual constructions of self to explore more outrageous or adventurous versions of femininity and sexuality.

Taking part in a series of pole-dancing classes, Feona Attwood and Samantha Holland wrote of the ways in which the group of women taking part viewed the activity and their participation over the course.<sup>233</sup> They note that as a form of exercise pole-dancing creates an audience of performers, performing for each other—women performing for other women, feeling the effects of the difficulty of the moves and seeing bruises develop on their skin, while watching the grace and beauty of the moves when executed by the others in the class. Speaking to their classmates, comments emerged revealing pleasures in feeling sexy, performing femininity and operating outside of a male audience. Thus, the safe space created by pole-dancing classes enabled the women ‘to “see”, “be” and “do” sexiness’ whilst being cheered on by other women that ‘may be as close as we currently get to a positive experience of sexualization in contemporary culture’.<sup>234</sup>

Katy Pilcher has produced an ethnographic study of male-strip shows for women. The findings of her study revealed some interesting ambivalence—while certain kinds of outrageous behaviour were encouraged, the MC’s insistent controlling of the event meant a quite limited range of heteronormative interactions were produced. However, the participants still reported pleasures in attending and this appeared to be because they could

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<sup>233</sup> Feona Attwood and Samantha Holland, ‘Keeping fit in 6 inch heels: The Mainstreaming of Pole Dancing’, in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualisation of Western Culture*, ed. by Feona Attwood, London: I.B.Tauris, 2009, pp. 165-182.

<sup>234</sup> Attwood and Holland, ‘Keeping fit in 6 inch heels’, p. 180.

‘socialise with other women in a “female space”, that is, one free from predatory heterosexual men’. Therefore Pilcher emphasises the space may be pleasurable rather than safe.<sup>235</sup>

Safe spaces, therefore, are precarious: glimmers of truly safe spaces emerge, but they are tentative. It is imperative that safe spaces exist to offer alternative locations for pleasure and experimentation that allow for reflection without too quickly having normalising narratives imposed upon them.

What type of safe space does the showgirl provide? Scenes like burlesque offer these glimmers of a safe space across its aggregate components, from live shows to online forums. Within the immediate, transitory moment of performance, the showgirl’s moment, I was aware, on occasion, during my research in Chapter Two, of a complete pleasure. How aware are showgirls of this? Are they looking to inspire women in particular? Who are you performing for, Ashley?

Ashley: I mean one of great things that for me, is inspiring other women. I love that. Feeling like you don’t have to be, you know in Los Angeles you have that total like Hollywood kind of look, it’s like, no, you don’t have to look like that (*laughs*) look, right? So that’s part of what I’m doing up there is wanting to **connect with women and empower and inspire** other women, so that’s a lot of my **connection**, but my connection too is also **a playful one**. I like **being playful with the audience** and I think that that thread is kind of there throughout. There’s **an awareness of I’m performing for you, and you’re in the audience and you’re here to have a good time and let’s play**, so, yeah. There’s a lot of that going on.

I think I’ve never been, felt more **empowered**, it’s so fascinating to me that you know some people might go (*sharp intake of breath*) you know, how could you get

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<sup>235</sup> Katy Pilcher, ‘A ‘sexy space’ for women? Heterosexual women’s experiences of a male strip show venue’, *Leisure Studies*, vol. 30, iss. 2, p. 15.

up there in lingerie and bounce around, but you're not— but you're fully in control, you're fully like just saying I'm a beautiful woman. And I think it allows other women to access that for themselves.

I love too because you know there's such a stigma about for women, about being over 40 and that was the other thing I was inside of, I was like I'm doing this for the women over 40 too, and the curvy women and I also have two children, so I'm a mother and so that was, all of those things I was very much inside of and in, and being inspired to do this and to continue.

I've always wanted to be **authentic** and **fully alive** and **fully shining** and **radiant** and knowing that some people may not like it, and that's ok. In the end, I wanna be surrounded by the people who go yes! I love it and who go, **I'm gonna shine my light** like that too, you know.

Ashley identifies the type of energy she is performing and for whom. Her descriptions of connecting to the audience and radiating from within herself build on the earlier observations of glamour that note that the glamorous exterior needs to connect with an interior to project outwards. Her experiences as a performer and in life contribute to her ability to reflect and identify her motivations for performing and the way she hopes to inspire her audience—so that they can 'shine' their own lights. But how is that encouraged between performers, so that they can develop their onstage personas? Do you provide sisterly encouragement of your chorus girls' personas, Amanda?

Amanda: Like one of my dancers that I can particularly think of. I took her—I took her to the Magic Castle. Well, we took her. A couple of us took her to the Magic Castle. And like I'm all dolled up in my like vintage 1960s, whatever, Ya-Ya thing. And, you know, I had long, long hair and short bangs. Like I kind of had like the— a lil' Bettie Page-y. A lil' bit. For a little while. Fan bun, I'm all dressed up. Bright red lips. Fake lashes. The whole thing. I'm like ready to go to the Magic

Castle. You have to dress up there. And she shows up. And I'm like—I'm like, 'Oh, do you want to borrow some lipstick?' And she was like, 'No. I don't wear lipstick'. And I'm like, she's refusing to wear heels. She's like, 'I don't wear heels. I don't wear lipstick'. We went through this whole thing like—like there was something wrong with me for wearing lipstick. And I'm there in my like super-tight like pin-uppy looking dress. Like I don't usually dress like that. But it was really fun. And, you know, my hair all did. And I'm looking at her and I'm like, 'What the hell'. And now she's one of my girls who is like really excited that she's lost another 12lbs. And she's super-hot. And she wears these like sexy-sexy things and she's like—you know. **She's blossoming.** I'm watching this woman in her late 20s like blossom. It's hot (*laughs*). It's a really cool thing to watch. And it's—so for her, her intention is to develop that part of herself. She's not doing it because she thinks that she's gonna get something out of some guy. She's not doing it because she—you know, a whole another level of it is like because she can't afford to eat. You know, that's another reason that that type of entertainment gets done. But her reason for doing it is **really sexy and playful and fun.** Like she straight-up wants to have **sexy fun.** And that's really fun. We like fun. All of us.

We all want to have fun, take pleasure in ourselves, and not feel ashamed or belittled because of our identity construction. Amanda talks about the impact of performing 'showgirl' on one of her dancers—the motivations for wishing to be part of Amanda's show and developing her femininity beyond the stage context. So much of the showgirl *is* about performing femininity. The showgirl offers her audience a space to enjoy her particular formation of femininity. We the audience are given permission. What about the performing context, is that a safe space? How do individual performers, used to competing with each other, develop positive relationships between themselves and foster supportive dialogue, sharing of opportunities, and building a community? Are there sisterly relations between you?

Felicity: When I went to Marseille, that was my first stage job. You see, the other was a film. I went—I was—I'd undressed in the dressing room. You know,



we were all in a row with mirrors, our own mirrors, you see. And I think I'd taken off my top and was making up. And for some reason, I wanted to go to the loo. Which was outside. And I went. And when I came back, they'd locked the door. I couldn't get back in. And I was in this passage and, you know, sort of screaming and screaming. And it was because it was my initiation. Because I was new to it. How it had got out that I hadn't been on a job before, I don't know. I was—I was a bit alarmed actually (*laughs*). I thought, 'God almighty!' And it was stagehands coming—I didn't have much to show actually (*laughs*). But it was very funny. But eventually, I think I beat on the door and beat on the door and made such a noise they eventually let me in (*laughs*).

Beatrix: At the moment there's a lot of competition for the jobs and especially in London with the current climate and the current jobs that are available I think there's a lot of almost one-up-manship, everyone wants to be step ahead so that they get those jobs and I've got a bit tired of the digital spaces being places where people either brag or try to jostle for attention and I was thinking about this just the other day and saw that the Facebook groups that are set up for Burlesque New York and Burlesque Deutschland they're **very positive spaces** where people are talking about, not necessarily what costume they're working on but say they're working on a project that **benefits the community** as a whole, they'll post about it in these groups and then everybody's up to date with what's going on and people will post to say, 'Hey I'm in this town on these dates does anyone have any jobs?' and casting calls will go up and they're **friendly spaces**. And I realised that the scene in London in particular is very segmented and there is all this talk of cliques and people making jobs just for themselves and their friends and—I thought I've had enough of this, I need to do something to initiate change. I'm not naïve enough to think I can change the world, but I can't just bitch and moan about a lack of **community** I should do something to make one. So I set up Burlesque London group on Facebook and its now got about a hundred members and I'm trying to get people engaging with the group on a, like an industry level so this week I've posted a question: what inspires you, and where appropriate post a link so that we can see it too, let's share. And that's got a really nice thread of comments now of people posting all these great influences, none of them are burlesque. There's things like,

there was a, I can't pronounce her name, but there was an old fifties musical movie dancer that somebody mentioned and posted a video to, and I watched that this afternoon and thought wow! That is brilliant! **That is inspiring!** Thanks! Let's share more of this! And somebody else was saying, they were listing illustrators, and authors and somebody said Lady Macbeth, you know there's this great like melting pot of different influences and it's great to remind ourselves that we are all unique and we all have our own thing going on, and **let's not homogenise** to compete. Let's stay who we are. **Let's stay true** but then let's share so that we can also **feed off each others individuality to strengthen our own.** And I'm just hoping that that will grow and the stigma with Facebook groups and this fear that they're just going to spam you, hopefully that will die down and when there's a nice little warm space brewing I hope to start bringing in promoters to this group so that when they have spaces that they need to fill they can post a casting call. Or if somebody's visiting from Scotland they can say, 'hey I'm in town, is anyone here a promoter who can book me?' That kind of thing. Because I think we need it, we need to stop fighting and **support each other** and **help each other** and **help the industry as a whole,** rather than competing and then unintentionally undercutting each other because we're all fighting for jobs and none of us has enough so we have to take what we're offered and it's crap. Let's stop that (*laughs*) and get on with each other and be nice and **supportive.**

The strip club, the context in which stripper showgirls perform, is directed at a male customer. As individual performers, hustling for private dances with men in the space, they are set in competition with the other performers. Given this experience, how far from a safe space was it, Chris?

Chris: No matter how **intimate the con felt** the customer would just leave like that, I mean, **a curtain would drop down** at a certain point and they'd had enough and they were out, **connection broken.** The girls were not nice to each other. The management was certainly **abhorrent.** I mean everyone was at each other all the time, everyone was only out for themselves, so it was like, a perfect microcosm of real life (*laughs*).

This particularly exploitative model of stripping is not the only one, although perhaps it is the dominant one that is reconfigured in lap-dancing club culture. Lily Burana, who performed all over America in order to reflect on the various laws, norms and etiquettes around stripping, writes of her experience of working at the Lusty Lady in San Francisco, a peep show that is ‘as close to a liberating a force as a sex business can get’. The hiring adverts highlight that it is woman owned and operated and ‘fun, friendly, feminist’.<sup>236</sup> She describes the relation with her co-workers:

Dancing together, naked, side-by-side onstage, we Lusties grow very aware of the individual beauty of our bodies. Not having to compete with one another for tips, we become friends. **We become agents of our own path.** And, since we never have to hustle to make our money, we are never humbled by the word *no*.<sup>237</sup>

The Lusty Lady continues to operate, now as ‘the world’s only unionized worker owned peep show co op’.<sup>238</sup> This poses the question: can the present model of strip clubs be moderated in such a way as to offer a ‘safer space’ for stripper showgirls and also for female patrons—female patrons, like me, when I visited Spearmint Rhino? As a woman watching another woman perform in a strip club for men, it seems barely possible to feel a sense of sisterhood. But, I did, like Burana:

There is nothing in the club that can compete with what’s happening onstage. A bomb could drop in the parking lot and no one would move a muscle. She has single-handedly brought the entire audience to its knees, this common genius, this protean hottie. And here is the heart of striptease: You can analyze and deconstruct the act all you want—you will never totally demystify it. You can’t break the spell. Nothing can fully explain why some people take to strip clubs—sometimes to the point of addiction, why some find the very idea offensive, and why others just don’t get it and shrug. What I like best about stripping is this, the arbitrariness. The mystery. The fact that you can’t definitively state what makes one woman stand out from the next. That some tiny part of every **dancer’s soul**

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<sup>236</sup> Burana, *Strip City*, p. 198.

