

'Showing the girl'

The new burlesque



Feminist Theory
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Abstract This paper examines the cultural phenomenon of 'new burlesque', a subculture in which young women take part in striptease performances which invoke the iconic styles and routines associated with mid-20th century cabaret. By reading burlesque websites alongside the celebrity culture and advertising, the article examines how the retro styles of dress and make-up associated with this subculture have circulated through a range of media sites as an alternative mode of femininity. By focusing on the intersections between online fan communities, popular images of burlesque, fashion, and beauty, I argue that burlesque styles involve a reclaiming of traditionally normative sites of identity production and that computer technologies are an extension of the technologies of dress, cosmetics and movements through which femininity is produced. I go on to suggest a re-framing of burlesque as a site of parody and resistance which 'troubles' critiques of femininity within both feminist theory and queer theory.

keywords *drag, femininity, parody, performance, subculture*

Introduction: the new burlesque

'Welcome to this underground of delights,' booms the handsome MC, downstairs in the tiny theatre. He introduces Miss Immodesty Blaize . . . The curvy brunette weaves her way through the tiny theatre and takes to the stage, black hat cocked over one eye, dressed in a black bustier and fishnet tights. Turning her back, and peeping coquettishly over her shoulder, she sways her hips and begins to undo her corset . . . Miss Blaize comes near to the end of her act, taking off her bra to reveal breasts crowned with a pair of black sequinned nipple tassels which she twirls, using shoulder action that should qualify for some sort of Olympic category of its own. (O'Connell, 2003)

The scene described above could be taking place in many contexts: in the music halls of 19th-century London, the supper clubs of pre-war Berlin, or the striptease shows of 1950s America. In fact, this article in the British newspaper *The Observer* describes a club night at the Duke of York pub in Clerkenwell, in 2003, at which the audience consisted mainly of women in their 20s and 30s, many of whom were dressed in similar vintage styles

to the performers onstage (O'Connell, 2003). Clearly, the relationship between performer and audience here was not that of a conventional striptease show.

This form of 'new burlesque' involves a nostalgic reworking of the striptease performances of the late 19th and early to mid 20th centuries. In this article, I shall use the phrase 'new burlesque' to refer to two distinct but intertwined cultural phenomena. Firstly, contemporary burlesque subculture in which women who may be amateur or professional performers take part in staged striptease performances; and secondly, the use of 'new burlesque' by the fashion and beauty industries to refer to a specific vintage 'look', a look which, as I will show, has been widely imagined through narratives of excessive, dangerous femininity.

Contemporary burlesque subculture appears to have originated in the mid 1990s in the nightclubs of New York and especially London, with the revival of 'supper clubs' including *Volupte*, *The Pigalle Club*, *Teatro*, and *Bethnal Green Workingmen's Club*. At these club nights, performers and audiences alike take part in striptease performances and dress in vintage styles. However, an important difference from earlier burlesque is that the audience is as likely to consist of women and gay men as the heterosexual men who comprised the traditional audience for such shows. What is more, the new burlesque is not limited to these particular spaces; it has also generated a wider subculture, including a highly active online community, with which I am concerned here.¹ As a look, the new burlesque has become a genre of femininity that circulates across a number of social and media sites. Its most famous representative is Dita von Teese, who exemplifies the burlesque look: dyed, often dark hair, red lips, corsets, and extravagant feathered and sequined costumes that has been widely copied by the fashion and beauty industries.² The rise of new burlesque communities on the Web reveals the extent to which this version of femininity has been taken up as a dramatic counterpoint to what von Teese calls the 'greasy supermodel look' that characterizes popular ideals of femininity (2006: 43).