<sup>237</sup> Burana, *Strip City*, p. 204. The Lusty Lady has also been written about in Tawnya Dudash, ‘Peepshow Feminism and Siobhan Brooks, in ‘Dancing Toward Freedom’ both in *Whores and Other Feminists*, ed. by Jill Nagle, New York, NY: Routledge 1997, pp. 98-118 and pp. 252-55, and Elisabeth Eaves, *Bare: On Women, Dancing, Sex, and Power*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002.

<sup>238</sup> Lusty Lady website, <<http://www.lustyladysf.com>> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> January 2013].

**spills out when she performs**, whether she means it to or not. That you can see a woman totally nude before you, and there's still so much about her that you don't, and can't, know. And that you can never predict that singular instance, like right now, when the world falls away and the only thing that matters is the light falling on the stage and the dancer unfurling herself against the music the way a singer wraps her breath around a note.<sup>239</sup>

The pleasure that women take in viewing other women performing in erotic ways—even when the performance is directed at a male audience, can inform both a sense of who they are, and who they aspire to be—how they might want to position themselves in society and in whose footsteps they follow. Jo Weldon writes of her enchantment:

I loved stripteasers. I also loved other female stars in film and photographs, but I felt a kinship to the strippers that was special. I could tell that their lives hadn't been easy, and for me that was part of the appeal. The photographs I admired most weren't mere modelling shots; they showed women scantily clad, dancing with abandon and **acting like tigers—owning and dominating** the viewer with **exaggerated movement** and **shameful display**. I knew instinctively that these were **my people, my forebears**, and that they had the energy I wanted to carry and continue.<sup>240</sup>

Jo Weldon (performing as Jo Boobs) was formerly a stripper, now a burlesque showgirl and headmistress at the New York School of Burlesque.<sup>241</sup> Jo King (performing as Goodtime Mama JoJo) similarly started her career in London pubs in the seventies, evolving her stripping to fit into burlesque. King set up the London Academy of Burlesque and the London School of Striptease in 2000, the very first schools of their kind in Europe, with the aim of sharing her celebration of her naked body with other women. She says, 'My self-imposed mission is to help all women who attend my academy to **lose their**

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<sup>239</sup> Burana, *Strip City*, p. 180.

<sup>240</sup> Weldon, *Burlesque Handbook*, p. 2.

<sup>241</sup> New York School of Burlesque, <<http://www.schoolofburlesque.com>> [accessed 30th December 2012].

**inhibitions**, let go of negativity, **explore their creativity** and rejoice in the sheer joy of being female!’<sup>242</sup>

Having both started their careers in strip clubs before becoming part of the new burlesque scenes in London and New York respectively, they draw on this background to give them a sensitive understanding of how bodies perform nudity in public. Both find ways of giving other women permission to be themselves, in class, for use onstage, or developing the confidence to love their bodies in life.

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<sup>242</sup> London Academy of Burlesque, <<http://www.londonacademyofburlesque.com>> and London School of Striptease, <<http://www.londonschoolofstriptease.co.uk/index.html>> [accessed 30th December 2012].

## Scene 4



Peppy chats to George in a stairwell—she is going up, having just signed a contract with the film studio George has just left—having decided he will not be part of the new ‘talkies’. After they chat, they go their separate ways. Peppy calls from the top of the stairs to George, he turns round to see and she does a few Charleston steps for him. She is herself. She expresses her feelings through her body as well as her voice—articulate with both. She comes from the same system as George—they are both tap-dancers who have cut their teeth in the theatre, but she finds ways to be herself and adapt and evolve within the changing technological landscape of film. Peppy is the feminised workforce, her fluidity and adaptability enables her integration into the new regime.

Peppy exudes charm, charisma, body confidence and delights in herself. Catherine Hakim, calls this erotic capital.<sup>243</sup> In her deadpan, dispassionate

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<sup>243</sup> Catherine Hakim, ‘Erotic Capital’, *European Sociological Review*, vol. 26, iss. 5, 2010, pp. 499-51 and Catherine Hakim, *Honey Money: The Power of Erotic Capital*, London: Allen Lane, 2011.

tone, Hakim adds erotic capital to Pierre Bourdieu's list of personal assets: economic, cultural, and social capital.<sup>244</sup> She describes its six elements (or seven, if you include fertility, which she adds is an optional extra) in detail. Briefly they are beauty, sexual attractiveness, charm (which Hakim acknowledges has been explored in some depth by Arlie Russell Hochschild in her study of emotional labour), liveliness and sexual competence.<sup>245</sup> Indirectly she contributes to our understanding of showgirl appeal when she writes: 'In most cultures liveliness is displayed in dancing skills'.<sup>246</sup>

Peppy, or any showgirl, has multiple erotic capital elements. Those who have erotic capital attributes can use it for their own privilege and economic gain. As women in general have more erotic capital than men, they *can* benefit from it. Hakim notes that erotic capital has been suppressed by both patriarchy and, she cites, feminists who deny its potential advantage for women. Thus, in quite joyless terms, Hakim's thesis proposes a route to economic success through the battlefield of neoliberalism. The 'meritocratic capitalist values of the western world' she writes, 'invite us to admire people who exploit their human capital for personal gain'. She encourages that we should admire the same way, 'people who exploit their erotic capital for its full value'.<sup>247</sup> Seen through the prism of our service economy Peppy's success is also about her ability to perform adaptability.

Within the live encounter, the showgirl-moment, how do showgirls respond and adapt to their audience? Can the audience affect the action onstage? And how can that interaction be shaped?

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<sup>244</sup> Pierre Bourdieu (1983) 'The forms of capital', trans. by Richard Nice, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. by J. G. Richardson, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 241–258.

<sup>245</sup> Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling: Twentieth Anniversary Edition with a New Afterword*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

<sup>246</sup> Hakim, *Erotic Capital*, p. 500.

<sup>247</sup> Hakim, *Honey Money*, p. 193.

Jacqui: A lot of times, (*pauses*) you know, it was just (*pauses*) boring audiences that you kind of like, 'Oh, God'. You know. 'Is there anybody out there?' And then obviously the more you—the less you're getting back from them, the less you're giving. So it's a catch-22 situation. An' then the next day, you'd get like a brilliant load of people in. An' the show would—you know, the energy onstage would go up (*pauses*) by 100%. An' so it's kind of a **feed-off-the-audience** type thing.

Beatrix: I can read an audience much quicker and easier than I could in the past, so, I find performing now, is often, where possible, a bit like herding and you have to herd up the audience and get them to concentrate on what you're doing. If it's a bad audience for whatever reason then maybe it's a bar and there's too much alcohol or the show's been structured badly and it's too long or it's too short or you're on too early or too late or just the architecture of the place is wrong so the audience can't really see the stage and the architecture geared towards conversation rather than a show. If the audience are like this then it's bad then there's absolutely no way that you could win them over because they've made the decision as to where the focus is in which case you have to kind of **dance through them, rather than at them**. And you have to know that they're not going to give you any energy back and you can't build a **rapport** with them, you can't play with the things that they're enjoying or not enjoying. And then an act tends to be quite, for me quite flat and I'm going through the motions and I'm on auto-pilot and I'm doing the bits that, that I enjoy doing and the bits that tend to work for most audiences because there might be one person in there that's watching what I'm doing. If it's a good audience then they will make a **dynamic** with you and there will be times when an audience gives me the energy to put something new into an act and it's not a conscious decision when I'm onstage. But if say, recently, an example would be, recently at *Kinky and Quirky* in Exeter I was performing my *Venus in Furs* number and that can suck in an audience, it doesn't always do it but if the conditions are right I can get everyone's attention make a really strong atmosphere throughout the room, make it really quiet and tense. And this audience, they were so, they had been unprepared for that moment, they were expecting raucous wild burlesque and they saw this quiet theatrical piece, but enjoyed it because of its connections with burlesque and it was intriguing and



fascinating and they were all with me. There was one woman that was shouting like positive heckles which was breaking the, breaking the atmosphere every now and then and punctuating it, but in a good a way. And she was **fuelling my sense of character**, so the character is, like a, she's supposed to be the true... potential of sadism, like the woman isn't sadistic, but she represents what sadism could be at its greatest form. So, if I have an audience that are with me, **I can feel the character come through, stronger**. And so, that, that night, I had tied the waistband of my cloak, closed again, its just a simple knot, and normally I tie the knot at a medium speed and then pull it tight, quite fast and let the end go. And this night I'd, because the audience were good and they were with me I'd taken longer to put the cloak on and because I'd done that I was running out of time to tie it and being in, in the character and having to do this knot at speed I really tied the knot quickly and pulled it really tight quickly, it was all one fluid movement, rather than being two parts and it got a cheer and that had never happened at that point in the act before. So, yeah, audiences help kind of make conditions for different possibilities to come through and they'll **encourage**, different **audiences will encourage different aspects of an act**. Some audiences want a laugh in which case if I've got an act that's got funny bits in, I can play those up and kind of ham them up and then sometimes an audience want something a bit sexier and sassier in which case tone the haminess down and change the choreography slightly so there's a bit more posing. So yeah, of course, audiences do affect what I do considerably.

Ashley:        You **cannot fully control an audience** I mean, you can't fully like, 'I'm gonna make you pay attention to me'. In fact, you might actually, maybe, maybe that's somebody else's energy and they've harnessed that and perhaps for them. Not for me, though, my—I'm all about an invitation. So for me it's a continual inviting and I find, that if I have a little bit of an off night, and I'm not fully inside of that and I feel the less connectedness so there's an element of a certain **a level of power of how I'm showing up in order to have that interaction**, with the audience, definitely. I don't say its fully one hundred per cent of my control, but definitely there's a power there that if you're tapped into it and you're inside of it and you're truly, really your heart needs to be open. You can't be up there just

strutting around, you could, I mean, you can, you can be up there strutting around and maybe people enjoy that too, but I find that the more my heart is open and loving, actually, just truly like loving, we're all one, the more connected, the more attention I feel, the more eyes I feel I'm connecting with, yeah, there's definitely something to that. Yeah.

Hakim's concept of erotic capital reduces successful interaction down to economic gain. Following the testimonies of the showgirls, I would contest that this is what doing showgirl is about. From these reflections, adapting to the audience is about connection, rapport and responding to and feeding off energy, rather than about serving them or giving them what they want—not for the showgirl's status benefits. Looking over the developing lexicon of words, I would like to suggest, that doing showgirl is more about: being proud, improvising, celebrating confidence, community, empowering and inspiring, depicting radiance and authenticity, and 'through this becoming agents'.

Perhaps, what erotic capital is without the economic agenda is simply, femininity. Femininity remains a contentious point within feminism.<sup>248</sup> The positions on offer suggest that feminine expressions like wearing lipstick and heels are about 'choice', and thus legitimate or that our choice is of no consequence, so go ahead and wear lipstick. Alternatively to wear lipstick is to perform our subordination to men.<sup>249</sup> In so many formulations, femininity is conflated with consumerism, as Penny writes 'Femininity itself has become a brand, a narrow and shrinking formula of commoditised identity which can be sold back to women who have become alienated from their own power as

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<sup>248</sup> For full accounts from differing perspectives, see a rationalisation of burlesque's relation to feminism in Willson's *The Happy Stripper*, pp. 111-125 and radical feminist Sheila Jeffreys's review of feminist literature on beauty practices in *Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful Cultural Practices in the West*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp. 5-27.

<sup>249</sup> These positions circulate widely online, on blogs and newspapers though can be attributed to Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism*, London: Little, Brown and Co, 1998, Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women*, London: Vintage, 1991, and Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny*.

living, loving, labouring beings’.<sup>250</sup> Linking together eating disorders, beauty industry hypocrisy, corporate fashion advice, and cosmetic surgery, Kat Banyard points to the subtle malignancies of self-objectification that have become part of contemporary women’s lives.<sup>251</sup> She raises the question, whether women ‘would genuinely want to continue with practices of objectification if true gender equality were achieved’.<sup>252</sup>

Between the ‘erotic capital’ of beauty and practices of objectification, what is emphasised across these perspectives is that femininity is about the perception of others. What about the pleasures of doing femininity? Julia Serano writes a persuasive defence of femininity as more than performative from the perspective of a trans woman, merely.<sup>253</sup> She brings together the ways in which sexism manifests differently. ‘Traditional sexism’ seeks to subordinate femininity.<sup>254</sup> ‘Oppositional sexism’ insists that feminine expressions must not emanate from biological men and masculinity from women.<sup>255</sup> Certain feminist positions belittle femininity as artificial, policing gender in ways similar to other forms of sexism. Underlying these sexisms, there remains unchallenged the inference that women use femininity to please men, which

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<sup>250</sup> Penny, *Meat Market*, p. 4.

<sup>251</sup> Kat Banyard, *The Equality Illusion: The Truth About Women & Men Today*, London: Faber and Faber, 2010 pp. 15-44.

<sup>252</sup> Banyard, *The Equality Illusion*, p. 22.

<sup>253</sup> Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007. Serano provides a useful definition of femininity, emphasising the breadth of manifestations, it: ‘refers to the behaviors, mannerisms, interests, and ways of presenting oneself that are typically associated with those who are female. Thus, the first thing we must acknowledge is that femininity is a collection of heterogeneous traits. This is an important point to make, as femininity is often assumed to be a monolithic entity—i.e., a “package deal” of gender expressions, traits, and qualities that are inevitably bundled together. The fact that individual feminine traits are separable is evident in the fact that some women are verbally effusive and emotive (qualities commonly considered feminine), but not particularly feminine in their dress. Reciprocally, some women who dress very femininely are not effusive or emotive. Still other women exhibit both or neither of these qualities’. p.320. She continues on to point out that the traits are not exclusive to women and are exhibited by men too.

<sup>254</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, p. 326-327.

<sup>255</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, p. 13 & 326.

Serano notes is a 'slightly toned down version' of the claim that dressing provocatively is asking to be raped.<sup>256</sup>

Serano incites feminists to challenge these assumptions, to 'work to empower femininity and pry it away from the insipid, inferior meanings that plague it'. Otherwise, those meanings of passivity, frivolity, and artificiality will continue to circulate and negatively used against, in effect, oppress those who are female and / or feminine.<sup>257</sup> In her manifesto-like exclamation, she writes 'We must rightly recognize that feminine expression is strong, daring, and brave—that it is powerful [...] in a tangible, practical way that facilitates openness, creativity, and honest expression'.<sup>258</sup> Hurrah!

I agree, we need to re-evaluate what femininity means, or could mean, not as a contingent entity formed in relation to masculinity, but as a set of stand-alone practices. The showgirl's excessive gendered coding which is predominantly feminine manifests variously in her poses, movements, costume and make-up. Showgirls, therefore are excellently placed to bring some nuance and detail to the positive associations of femininity.

Amanda, when you choreograph your shows, how do you bring out physical charisma, charm, and ease in the bodies of your performers?

Amanda: It's—it's that my—my girls are trained with very specific intentions and very specific thoughts. And they might even be sort of awkward or dirty. Or like very, very specific. Like, you know, what dirty bizarre thing did I say in rehearsal that makes them remember exactly where to place their hands? Well, I said it. And all I had to say was—I had to say—all I had to do was say it once. That's what I'm trying to say. All I had to do is say it once. And then they know.

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<sup>256</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, p. 328.

<sup>257</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, p. 341.

<sup>258</sup> Serano, *Whipping Girl*, p. 343.

And they think about it. And then they realise. Or like in order to get the—to get their hips caught back like I explained to them, there's like a particular movement in sex that makes your hips pop precisely that way. And it's real specific. And it's not just popping your hips back. It's thinking about the fingers of someone else rolling them down. And it makes all the difference. And that's—like that's how you can train a gal. How I do it. I mean and that's like trade secret. That's the kind of—you know, kind of the way that I train them.

Ashley, you were part of Amanda's show, and you did perform in physically charismatic way, how was that process for you, creating such a positive performance persona?

Ashley: You know, I have an interesting journey with that show because the show that you saw was our second run, not our second, its actually the fourth run of the show, the second cast for me, so I've been in the third and fourth casts. The first cast that— I was called in for a private audition, with the choreographer, the theatre manager knew of me and she needed another person 'cos someone was leaving the show and he told her about me. So I had a private audition and when I came in for our first rehearsal all of the girls were smaller than me, shorter in stature and very tiny and for me I'm kind of curvy girl, you know I'm a real woman (*laughs*) as you might say. At first I was a little bit concerned and thought maybe she'd made a mistake, maybe she just didn't realise how I would look next to these other girls. So I actually had a conversation with the director about it 'n wanted to make sure, 'are you sure you want—' and she said, 'no no no I like having women up there of all different sizes'. So the next thing for me was to really **get in touch with my own, my own sexuality, my own femininity, my feelings about my body**, everything. And everything was coming up for me, so what I started to think about was I, I, I know and I love my body. So I, I really started just really working with that so when I was inside of the dances, I actually was not so concerned with you know it's not about how does my body look per se. It's about an energy, this feeling that you're having in your body and the dance moves because they are so sensual and strong feel good so it creates that **real sensual and sexual energy inside of yourself** so I, what I do, I just really tapped into that and so when I'm

dancing I feel sexy, I feel beautiful, I feel strong, desirable, attractive, all of those things. And, it's a very powerful experience. It's also fun too because there's a great sense of humour in a lot of the dances, so it's not like you're taking yourself, you know over the top seriously, you know it's also fun, it's like we're all here to have a good time.

Ashley speaks eloquently and honestly of her work on her own feelings around her body and harnessing the feelings that choreography itself can produce. Ashley, can you go further and say more of the types of energy at play when you perform 'showgirl'?

Ashley: I think that you have to be careful when you're inside of a show like this that you're—because when you're tapping so much into an energy which is very real that you're able to then tuck it away after you leave so that you're not walking around with this excess kind of—. It was interesting, before I really realised that at the very—you know, very adult realisation that—how real energy is, and how people respond—because in the beginning of the show, when I was just you know. I was really, I was making an effort like—I'm gonna wear all sexy clothes 'cos I really wanna get inside of this—it was really kind of doing this sort of Method Acting thing. And I was starting to get all kind of unwanted attention so, I think there is a negative side. I think that when you're very aware that this is for show, this is for fun and this is something very also very private that I'm sharing that when I leave the stage, it's going back inside and I'll share that with, you know, in private with a person of my choosing. But, I had to—I had to recognise that—I had to really—I think that if you, stepping into that energy is very powerful, yeah. It's not a negative, but if you're not—if you're walking around with it, you might get some attention that you might not want (*laughs*), put it that way. You don't necessarily—and too—you don't wanna be around your—I think you wanna be your full self your **full radiant self** which is encompassing, a whole rainbow of elements, not just your sexuality.

Ashley, can you speak about the energy you are talking about and also empowerment, which you mentioned earlier. Are they the same thing, or different?

Ashley: They are different. The empowerment is when you know how to harness it, **the empowerment is knowing, having dominion** as we say, right, **over your own energy** so that you—so you're in charge. Like, I'm gonna make a choice about when I'm displaying this aspect of my personality.

That's the empowerment. It's—it can, it can—I think that if you—some people have the energy so naturally and they're not even aware, they're walking around with it and it's influencing how they're interacting with people and I would say that that's not empowerment, that's just having the energy but it's not empowered. Yeah, **it's empowered when you're, when you make a choice**, ok I'm walking into a library right now and I'm gonna give a talk on children and how theatre helps to, I don't wanna be walking around with this energy, I'm gonna be taken very seriously. So being able to turn it off and yet when I wanna audition for a show I can go in and know that I have this that I can bring, that's the empowerment.

The ability to control your own energy, to choose which energy is appropriate to embody is what creates empowerment. Empowerment has become an overused word within feminism. It has been denigrated as a concept that has come to represent the false consciousness of postfeminism. Walter and Penny earlier use the word to belittle those who purport to embody empowerment. However, 'empowerment' is often used without definition. Ashley's reflections of what she has learned through performing 'showgirl' produce a clear delineation of empowerment because she makes clear distinctions of what is and is not empowered. The complexity of her definition emanates from its subtle connection with embodied energy. She does not propose the showgirl-energy as empowering in and of itself, rather, being able to bring the energy into her body when it is called for, is

empowerment. This grounding of the word ‘empowerment’ in connection to showgirl practice gives the word a new relevance.

Embodying showgirl can have negative consequences for the performer. The psychological and physical prowess needed to produce showgirl can involve a cost to the performer. What are the physical costs of performing, night after night? Did you get injuries as a spectacle showgirl, Jacqui?

Jacqui: Loads of problems with my back. Loads and loads and loads. It’s still not great, I have to say. Ankle. Once you’ve gone over on your ankle and it gets weak, then it just kind of keeps happening. And the thing is, when you’re dancing in heels (*pauses*) you know, and leaping around and landing on one foot and then you can—you know, that is dangerous. And what—a lot of times it was because we had very, very quick changes. Because it was literally everybody onstage, then one or two would stay on, everybody else come off, quick, quick, quick change. You’d have like (*pauses*) 30 seconds maybe to change everything. Back on. (*pauses*) That a lot of times is when you go over on your ankle, because you’re trying to avoid people. There’d be costumes left on the floor. You’d, you know, go over. So I had a lot of ankle injuries. And—but mainly it was my back. (*pauses*) One show, brilliant show, but they were a bit nuts with what they expected us to do. The cancan was ridiculous. (*pauses*) Jump, (*pauses*) split in the air, kick your head with you back leg, bang down into splits. Over time, we all had massive injuries on that show. I ended up having to be flown home because that’s when my back went totally. I think I did two months (*pauses*) out of the four. One of the girls, never danced—in fact two of the girls never danced again after that one. I took nearly two—a year and a half, two years off, (*pauses*) ‘cause it was just injury after injury. Another girl from Constance Grant actually worked for them at a different time to me has now had a hip replacement and is waiting for her second one. She’s younger than me. We all blame it on the cancan. So after that contract, even when my back was better, (*pauses*) I’d always speak to the people. If there was a cancan, I’m not doing the show. Because **I knew my body**—doing it over—alright, if it was once a month or something, or once a week. But every night. It’s—it’s really hard wear and tear on your body. You know, if you could do it in



trainers, that would one thing. Because you've got the nice soft impact. But you've got cancan boots on. Which have got no impact at all. A heel on the thing. You're banging down in to splits. You know, tricks. Everything's so fast that you haven't really got time to do it properly. It's whack your legs up as high as you can, as fast as you can. You know, run around, cartwheel, jump around. (*pauses*) You know, and I was (*pauses*)—I don't know how old I was at that—I was probably only about 23, 24. But a lot of dancers careers are kind of over by then. (*pauses*) Especially in that world. A lot of people kind of do (*pauses*) 18 to 22. 18 to 23. And then you're kind of done. Because you do get a bit sick of the whole living out of a suitcase thing. And your body just goes, 'Okay. I've had enough of this now'. So mine's bad. My hips are bad. My knees are bad. My back's bad.

And what about the more hidden costs, how did your recuperate, after your particular experience, Chris?