Although, as I shall argue, the new burlesque 'look' is powerful precisely because it invokes stripping as performance and practice, the focus of this article is not on the club space itself, but on the ways in which cultural spaces, particularly online spaces, allow imagery previously associated with private space to circulate and to become the basis of an emergent community. This article focuses on the intersections between online fan communities, popular images of burlesque, fashion, and beauty. If new burlesque is partly a reclaiming of traditionally normative sites of identity production, spaces on the Web can be seen as an extension of the performance space.³ Similarly, computer technologies are an extension of the technologies of dress, cosmetics and movements through which femininity is produced. Indeed, an awareness of femininity as technologically constructed is central to this subculture, in which much space is devoted to constructing, displaying and sharing feminine images. However, this version of femininity is nearly unrecognizable from the version that is constantly reproduced and circulated through women's magazines and

advertising. Here, I am concerned with the ways in which particular images, practices and objects associated with the burlesque scene have been positioned against *both* mainstream femininity and a particular reading of feminist critiques of feminine identity.

I realised some time ago that I am a showgirl. When I perform it is to show the girl, whereas some performers take the approach of caricaturing or 'burlesquing' the girl. (Lola the Vamp)

In fact, burlesque means 'to parody or ridicule', a fact pointed out by a central figure on the London burlesque scene, Immodesty Blaize. For Lola, however, parody is less important than 'showing the girl', that is, allowing a feminine identity, or 'girlness', to emerge through performance.

This tension between 'burlesquing the girl' and 'showing the girl' – that is, in producing a version of femininity that is parodic, but also demonstrates pleasurable attachment to a feminine identity that is lived as authentic – precisely suggests a reading of burlesque as drag performance. My argument is that by reading new burlesque in this way, it is possible for the historic tension between feminism and femininity to be re-thought. Burlesque powerfully dramatizes the fact that femininity is not reducible to a single object or practice: that feminine identities are multiple, and may be experienced as pleasurable. However, it is not enough simply to claim that femininity is always a source of parodic pleasure. Like drag, burlesque also works to destabilize the ways in which dominant feminine identities become normalized. Whilst performers and fans may not participate with the explicit intention of questioning normative notions of femininity, these performances, haunted by queer theory and feminism, nevertheless speak to the constructed nature of feminine identity with just as much eloquence as any male drag performance: indeed, more so, since they also dramatize an *attachment* to feminine identity that may be missing from drag shows.

New and old burlesque

The term 'new burlesque' might appear to suggest a break with the old. However, one of the defining characteristics of new burlesque communities is nostalgia for original burlesque performances, as well as a reclaiming of historical burlesque performers as proto-feminist heroines. There is a distinction here between burlesque and other forms of stripping. Originally, burlesque performances took place in theatres, not strip clubs, and involved elaborate costumes and sets together with spoken dialogue or comic routines, often performed by the striptease artists themselves (Shteir, 2004: 122–4). As Shteir notes, unlike strip clubs, the American burlesque theatre of the early 20th century could provide a route to stardom for female performers, with iconic strippers like Gypsy Rose Lee appearing alongside comedians and singers like Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson and the Marx Brothers (2004: 122). Whilst many performers were also trained dancers or singers, their role in the show was to provide 'what Jazz Age Americans called "it" or sex appeal' with performers competing

for the most outrageous costumes, hairstyles, sets, and the most feminine walk, as well as displaying 'wit, charm, vivacity and versatility' (p. 122).

Burlesque was hence associated with a public display of sexuality, but a sexuality that depended first and foremost on excessive femininity of appearance and gesture. Burlesque has historically been a site of anxiety about traditional feminine roles; as Mary-Elena Buszek has observed, the burlesque performers and pin-ups of the late 19th century occupied a highly contested position which 'negotiated a rare spectrum of gray areas between the period's societal binary for women' (1999: 141). By performing excessively sexualized feminine roles onstage, but also being accepted in bourgeois society as the embodiment of ideal female beauty, female performers showed that 'between the bourgeois "true woman" . . . and the low-class prostitute existed alternative, unstable, and powerful roles for white women – transgressive identities that were celebrated and made visible in the theatre' (1999: 141–2). The pin-ups of the time can thus be read as 'representing its beautiful/beautified subjects' as ' . . . self-aware sexual beings . . . whose sexual identities can be self-constructed, self-controlled, and changing' (1999: 160).