Chris: I think there is another part of it that is useful, it was years before I could reclaim any kind of femme quality or sexuality in my persona. It wasn't really until I moved to LA, and the way I did it was—I was you know—I was taking an interest—at that point having recreational sex which was something I had never really done during the time for it, my twenties. I'd never done it, and before it was too late I thought ok, I need to check this out and I started hooking up with people. This was a little before the computer it was more on the phone, there was this thing called the telepersonals, and what suited me best for various reasons, one of them was that I was married and I wasn't really looking to replace that primary relationship in my life. I really was kind of like a gay man just looking for hook-ups in recreational sex, and as a straight woman, I found the easiest way of doing that was in the kinky sex world. And through that structure and so for years—for several years I took a very great interest in kinky sex, and I had a lot of partners. I was the submissive, I hooked up with dominant men, and there were all these games and trainings that were all about becoming femme. And I found this like, a wonderful game, because it wasn't (*pause*) it was not even that part of persona, but it was a way of sort of experimenting with that persona in a way that I could own more, that had to do with my own pleasure, that had to do with a real

reciprocity and I wrote about that in my book, *Video Green*.<sup>259</sup> But, I guess I've never really, no-ones ever asked me to explain it, but I think it really has a lot to do with the shutdown of sexual persona that happened to me from working in the clubs. So, going off on these kind of femme kinky sex, submissive woman, adventures was a way of having it without having to really be it, you know. I really liked the boundariedness, you know, it was a game, you know **we're playing roles** within this game and so, you know, a role to someone in the theatre is not a small thing, **a role is a really big thing. A role is very real, just because it's a role doesn't mean it's fake.**

'You've paid your money, so its ok, you can look at me, but the deal is you have to listen to my voice', said Mat Fraser, addressing the audience for *The Freak and The Showgirl*, his collaborative show with Julie Atlas Muz. By articulating the boundaries of the space of the show, Fraser also confronted the audience's perhaps hidden desire to stare at his different body. Making safe, through pointing out the roles, and making clear this is not exploitation. In his recreation of Sealo, the Sealboy's act from the 1930s he brings the historical freak show and his own body into the same context, and points out the resistance against exploitation both of he and Sealo perform. Muz and Fraser both perform naked strips, Muz with her struggle out of ropes to Lesley Gore singing *You Don't Own Me* and Fraser commenced in a suit with prosthetic arms which he throws off. A couple beyond the stage as well as on, bring an insistent lack of shame into their show. The euphoric culmination sees the pair perform oral sex on each other while singing and dancing. Muz has been a crucial part of the New York burlesque scene, bridging the live art, gallery-based art and cabaret context; Fraser, an all-round entertainer and a visible disability activist.

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<sup>259</sup> Chris Kraus *Video Green: Los Angeles Art and the Triumph of Nothingness*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004.

Fraser's introduction, in which he confronted the dynamics of the performance context, 'you've paid your money', reframed the role of the exchange of money and the supposed tensions this creates.

Let me complicate the showgirl and her incarnations. In a simple plotting of the terrain we might place the stripper showgirl on one end of a spectrum, where perhaps her role conflates to some extent with sex-work. On the other, would be the avant-garde showgirl that merges into art practice. Money intersects this spectrum: the stripper showgirl has the greatest opportunities for making money, and we can suppose this is her primary motivation. Because of this financial recompense, she smiles and performs in ways that are pleasing to her customers, she says yes and accommodates their desires.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, avant-garde showgirls or artists with a showgirl inclined practice, incorporate elements into their acts/art work that challenge easy reading. To draw attention to the self-reflexive style of avant-garde performance, spoken word is often incorporated into the performances to ensure that ideas are heard rather than only inferred through the visual; examples of this are David Hoyle, Penny Arcade, and LaJohn Joseph. Here, the showgirl performs to make us think: she can offend, rebuke us and make us uncomfortable. She has autonomy.

The showgirl in other contexts gives us pleasure: that is her role. But, as Fraser reminds us, paying the performer can allow the autonomy, to refuse, to challenge. And within the pleasurable showgirl contexts, the provocations can be over-looked. Lola the Vamp, a burlesque showgirl and academic, notes the differences between what she identifies as neo-burlesque, the more obviously subversive, sometimes messy and abject that is often seen as politically superior because of outrageous qualities. However, Lola points out

that what is often overlooked is the complexity of what she identifies as aesthetic burlesque, which:

follows the traditional aesthetics, movements and styling of historical burlesque closely, reflecting both aesthetic ideals and historical ideals of the feminine. Aesthetic Burlesque seeks glamour in a play of aesthetics and does not subvert them. Aesthetic Burlesque produces a consciously self-made feminine rather than a critique of the common ideals of the feminine. The element of burlesque parody is often much more subtle, and the story is told through imagery and aesthetics. The political message is secondary to the play of aesthetics. Aesthetic burlesque can present as a form of tribute or homage to performers and / or everyday women of previous pre-feminist eras. This style can leave the audience questioning the performer's politics; allowing for a complex enactment of femininity that so closely approximates traditional versions of femininity as to appear dangerous to feminism.<sup>260</sup>

The performances of showgirl occupy the position on the spectrum: not the performer. Showgirls change contexts, evolving, and adapting. Bringing their experiences into different contexts for different reasons: sometimes financial and sometimes creative or intellectual or political. Shifting her pole-dancing stripping experience into the context of a performance-musical, Erin Markey's *Puppy Love: A Stripper's Tail* reflects from the inside her sharp observations with wit incorporating an unashamed attitude to nudity onstage. She has performed the material as a solo show and as part of Annie Oakley's *Sex Workers Art Show* tour. The tour notably complicates notions of who gets to speak and perform within performance / art contexts. Resisting simplifying the experiences of sex workers of all stripes, the show 'smashes traditional stereotypes and moves beyond "positive" and "negative" into a fuller articulation of the complicated ways sex workers experience their jobs and their lives'. It offers a 'scathing and insightful commentary on notions of class, race, gender, labor and sexuality!'<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Lola Montgomery (Meghann Montgomery), *A Burlesque*, PhD Thesis, Griffith University, Brisbane Area, Australia, 2013.

<sup>261</sup> *Sex Workers Art Show Tour* 2009, Press Information, <[http://www.sexworkersartshow.com/presstext\\_03152009.html](http://www.sexworkersartshow.com/presstext_03152009.html)> [accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2013].

## Scene 5



George's career is over and he has a gun in his hand, about to commit suicide. Peppy arrives in her car and rushes in, realising what is about to happen. She has an idea. She remembers George's ability to tap-dance and so the pair go to the studio boss and tap-dance a routine together in front of him—he loves it! Peppy understands the system and how to survive within it. She is invested in George, in history, what has gone before. Although embedded in the system, she places demands on it—she finds ways to make it progress, she finds her voice within it. And she is kind to George.

The new burlesque scene looks backwards, to imagine, embody and contest the present. Debra Ferreday writes on new burlesque as an alternative mode of femininity, noting both the seamless integration of online communication technologies and historic styles of dress and performance.<sup>262</sup> Ferreday sketches out the tension between burlesque and feminism, emphasising new

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<sup>262</sup> Debra Ferreday, "Showing the girl": The new burlesque' *Feminist Theory*, Sage Publishing, April 2008, vol. 9 no. 1, pp. 47-65.

burlesque's interest in old burlesque's disruptive qualities: 'The desire to honour earlier performers often stems from a recognition of their importance as just such self-aware and self-creating feminine subjects who embodied resistance to the dominant feminine ideals of their time'.<sup>263</sup>

The showgirl has and continues to offer us a powerful symbol of femininity, wrapped up with a touch of historical mythology. Andrea Stuart writes 'In her heyday [...] the showgirl was a dynamic symbol, a conduit from street directly to stage, whose anarchic cancan or suggestive strip was a symbol of her disruptive, even revolutionary, potential'.<sup>264</sup> No wonder then, the appeal of developing a persona beyond the stage that incorporates fashions of bygone eras. When did you start to develop your style, Sam?

Sam: I'd—I'd started, when I was about 16-17—my look started changing. The films started changing me, the music—I was into a lot of musicals like 'Hello Dolly' an' 'Funny Girl', things like that an' I was starting to dress a lot more girly, wearing skirts and things and then I got into like the pin-up scene. So I was really interested in pin-ups and I collected the books of all different types of pin-ups, an' I was just—you just get **so engrossed in the pictures**, an' you just, I was so interested in the whole vintage scene as well. I'm tryin' a think back now, its really hard to think back (*laughs*). Cos my sister is—dresses very forties and fifties as well so we've kindof like, shared our things an' been brought up on things like that. We went to a lot of events when we was younger an' I was going to a lot of vintage shops, an' gradually over the years like I've just collected so much vintage and like fifties, forties reproduction that when I go in my wardrobe now that's all I have (*laughs*). And I wasn't as glamorous before burlesque, I think it definitely changed me a lot. I mean, I always did my hair before burlesque in a forties, fifties style, but it probably it wasn't every day, I'd probably go to work in a pair of jeans, but I'd have forties, fifties hair and it was all a bit mismatched. And then throughout burlesque it just took over and I was taking, I was **taking more pride in my**

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<sup>263</sup> Fereday, 'Showing the girl', p. 50.

<sup>264</sup> Stuart, *Showgirls*, p. 210.

**appearance.** I was going to work but I was wearing things that accentuated my curves an' pencil skirts because that—I thought—I wanted to show it off, I wanted to wear, like, an' then for the rest of the years that I was working I wore like three inch heels everyday to work! I know, I—everyday to work for about two years and—yeah, it changed me. I mean, before then I would never've worn heels to work. But, I was seen running around the shop in heels (*laughs*), so yeah, its definitely changed me, influenced me. It opened a whole world of just costume ideas and not just costumes for the—the acts, but for me as a person as well. And **how I wanted to dress, who I am**, now, I couldn't imagine dressing in anything else because I'm comfortable like this, if I came out wearing jeans, I really wouldn't be comfortable, I'd be so far from my comfort zone.

How does reflecting on past versions of glamour inform what you do now, how do you draw on history in your acts?

Maria: I think the historic idea of glamour is tied up very closely with the specific image of women and how they're supposed to behave and act and think and feel. And what I'm doing in—so my performances consist of, yes singing and mostly singing, performing, dancing a little bit, talking to people. But I also write the lyrics to my songs in German. Some of the songs I write myself and many of these at the present point in time are standards, they are American jazz standards but write new German lyrics. And the lyrics actually go against that grain of the well behaved, proper woman and more into a contemporary image of women, you know, looking for, maybe still looking for their prince but looking by checking out like 25 different guys and not liking either of them. Or it's more contemporary and it's more about this contemporary image of what women kind of do and can want so yes, it is trying to update it. And to fill it I guess with a more **emancipated image of what women can be today**, still not giving up on the idea that you can still be glamorous and I don't know, feeling, and smooth in a sense but still have some sort of breaks in your personality.

Amanda: I think where we're going to go next with the show is really taking a look—I sent a link to all the girls about—it's all these essays about Weimar cabaret

a collection of essays on Google or something. They are all written between 1919 and 1933. And they're amazing. So I sent the girls all that. So we're starting to do the research and see like the political parallels and things that maybe we should take a look at in our own lives. And what happened. There are lot of—a lot of the wrong things happened in succession. And because history has repeated itself, there's no reason for us to blindly think that we will not repeat history of some kind. And also, art is going right out the window. And one thing that was very important to people in the Weimar Republic, who were artists, was finding a way to marry—to marry high art and consumerism. And one way that they did that was through—through cabaret. Because it was enticing and sexy. But then they would also—like the burlesque would be like this really specific like political commentary that's very funny but kind of like—oh, but you're reaching this whole audience of people. And you're plying them with enjoyment and laughter and all these different things. It's really kind of brilliant. And so we talked about that a little bit actually with the girls. Like, how—you know, do we want to delve in that direction? If we delve in that direction, how far do we want to go? And then see what it brings up from there. [...]

And actually a part of what we're gonna do, hopefully—what we want to do—it's our ambitious thought. We'll see if we actually do it. But just take some of—take some of that and some of the writing that I feel would be valuable to us as people and post some of that like on our Facebook. Let people kind of track it and learn from it. We posted a couple of things. You know, where people—like there are a lot of people that don't know—like they know the Bobby Darin *Mack the Knife* but they don't know that that song really is from, you know—from *Threepenny Opera* from—you know, that's actually a Weimar entertainment.

Sam, Maria, and Amanda research the aesthetics and even politics of the showgirl, glamour, and cabaret to extend what they do with awareness. Sixties glamour infuses pop showgirl Lana Del Rey's aesthetic. Her showgirl-constructed persona merges contemporary consumerism, a savvy-insight into the American Dream with an ability to tell stories that depict desire and pleasure. She creates allusions to unhealthy compulsions, going too-far-bad-



girl-chic. Del Rey enmeshes references to cinematic tropes, popular culture: the fantasies that exist only in representational space, not the real, into her persona and imagery across song narrative, style and video images. Her soft, sexy voice knowingly tells the stories that other pop showgirls do not tell. Thus, her songs exist not wholly in the present, not wholly in the past. In her spoken end to *Ride*, she says ‘Who are you? Are you in touch with all of your darkest fantasies? Have you created a life for yourself where you can experience them? I have. I am fucking crazy. But **I am free**’. Here, she urges us to identify and live our pleasures as though through these, maybe we can glimpse freedom.

Temporality is confused across showgirl culture. She re-works history and embodies it with desires and themes that emanate from our contemporary context. But might we understand this confused temporality, this freedom of movement within a feminist framework? We need new feminist tools that allow the showgirl to negotiate her own image in terms that jive with our new technologies. The pop showgirl-inspired *Gaga Feminism* begins to offer such tools. Halberstam celebrates Lady Gaga’s bold sexual persona, bodily display as well as the way she produces and manipulates her image across media.<sup>265</sup> The provocation of *Gaga Feminism* is to make-it-up, to reflect, to negotiate images and meanings in real time. Saving what works, deleting what loses relevance.

Amanda, you use more than just particular historic references in your show, there is also a kind of sexuality at work in it too, can you talk about that?

Amanda: I think it’s a really **powerful tool**. I don’t think it’s a problem. Men use their masculinity and strength like—I’m just not that way. I like wearing dresses. I don’t overdo my hair and make-up but I don’t care if other people do.

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<sup>265</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, 2012 p. 7.

You know, whatever—whatever makes you happy with and makes you feel good. I had an ex-boyfriend who thinks I'm an exhibitionist. But like this is how I dress. You know, normally. I'm usually like up to this even, not anything, but I'll do pasties onstage. So it's like a different—it's a different thing entirely. And I think it's a powerful tool and should be **treated respectfully** and should be utilised in a particular way. And *(pause)* I think it's a delicate balance, you know? Men, women, sex. It's all there.

What else do you think works in the show, what makes it so successful?

Amanda: It's being flexible. And like I think that's a big thing too that a lot of shows don't really have. They don't have that **like swinging kind of vine feel** *(clicks fingers)*. I think it makes a big difference. And I think that's where we nail it. Not to sound cocky, but I think that's where we nail that. Yeah *(laughs)*.

In continually negotiating the present in her show, Amanda is aware that the show maintains a frisson of energy that provokes the audience. It is in these transitory moments, the performers and the audience can feel, think, experience, and reflect.

'It's all in the game' is both a phrase repeated in the HBO series *The Wire* and a way to understand the defunct systems the show depicts. At the end of *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam attentively interprets both the symbolism of chess and the scene in *The Wire* in which the character D'Angelo explains to street runner drug dealers how to play chess. Drawing obvious parallels between the way the dealers' lives are governed by the drug hierarchy, the police, and politics, D'Angelo tells his audience the king has freedom of movement backed up by his team, so that he does not have to 'hustle' to survive. The queen 'she got the moves', he explains; 'She's smart, she fast, she move any way she want, as far as she want'. But the queen can be sacrificed for the king's survival. Thus, Halberstam writes that Gaga feminism is

the ideology that motivates the queen in the chess match—as the queen, you can make big moves, bold moves, aggressive moves. You can do damage, take others out, move at will. You will also have everyone gunning for you, coming for you, following you. You will go down. But, in the words of Lady Gaga: “Don’t be a drag, just be a queen.”<sup>266</sup>

And through the unpicking of the signs at play in chess, *The Wire* and our lives within our neoliberal capitalist context, Halberstam in effect also spells out what remains potent in the showgirl. Like the queen, she has all the moves and in moments of luminosity the showgirl embodies femininity, pleasure, and freedom. And that may be as close to emancipation as we are ever going to get within this system.

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<sup>266</sup> Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism*, p. 148.

# Dancing Object

The jubilant dénouement of *The Artist* completes the film by imagining a new performance space within technology: Peppy and George can tap-dance on-screen, their taps audible. Pulling backwards away from the film screen I re-watch the scene on YouTube. The new pixelated image exists autonomously; it is ruptured from the narrative flow and is now an online entity. Once I have watched the clip, I follow links to actor interviews, dancer's tributes, a video collage, a professional showreel, Fred and Ginger, and a dance tutorial. I create for myself a bespoke show. A new form of live. 'The grab' of my interaction produces a new spectacle.<sup>267</sup>

Let us now turn to Hito Steyerl, who unpicks the immaterial image world that implicates us within it revealing the complex structures that support it.<sup>268</sup> The immediacy and ubiquity of low quality images enables their easy accessibility, their travel and use. The grab technologies destabilise the theoretical support structures that present and interpret the real and representation. 'The poor image is no longer about the real thing', Steyerl writes, 'it is about its own real conditions of existence' and its 'digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities'.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> I watched: 'The Artist - clip - tip tap a due', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2s9ZlenQm8>>, 'DP/30: The Artist, actors Jean Dujardin, Berenice Bejo', <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-T4a2M\\_iCz8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-T4a2M_iCz8)>, 'The Artist Tap Dance Tribute (Melinda Sullivan & Dennis Bendersky!)', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8k0gQxunQpk>> 'Singing in the artist', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr1i48Zl9Ng>>, 'TAP FACTORY - Claquettes - Tap Dance - TEASER 2012', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PpR7jXWO1Q&feature=endscreen>>, 'Fred Astaire & Ginger Rogers (Tap Dance)', <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAB12aeI6nA>>, 'How to Do the Shirley Temple in Tap Dance', <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpJ\\_lJozWB8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpJ_lJozWB8)> [all accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April 2013].

<sup>268</sup> Hito Steyerl, 'In Defence of The Poor Image', in *e-flux Journal: The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012, pp. 31-45.

<sup>269</sup> Steyerl, 'In Defence of The Poor Image', p. 44.

In this chapter's epigraph Steyerl asks: why not side with the object? 'Why *not* be a thing?' she writes, 'A thing among other things? A desire to become this thing—in this case an image—is the upshot of the struggle over representation'.<sup>270</sup> Following the new logics of images and representations, Steyerl inverts sense, so that she can make exciting, outlandish claims: but it is true, why the fidelity to worn out words that do not mix easily with our new contexts? Steyerl's observations extend our understanding of the grab mode of looking and creates a bridge into my video 'scenes' in this chapter: low quality digital videos of improvised dances in the shared PhD studio. I take the place of the art object, an art object amongst art objects. I respond to the space limitations set up by studio ephemera: in this case, large sculptural art works by Dale Holmes.

I dance, improvise, find a new site of live moments. I think of avant-garde aesthetics, kabarett. Of strippers and burlesque showgirls. I think of pop showgirl's advice: 'don't be a drag just be a queen' and 'I am free'. What we have when the live improvised dances end are a collage of possibilities that lead to more links. The showgirl can speak—and give us advice. Stripper showgirls grow up, move on, evolve and speak of bodies in transgressive ways. Young showgirls dress like forties Hollywood stars. The male gaze produces the energy to perform. Community and connection emerge between showgirls, connecting with each other backstage and online. The struggle for body acceptance in a kick-line leads to the type of empowerment feminists dream of but cannot articulate. Spectacle showgirls fit in, drop out. Dropouts turn not fitting into unique selling points. Temporality makes less and less sense. Improvising, finding new words to speak, new ways to communicate leads us to new safe spaces—where the showgirl exists already.

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<sup>270</sup> Steyerl, 'A Thing Like Me and You', p. 50.

**FINALE**



So the feelings I want to have are—that I'm trying to, I am actually feeling quite composed, I think so the whole process of getting in to character, you know it's not really a character it's all myself but the hair and the make-up and dressing.

It does make me self-confident and makes me more self-confident. But then I guess the goal would be to still feel glamorous even if you don't look glamorous so just like the outsides just the make-up and the dress won't do it. I guess it's the first step maybe or it's my first step. But I'm well aware that it's just not like an outside thing, it's not just a role, it really has to be filled in from the inside, so and the confidence does have to come from somewhere else too so I'm also trying to come up with that self-confidence and to fill that I don't know, vase or the container that glamour can be. I have, I know I have to fill it myself. [...] It's actually quite difficult now I have to think of it.<sup>271</sup>

<sup>271</sup> Maria Slowinska, interview with author.

The threefold focus of this thesis has been: how do I look, as in how might my mode of looking be described? Showgirls have been in the spotlight, as it were, as the subject of what I look at and get pleasure from, and so I have uncovered a little of who they are, what they do, and how my art work might take a showgirl inclined approach, we might term, showgirlian. Finally, I have experimented with how structures can be created that allow for viewing, thinking, and reflection. Thus, in asking ‘how do I look’, I gained access to a broad range of conversations across disciplines.

I reprised Maria’s words as the final epigraph, as her reflections can be understood as a *mise-en-abyme*, the literary device of internal duplication, the detail that reveals the whole, for example, a novel about a novelist writing a novel. Maria’s words illuminate the structural gesture underpinning this thesis—a crafted vase, populated with research that fills out the structure. Or more accurately, let me use the metaphor of the showgirl. The structures I have used have functioned as glamorous surfaces, a sequinned dress, perhaps, that I have filled and animated with thoughts, reflections, challenges, ideas, actions, gestures, problems and theory that at times dance around, move in embodied ways.

In Chapter One I appropriated stills from *Dance, Girl Dance*, of the range of looks in the filmic burlesque theatre audience as Judy confronts their taunts. I use these to illustrate what I identify as the four modes of viewing showgirls: observe, gaze, double-take and grab.

The first two modes, conducted in the dark spaces of music halls, cabarets and cinemas remain modes characterised by distance. The theories and descriptions of showgirls do not connect with who the showgirl might be: she is merely a set of signs to be understood. To observe and to gaze, is to be a



mute, static onlooker, an outsider, a witness. Mode One and Two writers are careful to avoid ownership of feeling a pleasure from the showgirl: they maintain a position outside of the paradigms they describe. By re-framing the modes and linking technologies of viewing and theoretical perspectives I was able to disrupt the circulatory discussion that takes place in particular around the gaze.