An important aspect of the current burlesque scene is a sense of continuity with historic performances. 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. Indeed, the front page of her website, which shows Miss Blaize gazing out at the viewer while herself the focus of a crowd of paparazzi, precisely suggests the beautified object of the camera's gaze as self-aware sexual subject. Many current performers and fans claim continuity with earlier burlesque stars of the 19th and 20th century; indeed, von Teese's signature act, in which she dances in a giant cocktail glass, was first performed by Lili St. Cyr in the 1940s. Immodesty Blaize attributes her love of burlesque to seeing a film about the life of Gypsy Rose Lee when she was three years old, an experience which, significantly, also inspired the comedian Paul O'Grady to develop his (excessive, working-class) drag alter ego, Lily Savage. Blaize also speaks of her admiration for another artist, Tempest Storm, who is still performing at the age of 80 (*The Paul O'Grady Show*, 2007), demonstrating how new burlesque is seen in terms of honouring past performers, as a performance of femininity that has survived as a symbol of earlier expressions of independence and sexual freedom. The 'newness' of new burlesque, then, has to do more with the context in which performances take place. The content, costumes, dance routines, all draw heavily on 'old' burlesque; and, as I shall argue, embody many of the same anxieties about feminine excess.

One aspect of this 'newness', however, is an awareness of feminism; the question of whether burlesque is feminist or not is ever-present.⁴ Within the new burlesque community, there is a widespread, albeit uneasy desire to align an attachment to feminine identity performances with a commitment to feminist politics. However, this desire is troubled by an anxiety about whether burlesque is really compatible with feminism. One

performer described this tension between a desire to see herself as a feminist, and her commitment to continuing the tradition of burlesque dancing as follows:

Early in my career I would use feminism as armour. It was my shield to those who were worried about what I was doing stripping! . . . [But] I've learnt over time that the most interesting thing about burlesque, for me, is not the ideas about feminism it answers or raises, but how many ideas, how many different aesthetics, can be poured into the form . . . (Lola the Vamp)

The new burlesque is haunted by feminism, but the burlesque community is troubled by a sense that any cultural practice that makes visible an attachment to feminine identity is always already irreconcilable with feminism. However, whilst performers may feel excluded from explicitly claiming feminism as an identity – in much the same way as their 19th century forebears were forbidden to discuss sexuality openly – an awareness of the problematic relationship between feminism and feminine identity practices is always in the background, part of the shared history of the community. The staging of femininity in burlesque performances is hence associated with a history of women's liberation and sexual freedom that is inseparable from excessively feminine identity performances.

One of the ways in which burlesque subcultures have appropriated feminist language and discourse, however, is in the desire to 'liberate' women from more normative versions of feminine beauty. In order to construct itself as a subculture, new burlesque engages with the language of both feminism and queer theory, as we shall see. There is also much focus on the sense of community between performer and audience, a sense which derives partly from a shared love of specific retro or vintage femininities which reference precisely those feminine images that have been extensively parodied by feminist artists as emblematic of a pre- or proto-feminist period. This feminine look constitutes a shared set of cultural belongings through which a community emerges: this can be seen, for example, in a number of classes in femininity that are available both online and offline:

Join four-time Tease-O-Rama veteran Bella Beretta and learn the secrets of glamorous, over-the-top burlesque makeup techniques. Anyone who wants to blend neutral shades need not apply – this is a class for glamour gals who want to stop traffic. (<http://www.teaseorama.com/activities.html>, accessed 1 October 2007)

These classes, like those aimed at cross-dressers, demonstrate awareness that femininity needs to be learnt: in this, they reveal an implicit relationship between burlesque and queer notions of performativity. There is also evidence of direct engagement with feminism and queer theory, in the form of courses like those offered by Miss Indigo Blue's Academy which, alongside the usual courses in the theatrical aspects of burlesque such as stripping techniques, 'makeup and wig tricks' and 'walking in heels', teaches workshops on feminism and the burlesque industry, 'Queering Burlesque', and 'Performing Femininity'.

Learning femininity, in this sense, also involves unlearning existing normative forms of femininity in favour of new, reworked performances.

Burlesque can hence be read as a form of drag performance, as a parody of femininity. However, I shall also argue that there is a tension between this desire to mock feminine ideals, and an attachment to femininity as an identity position. As such, it also problematizes the ways in which femininity has been read as an unconscious performance, in opposition to drag which is seen as a self-aware (and hence potentially subversive) parody. I shall return to this point at the end of the article. Here, I want to examine the ways in which burlesque negotiates the vexed relationship between feminism and feminine identity by focusing on one commodity: the red lipstick of the burlesque performer.

Red lipstick: femininity and excess

Being different is good. It is so scary at first, but it is good. There are so many different ways of getting glamorous, it doesn't have to be painful . . . Try a nice new lipstick, a red or a burgundy or a plum, not your usual beige-brown. (Dita von Teese, cited in Hughes, 2007)

Red lips are central to the imagery of new (and old) burlesque. Performers may occasionally be seen with purple, crimson or black lips, but these are the exception. The practice of acquiring and putting on lipstick is itself fetishized; Dita von Teese claims to own at least fifty shades of red (Hughes, 2007), whilst an entire thread on the Ministry of Burlesque web forum is dedicated to deciding which lipsticks are the most elegant to apply in public. Visually, one of the most striking aspects of burlesque imagery is the constant repetition of the painted mouth as a central trope. Certainly, in researching this article, I have never come across a single image of a performer or fan sporting bare, glossed, or pale lips.

In critiques of femininity, red lipstick is synonymous with feminine excess. In *Beauty and Misogyny* Sheila Jeffreys claims that lipstick is a 'toxic substance' which fits the United Nations' criteria for 'harmful cultural practices' (2005: 107, 28). Lipstick, seen as literal as well as figurative poison, is accorded a special place in Jeffreys' model of femininity, which sees femininity as additive, as something that is superimposed on some mystical 'authentic' self which cries out to be liberated from the artificially imposed constraints of high heels, make-up and restrictive clothing. This model of femininity is summed up by Naomi Wolf's statement in *The Beauty Myth*, that 'femininity is code for femaleness *plus* whatever society happens to be selling' (1990: 177, emphasis added). Sabina Sawhney provides a summary and critique of this position:

Feminism seems to be relying on the notion that the authentic identity of woman would be revealed once the drag is removed. That is to say, when her various 'clothes' – racial, ethnic, hetero/homosexual, class textured – are removed, the real, genuine woman would appear whose identity would pose no puzzles. (Sawhney, 2006: 5)

As Sawhney suggests here, it is possible to read accounts of femininity such as Wolf's as implicitly essentialist, in that they suggest the existence of a primary, authentic 'femaleness'. Femininity consists of layers of

artifice that are superimposed on to unproblematically female bodies; it is articulated as a compulsion to add 'whatever society is selling', as a miserable duty over which women have no control. As Samantha Holland argues, the danger is that women become positioned as 'mindless consumers, in thrall to the power of media images' (2004: 10) who need to be educated by middle-class feminists. This desire to control, to curb excess, is most often presented as concern, as in the recent debate over 'size zero' models and celebrities. As Susan Bordo argues, this concern may be justified when it leads to the critique of the 'ideological construction of femininity [which] is always homogenizing and normalising, erasing racial, class, and other differences and insisting that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal' (2004: 168–9).