There are also significant similarities in Modes Three and Four. Both Modes incorporate queer theory methods of conceptualising and challenging and entwined with this both involve more personally tailored, interactive modes of viewing, in the form of the VCR and the Internet. To double-take is a physical swift turn of the head, and to grab is to use your hand, a dramatic hand snatch: both physical gestures we do to get a better look. Theorists of these modes can choose when to look, view relevant material repeatedly, fast forward or ignore what interests them less: what they view has malleability. As they have a hand in the construction of what they view, ownership of pleasure enters into the discussion. For example, Arbuthnot and Seneca analyse *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by repeat video-watching so that they can ‘recoup from male culture some of the pleasure which it has always denied us’, and clarify ‘We are using the term “pleasure” here to refer to enjoyment and delight’.<sup>272</sup>

While looking is a tailored encounter in Modes Three and Four, becoming part of a community presents as a possibility, performing back to what is seen. In the paradigm of Mode Three, ‘cult’ films emerge with insider interpretations, particular film characters are re-performed in drag shows, and dance routines can be learned and copied. In Mode Four, fans interact with

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<sup>272</sup> Arbuthnot and Seneca, ‘Pre-text and Text’, p. 77 and p. 84.

pop showgirls via YouTube comments and Twitter. But also, to watch new burlesque and cabaret the audience must use the Internet to locate shows, often dress up similarly to performers onstage, and afterwards might share phone-camera footage online with the performers. Thus, double-taking and grabbing also incorporates the interplay of seen and scene.

I broadened the grab of Mode Four in Chapter Two by watching eighteen live showgirl shows and examining my feelings as I watched. I considered the most effective tool in assessing the connotations of the performances to be my emotional responses, thus, I reported on my observations and how they made me feel. I was keen to identify where and how I might feel pleasure. I found a range of aspects of the shows had an impact on my feelings of pleasure. In particular, the aspects that contributed to my pleasure I identified, the showgirl's physical performance qualities for example, eye contact with the audience, smiling, alert, expressive facial expressions, charisma. A sense of the performer's self-possession confidence and self-belief, visible good technique for example skills demonstrated effortlessly as well as shameless display and embodiment for example a lack embarrassment in revealing the body. I also enjoyed seeing technically proficient synchronization, a chorus, moving as one. Feelings of belonging and camaraderie in the audience and being excited by the performance space interior and architecture contributed to my ability to relax and interpret what I saw positively. In terms of show direction I noted seeing subverted or expanded gender roles, innovative approaches to spectacle, traditional tropes recycled to good effect. Elegance, glamour in the costuming and lighting, and informed, intelligent choreography, particularly quoting other dance forms. Explicit sexuality framed in avant-garde or sophisticated ways, political awareness, satire, positive relations between women, self-reflexivity within the form and edginess as being significant in generating pleasure.

And the aspects that inhibited my pleasure I found were, the performer's indifference, bored, inanimate expressions, lack of enthusiasm, restrained, awkward and embarrassed performance. I was concerned when I saw the disappearing body and personhood of the dancers and I feared for the health of the performer's backs due to the choreography's demands on the body. Feeling uncomfortable within the audience corpus did not help my ability to feel pleasure. In terms of the show direction, unsophisticated visual tropes and tackiness, spectacle tropes reused without care or thought, updating the formula but without retaining the exciting qualities. Feeling the show was too safe or mainstream, that elements were added that did not fit, and feeling an inability to define or understand choreography, which lead me to be unable to contextualise what I saw. As well as, lack of awareness of how content might be out of date and give offence, or unexpectedly sexually explicit or gratuitous, particularly where the promotional rhetoric does not mention this. Also, repressive or restrictive approach to gender, negative relations between men and women, and women and women within the show or context, and lack of delineation between dance performance and sex work.

I considered it important that I investigated these shows first hand so that I could generate my own sets of comparative observations, using a consistent framework for my feelings. These shows and venues are usually overlooked within academic discourse perhaps because of their reputation as low culture entertainment.<sup>273</sup> The 'Theatres' receive minimal coverage in terms of performance reviews, most likely because of the infrequency with which new shows open at the large-scale spectacles. However, my searches were limited to English-language reviews and so there could be a body of French-language

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<sup>273</sup> Moulin Rouge is an exception.

reviews on the Paris shows. With regards to the 'Shows', these are usually not reviewed when they occur as a one-off. For shows that reoccur or have a consistent run in venue, for example, *Schmutzigen Deutsche Kabarett*, they do receive press attention. However, the minimal critical discourse connected to showgirl shows, I felt necessitated that I map the terrain myself. As a contribution, my intention is that this will provide a useful point of departure for other researchers working on the expansion of showgirl research, offering sites of comparison to historical studies of shows, as well as media representations.

As I wrote Chapter Two I was also engaged in the *Video Letters* project with Kerstin Honeit and I see parallels between the two, particularly in considering them both as forms of dialogue. Honeit, an artist based in Berlin, and I took part in a residency at LoBe gallery in Berlin. Before working together, we began to make one another short videos and exchange them. Initially the project was a warm-up activity for the residency, and so imagining only the other artist would see, we made videos with an intimate quality, performing only for one another. After screening the work early on in the residency as part of a symposium, we realised the videos, shown as a conversation *was* the art work. The conversational structure maintains the informality, playfulness, and sincerity as well a sense of trying to understand another person, another practice. The *Video Letters* were shown in our exhibition 'Showtime', at LoBe and SIA gallery, Sheffield. In both venues Honeit and I took part in artist's talks engaging in dialogue and testing out the work. It is clear to me that both Chapter Two and *Video Letters* involve similar types of action: close-looking, reflecting and performing back, wanting to be seen in my reciprocal performance.

In Chapter Three I positioned reflections from interviews into ‘scenes’ following scenes from the film *The Artist*. This somewhat ornate formulation emerged in part from my analysis of the interviews. I spent some considerable time identifying themes in the interviews while simultaneously I compiled a range of comparative theories, ideas, and context. During this process, I was experimenting with creating dance videos in my studio inspired by *The Artist*, until eventually it became apparent my studio experiments and thesis writing could be brought together in direct ways. What emerges out of this process is a richly woven accumulation that similarly to Chapters One and Two, facilitates a reorganisation and reappraisal of the existing material on the showgirl, which I expand on.

Turning now to what I have been able to establish in terms of generating meaning around showgirls, I feel I have developed a sophisticated understanding of her image, her live performances and tracing her historically.<sup>274</sup>

I felt an important aim in giving the showgirl freedom of movement was putting Laura Mulvey’s polemic and widely circulated essay, ‘Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema’ into context in ways that would destabilise its status as a monolith. Remnants of her essay loom on the periphery of contemporary discussion on the showgirl. Her observations on showgirls maintain, as McLean writes, ‘the device of the showgirl has been left standing as a unitary cinematic strategy that de facto objectifies women—whether strippers or ballet dancers—and renders them passive, beautiful, and reassuring objects of the male gaze’.<sup>275</sup> Although Mulvey focuses on the cinematic showgirl, her

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<sup>274</sup> I put this insight into writing an entry in the *Cultural Encyclopaedia of the Breast*. I submitted the entry ‘Topless Dancing’, for *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Breast*, ed. by Merrill Smith, to be published by AltaMira Press.

<sup>275</sup> McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth*, p. 116.

words continue to travel beyond film studies into wider cultural, visual, performance, and audience studies. Thus, we can presume tools that emerge from Mulvey's text continue to be appropriated and applied to various iterations of showgirl with negative effect. I was concerned that this particular application of theory would result in the further reduction and silencing of the showgirl—to describe her as a mute, passive, object of the gaze, is in effect to continue to reproduce her in these terms.

I felt it imperative that I speak to showgirls and ask them for their reflections. This was brought into sharper focus as I read the popular feminist writing of Ariel Levy, Natasha Walter, Laurie Penny, and Caitlyn Moran. While their writing applied less specifically to a wider sense of showgirl, their words on stripper showgirls made me feel deeply uneasy. I am not arguing that the lives of stripper showgirls are without problems or that our culture with its prevalence of bodily display creates feelings of emancipation and empowerment for women. Rather, I have become increasingly alarmed at the inadequacy of the critical tools applied to showgirls and showgirl culture—tools that seem only to uncover a limited set of conclusions. Namely that women are led blindly into practices of bodily display and femininity, that exposure of their body only signals a desire to please men and get ahead in financial terms, that women only feel jealously and competitive when they see other women represented or performing in beautiful or erotic ways. As Katherine Angel parodies, 'Get off the pole, you stupid bitch'.<sup>276</sup> All of this presumes that showgirls have no capacity to reflect, think critically, support one another, and change performance contexts. However, as Dorothy Arzner makes apparent, interesting things happen when you allow a showgirl to

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<sup>276</sup> Angel, *Unmastered*, p.192.

speak, as Judy demonstrates when she confronts the jeering burlesque audience:

What do you suppose we think of you up here with your silly smirks your mothers would be ashamed of? We know it's the thing of the moment for the dress suits to come and laugh at us too. We'd laugh right back at the lot of you, only we're paid to let you sit there and roll your eyes and make your screamingly clever remarks. What's it for?<sup>277</sup>

By bringing the showgirl's expertise to bear on the range of new feminist conversations, I hope to underscore the type of understanding that practice, performance and embodiment creates, demonstrating how women who inhabit the showgirl role develop sophisticated skills in order to 'do showgirl', as well as developing nuanced reflections on the meanings associated with her. Thus, a significant contribution to these particular polarised discussions is using oral history interviews to bring balance and nuance from the perspective of the practitioner. I was also able to assemble the showgirl lexicon—using the interviews as a word-source to refresh the palette of available terms and break the circulatory nature of the existing discussion. A key contribution, therefore, is the showgirl lexicon, and the method of compiling the lexicon.

As the muse of this thesis, I hope I have demonstrated the complexities of the showgirl and have made it somewhat more difficult to dismiss or diminish her. I wanted to generate a sense of permission in claiming my own pleasure, through developing a glamorous, shameless writing style—as bold and fearless as the performances of showgirl I have watched. Across my writing, viewing encounters, art works and in interviews, I have drawn on dialogue as a strategy for generating ideas. I have circulated an extended account of visiting

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<sup>277</sup> Judy O'Brien addresses the audience in *Dance, Girl, Dance* dir. by Arzner.

Spearmint Rhino within the discursive context of an online magazine.<sup>278</sup> Through the visibility this has produced I have been able to connect with stripper, burlesque, and avant-garde showgirls online and at shows, who advise my research.

I have generated a wider network of support for my research across a range of disciplines, as a result of sharing my work within feminist, gender, media, history, theatre and performance contexts as well as within practice-led and art research ones.<sup>279</sup> I have tailored this research to fit particular academic milieu (like Jazmin, tap-dancing within burlesque). By performing my papers, incorporating different voices, accents, movement, poses and dancing within these contexts I also questioned what might constitute an academic paper. I worked on both content and form thus, the risks I have taken within this thesis I have already tested out within conference papers.

Having undertaken the research, I can now claim that how I look is a technologically engaged grab, I am an emancipated spectator. If we revisit Rancière's words, he writes, 'Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting', continuing that the spectator 'participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way'.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>278</sup> *Cliterati*, ed. by Emily Dubberly and *The Brockington Review*, an online journal, Loughborough University.

<sup>279</sup> For example, conference papers delivered at *Looking Back: 'Post-Feminist' Histories*, *Post-Feminist' Stories*, Institute of Advanced Studies, Warwick University, 2012, *Seminar on Bodies*, Birkbeck University, Onscenity Network, 2012, *Who Benefits from Your Research?* Birmingham Institute of Art & Design, 2012, *How Do We Look?* MOCA, Los Angeles, 201, *Who Do We Think We Are?: Representing the Human*, Drama & Theatre Department, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2011, *Creating Friction*, Interdisciplinary Creative Practice Conference, Newcastle University 2010. The only conference paper I do not consider a performance was also my least successful, this was within an art research context—I learned from this—the greater the risks I take in presentation and content, the more able I have been to control the discussion and make a positive contribution.

<sup>281</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2009, p. 13.



But there is more that can be said about how I look. I see through a feminist lens, I look to queer. I reflect on what I see: perhaps this is what a meta-feminist mode of looking might be. As an artist, I look so that I can improvise how I respond back. I also look sensitively, with my feelings. I look and I want to engage in dialogue, exchange my perspective with others, with the showgirls I watch and so I look and I tweet. I look and I want to be seen. I look and I dance.

The words I have used create more problems as I try to elucidate their use in particular contexts. But the limitations of language as a tool to speak of our pleasures pose possibilities for artists to take up. Lauren Elkin writes: 'We do other things with language other than communicate: we protect, we stimulate, we caress [...] We have no control over how our words, our desires, are taken. The gap is too wide; the space where translation takes place, between enunciation and understanding, is too wild. So we bring in metaphors to try to define the terrain, to tame it, to draw a map of it'.<sup>282</sup> In my introduction, I urge that we do not allow fears of objectification, sexualisation and exploitation to close down the possibilities that showgirl offers. I consider the work of this thesis is identifying the apertures within showgirl, finding what might be 'open' about her. The thesis can only take us so far. My video work, *The Artist*, in particular, embodies the sites of openness in the showgirl in ways beyond the problematic arena of language.<sup>283</sup> Therefore, there is no other way to put this: *The Artist* is a speculum, a device for maintaining openness. Speculum is the right word: it is a device for viewing, a lens. It is about sight, reflection, and maintaining openness.

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<sup>282</sup> Lauren Elkin, 'Barking from the Margins', p.153.

<sup>283</sup> The words keep catching us out!

Allow me to propose an art exhibition of art works that expands on the showgirl, as we have reached the point where art can better extend the various pleasures of showgirls, broaden out the range of looks there are both at her and from her, and offer possibilities for considering her in complex ways. Recalling the works I have included, I can envisage an exhibition, perhaps ordered along the lines of the Modes and Scenes. *Girlie Show*, Edward Hopper, would be a suitable first art work to encounter and would announce the subject of the show in a bold way. Opening with the theme of observing and imagining unlimited financial means, other historic paintings could be included, for example Walter Sickert's music hall scenes or Edgar Degas's dancers. Or what about Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings in Parisian cabarets like the Moulin Rouge, with skirts flung up for the quadrille dancing or the waltzing women, or stars arriving?

Eleanor Antin's *From The Archives of Modern Art* could lead us from the historical paintings and into works that resist or challenge concepts of the gaze. Photographs by Hannah Wilkie, Cindy Sherman, perhaps even Claude Cahun, all of whom play to the camera's lens, complicating our understanding of performing—they do not perform for a physically present audience and they create the scenes they inhabit, waiting patiently for us to access the work, in a different time frame. Their gaze outwards exists prior to our gaze towards the photograph.

We could do a double-take to return us to performance: the photographic documentation of Sophie Calle in *La Striptease*, of her time working in a club in Pigalle. Similarly, photographs and footage from Cosey Fanni Tutti's time experimenting as a sex worker in the seventies. Seen alongside Pippilotti Rist's *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* and Tracey Emin's *Why I Never Became a Dancer* and a sense of brave and confrontational performance personas

emerges. Here, the artists motivations are opaque and the critique is slippery. There is an element of being subsumed into and inhabiting the subterranean sites of desire, both complicity as well as resistance in the double-taking works.

The grab of the Internet would present some questions in the curation of the show. I envisage these video works on small computer screens with headsets for the sound. Perhaps Natalie Bookchin's visually complex *Mass Ornament*, would need to be presented as a larger projection. However, *Pizza Shop Dance*, Sophie Lisa Beresford, works well viewed more intimately. As do the pole-dancing and Piet Mondrain inspired *Red Stijl*, by Christina Lucas and the corporate logo-dancing of *Franchise*, by Roman Vasseur. And Hito Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea* a video in which the artist travels to find photographs from twenty years ago of herself in Japanese bondage. And this is the complexity of the grab: tracing oneself in images, images that are not of you, but form you, other images of you that circulate independently of you. Perhaps my video *The Artist* would fit here. What about pop videos too? Lady Gaga's *Applause*, Lana Del Rey's *Ride or Burning Desire*, and Iggy Azalea's *Work* (and so many more I could mention!) would expand on the possibilities of the grab.

The grab of the video works would lead us quite organically into the self construction of Scene 1 with Liz Cohen's *Body Work* photographs and also Nikki S Lee's *The Exotic Dancers Project*. Lee integrates herself into subcultural, ghetto or particular social spheres, spending time to behave as those around her, becoming alike, performing as they do. The subsequent art work exists as photographic documentation of these social interactions. Both these artists re-connect with the gestures underpinning the double-take artists.

Scene 2 would provide a counterpoint, in what ways *are* men looking? *Strip*, Jemima Stehli's photographic series depicts the expressions on her male subjects faces at various points in her strip for them. Various amusement, laughter, intimidation and indifference play across their faces. Philip-Lorca DiCorca created a series of photographs of pole-dancers alone in dark venues on the pole. Here there is admiration, fascination and a quizzical respect for the taut, athletic, inverted and gravity-defying bodies.

One day the photographer Leigh Ledare visited his Mom. She opened the door, naked, having just got up from sex with a younger man, roughly Ledare's age. Thus, she announced her sexuality to her son. Mom had been a ballet dancer, exotic dancer and placed ads looking for men to look after her. She approached Ledare to document her sexuality. He obliged, creating works that never approach Mom with forensic, pathologised study. He has photographed Mom in flagrante, her posing for him, sometimes he is in the frame, sometimes they are having innocent fun together, other times something more erotic is inferred. She looks out of the photographs directly at us, challenging us. In Ledare's work, subject-object politics is always complex.

And then Francis Alÿs's video *The Politics of Rehearsal* records a stripper dispassionately, as she rehearses in an empty bar to a pianist and singer as they rehearse. Her strip is frequently halted by the break in music; she re-arranges her clothes and then carries on when they recommence. Without an audience she moves through her steps without engagement. Only occasionally does she seem to lose herself a little to her clothing removal. An audio of a male voice speaking in Spanish is transcribed onscreen—he tells us of the faltering development of Latin America is like a stripper. Here, the stripper in the

piece is functions the metaphor of the audio, an ignored fellow performer on-stage, an autonomous artist amusing herself.

The relations between women in Scene 3 could be beautifully expanded on in the short film, *The Crystal Gaze*, by Ursula Mayer, in which three women move as though they have just stepped out of film scene, each playing a showgirl in a different film, in a different time period. As they walk around the beautiful Art Deco wood-pannelled house, in fragmentary, ambiguous statements that they share with each other they reflect on being represented, articulated by others, the pleasures associated with this, and perhaps the regrets.

The confidence of Scene 4 would need to be presented as a related live art programme with new commissions from featuring Mat Fraser and Julie Atlas Muz, David Hoyle, Penny Arcade, LaJohn Joseph, and Erin Markey, all of whom create outlandish works that draw on their own extensive experiences performing. If we consider Ashley's term, 'dominion', their works go some way to illustrating what having dominion over oneself looks like. Let me speculate further on the live programming. What if I could tempt Beatrix Von Bourbon to perform? Perhaps she could be drawn in to do something that includes speech? An homage to Judy's confrontation? Maybe I could re-enact Judy's speech myself? Or could I shape the interview transcripts into performance scripts and stage them in this exhibition? I could invite all the showgirls I watched to perform?

The pleasures of embodying or imaging other time periods and potentials for analysing the present through them in Scene 5 could be described by two very different works. Anna Biller's feature film *Viva*, a recreation of a Seventies sexploitation movie, an uncomfortable mix of pastiche and authentic emotions, in which Barbie/Viva goes on a journey of sexual discovery. The

final scene, celebratory and sad, sees Barbie and her friend in a down-market recreation of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell's number *Two Little Girls from Little Rock* from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The film touches on, but resists the polemic of empowerment or exploitation that so often dominates representations of women's sexual desire.

Sharon Kivland's *Ma Nana*, a text-based print in which the descriptions of Nana in Emile Zola's novel are reworded into first person speech. A self-declaration of fabulousness emerges as it is read. And to read Kivland's work is to find oneself declaring one's own hypnotic fabulousness, if only under your breath.

But for now, the curtain is ready to descend, the house lights are ready to come up, and I must take my courtesy, to end this, my research-showgirl-performance.

Word count: 61, 325

# SHOWGIRL LEXICON

Abhorrent

Acting like tigers—owning and dominating the viewer with exaggerated movement and shameful display

Audiences will encourage different aspects of an act

Authentic

An awareness of I'm performing for you, and you're in the audience and you're here to have a good time and let's play

Being playful with the audience

Benefits the community

Be proud and sing it loud

Cannot fully control an audience

Celebrate confidence and our love of our own bodies

Community

Composed

Conditioning

Connection

Connection broken

Connect with women

The content

A curtain would drop down

Dancer's soul spills out when she performs

Dance through them, rather than at them



Dynamic

Emancipated image of what women can be today

Empower and inspire

Empowered

It's empowered when you're, when you make a choice

The empowerment is knowing, having dominion over your own energy

Enclosed in itself

Encourage

Enjoying yourself

Execution of the act

Explore their creativity

Feed-off-the-audience

Fuelling my sense of character

Fully alive

Fully shining

Friendly spaces

Galvanising effect

Get in touch with my own, my own sexuality, my own femininity, my feelings  
about my body

Getting my glamour on

Good personality onstage

Help each other and help the industry as a whole

How I wanted to dress, who I am

I can feel the character come through, stronger

I'm gonna shine my light

Improvising

Infuses

Intimate the con felt

It doesn't mean that it's artificial

Let's not homogenise

Let's stay true but then let's share feed off each others individuality to  
strengthen our own

A level of power of how I'm showing up in order to have that interaction

A line of empathy

Lose their inhibitions

My people, my forebears

The narrative

Now it's mine

Permissive

Persona

Playful connection

Powerful tool

Prescribed script

A projection for the male gaze

Projection plane

Radiant

Rapport

Real sensual and sexual energy inside of yourself

A role is a really big thing

A role is very real, just because it's a role doesn't mean it's fake

A sense of entitlement

Sexy fun

Sexy and playful and fun

She's blossoming

The Showgirl Stance

Smoothness

So engrossed in the pictures

Stage presence

Suiting up for battle

Supportive

Support each other

Swinging kind of vine feel

Taking more pride in my appearance

Talent

That is inspiring!

The theme

Treated respectfully

Unapproachable

Vase, I have to fill it myself

Very positive spaces

We become agents of our own path

We're playing roles

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*Bitch! Dyke! Fagbag! Whore! Penny Arcade*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012, Arcola Theatre, London

*Bobème Sauvage*, 25<sup>th</sup> February 2011, Gruner Salon, Berlin

*Bonheur*, 17<sup>th</sup> July 2010, Lido, Paris

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## **Workshops**

*Spice* with Jo King, London, Friday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2012

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*Dirty Martini and the New Burlesque* dir. by Gary Beeber, Ten-In-One Productions 2010

*The French Cancan*, dir. by Jean Renoir, The Criterion Collection, 1954

*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, dir. by Howard Hawks, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1953

*Gilda*, dir. by Charles Vidor, Columbia Pictures, 1946

*Immodesty Blai ze Presents: Burlesque Undressed*, dir. by Alison Grist, Night Falls, 2010

*Moulin Rouge!*, dir. by Baz Luhrmann, Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2001

*Mrs Henderson Presents*, dir. by Stephen Frears, The Weinstein Company, 2005

*Pretty Things*, dir. by Liz Goldwyn, HBO, 2005

*Tournée* [On Tour], dir. by Mathieu Amalric, Artificial Eye, 2010

*Sex and the City*, [tv series], created by Darren Star, HBO, 1998-2004

*Showgirls*, dir. by Paul Verhoeven, Santa Monica, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, Paris: Path  , 1995

*The Women*, dir. George Cukor, Beverly Hills, CA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1939

*Working Girl*, dir. by Mike Nichols, Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 1988

*Working Girls*, dir. by Dorothy Arzner, Paramount, 1931



## Ephemera

Ahearne, Gemma, email to the author 9<sup>th</sup> April 2013

*Bonheur* programme, Lido, 2010

Bourgeois & Maurice, email to the author 13<sup>th</sup> February 2012

Butterfly, Vicky, email to the author 17<sup>th</sup> November 2012

*Féerie* programme, Moulin Rouge 2011

Gothique, Lara, email to the author 18<sup>th</sup> December 2012

*How to Become A Crazy Girl*, Crazy Horse

*Jubilee Fun Facts* sheet, the press office

*Jubilee!* programme, 2008

Limits, Dusty, email to the author 25<sup>th</sup> February 2013

McLean, Adrienne L., email to the author 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2010

*Paris je t'aime* programme, La Nouvelle Eve, 2011

Pace, Carolyn, Facebook message to author 28<sup>th</sup> September 2012

Press pack, Moulin Rouge Press and Communication, 2010

Von Bourbon, Beatrix, email to the author 1st October 2012

Weber, Ghazal, email to the author, 9th August 2012

## **endix**

CD of interview transcripts:



# HOW DO I LOOK?

*Alison J Carr*



# HOW DO I LOOK?

*Alison J Carr*



*Being & Becoming*



*Lido, Paris*

The atmosphere of an empty theatre has a strange quality. Years ago, I was a theatre usher. At one point, after the show was over, a task of mine was to walk all the corridors and stairwells of the front of house and auditorium, checking all the doors were locked. The walkways leading towards the theatre entrances were decorated with a dusty pink-red colour, flecked with colours from the theatre interior. Inside the dusty pink-red auditorium, the proscenium arch stage was gilded with a frame, and flanked with statues of angelic cherubs. The theatre performs. To walk alone around a theatre is to constantly catch the magic and spectacle of the theatre out of the corner of your eye. The memories: personal, collective and imagined of what has happened on the stage dance around, just beyond sight.

One of the consistent activities during my research has been photographing empty theatres and spaces that have hosted the showgirl. Once inside these spaces, I turn away from the stage and photograph the architectural details and furnishings of the space for the audience. I observe how the space is animated and made fantastical through the textures, fabrics and rich deep colours, particularly reds that covered the walls and furniture. This activity has afforded me the opportunity to really look, spend time alone in theatres and consider how the space constructs a way to view. Initially I paired these photographs with texts on showgirls: biographies taken from ancient sources or online web presence of showgirls who had performed on the particular stages. This text and photo strategy was interesting, but it detracted from the central performance: the space.

Of all the works I have produced over my PhD, the theatre photographs are the least complete. As an ongoing practice, creating the photographs, finding a reason to spend time in empty performance spaces, has been formative for my thinking on viewing. As records of those thoughts, the photographs have not yet found their ideal form. However, they have functioned very well as slideshows in the background during the performative conference papers I have delivered, creating backdrops for me to perform against.

*Being & Becoming* is a single photograph. A one-off, created for my PhD upgrade presentation. It feels somewhat like a manifesto or statement of intent. It has been a useful image for describing my position, a type of shorthand. When I show people the photograph, they get what I do, with less need for lengthy explanations. I presented this photograph alongside the text and theatres combinations. A photograph of me, sitting on my desk, in my studio, alongside theatres created a potent juxtaposition: contexts for particular performative activities, contexts that give permission for certain kinds of action, certain kinds of interaction.

I share the studio at S1 Artspace with the rest of the fine art PhD students at Sheffield Hallam University. We all access the space at differing times, making use of it in drastically different ways. I come in on the weekend, finding times of the day when the building is empty. I put on loud music and dance in the studio, recording my movements on my compact, still camera. This has become my way of working over my PhD, first tested out in my collaboration with Kerstin Honeit. We made each other video letters, in preparation for a residency and exhibition at LoBe gallery in Berlin. Initially, we thought of the videos as meant only for each other, shared via Dropbox, along with songs, journal articles and strange ephemera we thought the other would like. Rather than discussing our videos received, we responded with a follow up video—picking up and developing ideas, methods, or aesthetics in our responses. Early on in our residency, we had the opportunity to screen some video work. We were nervous, but we put together a few videos into a ‘conversation’. Seeing them projected in front of an audience, we were startled by what we saw—this *was* our art work! The work was done, it was not preparation or warm-up, the art was *there*. What we noticed was all our shared ideas, our differing starting points, our willingness to respect and understand each other, were up there on the screen. As we had anticipated that these video letters would be just for each other to see, we made them fast with low-tech methods, for easy sharing. What was conceived as a private conversation held within it the threads of our shared interests. The letters commenced with dancing to Lady Gaga and descriptions of bodily afflictions

producing two separate conversations: *Video Letters: Body* and *Video Letters: Voice*. As the conversations continued we performed for each other: dancing to music, intervening in gallery spaces, asking other people to help us explore themes. A shared visual language evolved as we technically and visually quoted one another, mimicking the way in which a verbal conversation uses repetition to register understanding. The work explored public and private spaces, intimate performances and investigative encounters.

When I saw 'Gaga Charleston', the final video of *Video Letters: Body*, I was struck by a strange thought. Why does my art practice not look like *this*, I wondered. What I saw on screen was a woman dancing in her studio, with joy, abandon, freedom, improvising—at times moving with control, stylised movements knowingly performed, at other times, bursting into playful posing. Not every move worked but so many did. No elaborate context framed the action, but there was a vintage dress and Lady Gaga singing. And I realised. All the things I wanted my art practice to do were happening in this video. *Dancing in my studio!* This is what I need to do, I thought.

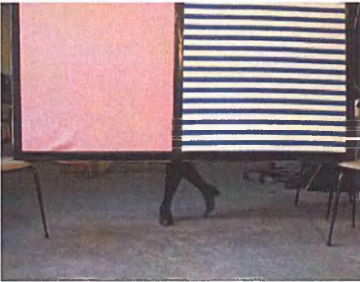
After *Video Letters*, who would I correspond with? Who would I dance for? What would I respond to? I had begun to use the film *The Artist* as a structuring device in my writing when I realised that perhaps instead of using the film in my writing verbatim, what I could do is respond and restage the scenes of film in my studio. The title, *The Artist*, is a double entendre of sorts, like my title *How Do I Look?* I am the artist, in an art studio. But I am also negotiating a recent film, which itself negotiates silent-era Hollywood movie-making, which is also a quotation of *Singing in The Rain*. By restaging the scenes, responding, interpreting, entering into dialogue with them, I could also embody the showgirl artist, a showgirl who performs in her studio. An artist: *The Artist*.

Let me start at the beginning, Scene 1. In the film, Peppy's career break comes to her because she can dance. She dances to get a part as an extra and on set she practices her tap steps, obscured by a flat, playing along as George begins to mimic her steps. In my recreation, I move into position behind a screen / painting / object that I found rested against a wall. One of Dale Holmes's many art works in residence in our studio. I play with the art work, we dance together, there is no George in my scene, only art and an artist.





'Gaga Charleston' from *Video Letters / The Artist*, Scene 4



*The Artist*, Scene 1



*The Artist*, Scene 2



*The Artist*, Scene 3



*The Artist*, Scene 4

showing my pleasure in tap. I have tap-danced since childhood and I have been going to classes throughout my PhD. I wanted to maintain contact with tap as another language of the body, related to theatre performance.

In Scene 2, I dance with many of Dale's art works. Again, the art works stand in for George, this time, when he adds a beauty spot above Peppy's lip. The necessary touch to her image, which creates her unique look and launches her career. I was thinking that I was an art object amongst art objects, and that perhaps their undoubted status as art objects might confer art object status onto me. I dance to a mash-up of Whitney Houston's *How Will I Know* and Robyn's *Dancing on My Own* called *Dancing in Houston (Robyn vs Whitney Houston)* by Zooash, a song I found on Soundcloud. Two songs unwittingly collaborate through the input of the unknown 'Zooash'—these details of visibility, stardom, shaping of identity, performed through new online sharing technologies. But I also remember Houston's video to *How Will I Know*, in which she dances with contemporary dancers in a gallery-like performance space, in around art. She wears a big grey bow on her head, and her eye make-up matches the flats / painting / walls. In Robyn's video, she performs alone to camera in a studio, and a nightclub around people. I quote all these sources, moving between them. Scene 2 moves around rather than having a static meaning. My art work and art persona is formed in and through other influences, is seen through lenses of popular culture and is improved through the addition of aluminium tape I found in loose strips near my desk.

I dance with two friends, Lizzie and Hayley in Scene 3. We tap-danced in the reception of S1 Artspace (and I have to polish the floor after somewhat marking the parquet!). Responding to the togetherness and community of the laughing showgirls in the film, we had fun by mixing our regular tap warm-up routine with improvised moves. We picked the music together after testing out a number of songs, finally settling on Julie Andrews singing *Le Jazz Hot* from the musical *Victor Victoria*. Andrews plays a woman, who performs as a man in drag: the ultimate showgirl gender confusion. In the film, she sings with an ensemble of white bowler-hatted male tap-dancers, that re-appear at the end dressed in top-hats and tails, with female tappers in black satin playsuits and top-hats. Lizzie, Hayley and my taps are so loud we occasionally drown out the song—though this is entirely appropriate: the track has taps pre-recorded on it.

I reprise *Gaga Charleston* in Scene 4: I could not better this video for the energy and physical expression of joy, and so what better way than to embody Peppy's playful stairwell Charleston? I dance to Lady Gaga's *Scheiße*, a song

about growing in confidence—wishing for more confidence, perhaps already having it, but not knowing. Similarly, Peppy embodies a charisma and confidence in her body, her dance steps, her friendly interactions with George, without really knowing exactly that this is her gift. Perhaps I did not know either, until I saw *Gaga Charleston*.

What would be a fitting Scene 5? In the film, Scene 5 is the tap-dancing duet that enables George's rehabilitation back into the talkies. By remembering George can tap, Peppy re-launches George's career. Scene 5 is about imagining unconventional ways to speculate new possibilities. In my version, I dance in the studio, in front of stage-set type constructions by Holmes. I went further: I used Algorithm's *Boucle Infinie*—after seeing Dale use Algorithm's music for his own performance. Thus, I am dueting with Dale's art practice and we combine into our own celebratory number.

Across all the scenes of *The Artist*, I improvise, make new moves fit for the context, but I also remember moves from class, moves from all kinds of showgirls, bright Broadway moves, bold moves, sexy moves, but also kick-lines, kabarett, avant-garde aesthetics. I find new sites of live moments. I think of pop showgirl's advice: 'If you're a strong female you don't need permission'. *The Artist*, embodies the sites of openness in the showgirl going further than thesis can alone. There is no other way to put this: *The Artist* is a speculum. Speculum, a device for viewing, or a lens, is about sight, reflection, and maintaining openness.



## TIMELINE FOR VIDEO LETTERS

### Video Letters: Body



A  
19.05.11  
S1 Artspace Studio / Home Kitchen, Sheffield  
*Born This Way*



B  
23.05.11  
Living room, Berlin  
*Heaven & Hell*  
Black Sabbath



C  
03.06.11  
S1 Artspace Studio, Sheffield  
*End Credits*  
Chase & Status feat. Plan B



D  
08.06.11  
Garden, Berlin  
*Where the Wild Roses Grow*  
Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds feat.  
Kylie Minogue



E  
26.06.11  
A lake, Berlin  
*Can't Get You Out of My Head*  
Kylie Minogue



F  
08.07.11  
KW Institute for Contemporary  
Art, Berlin  
*Best Minds Part One*  
Jeremy Shaw



G  
4.09.11  
Centre Pompidou, Paris  
*Cuentos Patrióticos*  
Francis Alÿs



H  
14.09.11  
Zoo, Berlin



I  
21.10.11  
Hathersage Road, Sheffield



J  
26.10.11  
Boberger Sec, Hamburg  
Bildwechsel 2008



K  
1.12.11  
S1 Artspace Studio, Sheffield  
*Scheisse*  
Lady Gaga