Despite their very different positions, Jeffreys' and Bordo's accounts have in common an assumption that femininity is incompatible with feminism. This oppositional model is questioned by Hilary Hinds and Jackie Stacey, who have argued that it is precisely through attempts to reconcile femininity with feminism that changing ideas about gender are culturally negotiated. They point out that:

It is in the tension between the shifting meaning of the categories of femininity and feminism that the fantasies, anxieties and desires about the changing meanings of gender that pervade contemporary cultures can be tracked. (2001: 170)

Historically, this tension has been worked out in media images of femininity, and particularly in consumer culture. Imogen Tyler uses the term 'lipstick liberation' to refer to the incorporation of feminist rhetoric within consumer culture in the 1970s (2005: 37). She cites Susan Douglas' research on the ways in which ads for fashion and beauty products incorporated the language of women's liberation. Anxieties about the appropriation of feminism by consumer culture are thus present from the outset in debates about women's liberation, and Tyler suggests that this is an ongoing set of tensions, played out in consumer culture, that is primary to the meaning of feminism itself.

The term 'lipstick liberation' is particularly useful in this context, since lipstick has played an important role in historical attempts to negotiate the relationship between femininity and feminism.⁵ The burlesque performance produces similar anxieties. It suggests a tension between the intention behind a particular identity performance, and the way in which it is likely to be read by an imagined other. No matter how 'alternative' or 'subversive' burlesque femininity may *feel*, therefore, it is held to fail as long as it is capable of being (mis)read as a reproduction of normative heterosexuality. This anxiety about female excess is echoed in some of the press coverage of the burlesque scene. For example, an article in the British newspaper *The Observer* takes a sceptical position on some performers' claim that their work is feminist, wondering whether the 'fairy dust of irony really strips burlesque of any political dubiousness' (O'Connell, 2003), while an article on a feminist website argues that the movement 'can still be interpreted as a form of exploitation of women's bodies', which

rather suggests that it is the purpose of feminism to try to interpret all manifestations of femininity in this way, as if feminism itself were a system for curbing feminine excess (DiNardo, 2004).

Cult cosmetic companies such as NARS and MAC have drawn on the complex web of associations between lipstick and liberation that are invoked by new burlesque performers. NARS' lipsticks are named after golden-age Hollywood films – *Shanghai Express*, *Blonde Venus*, *Morocco* – thus evoking both the vintage ethos of the movement, and the notion of strong, diva-like femininity. Dita von Teese herself advertises Viva Glam lipstick by MAC, 'an outspoken deep red', from which a hundred per cent of the profits goes to Aids charities. This commercial is the latest in a line utilizing celebrities, which originated in 1995 with a campaign featuring the 'first drag supermodel', RuPaul. Subsequent campaigns have included Boy George, k.d. Lang, Lil' Kim and Sandra Bernhard. The campaign not only, then, suggests that buying this product is an act of political protest in itself (that is, it means that one is 'being outspoken'); it also marks the wearer as part of a community of outspoken queer subjects. Lipstick thus becomes the visible mark of, but also paradoxically stands in for, political activism.

It is precisely this visibility that makes red lipstick, like many of the trappings of burlesque femininity, troubling for mainstream consumer culture. Again, whilst women's magazines and websites have been quick to appropriate the burlesque 'look', these accounts are haunted by a certain anxiety which is expressed through the notion of 'high maintenance' femininity. This question of maintenance is a recurring trope whenever von Teese is mentioned in mainstream women's magazines, with different publications seeming unsure whether to reassure their readers that a little high-maintenance femininity is no bad thing, or to suggest that the look is not really high maintenance at all. Certainly, there seems to be a general feeling that reassurance is needed. Hence the winter 2006 fashion section of the mainstream women's magazine website *handbag.com* featured an article on 'how to wear the new burlesque', under the heading 'Femme Fatale: ditch those jeans and break out the stockings and feathers'. The article goes on to tell its readers, 'it's time to reveal your inner showgirl with the latest burlesque look', and to remind them that 'Burlesque is a show, so make your outfit perform with glamorous details and tongue in chic accessories – this is not the time for low maintenance' (Temple, 2006).

An article in the fashion pages of the *Daily Telegraph* gives instructions on how to achieve the new femme fatale look, but advises readers that the look is not as 'high maintenance' as it appears:

She may look like one of Hollywood's most high-maintenance women, with her glossy red nails filed to points and their half-moons left unpainted, but she declares herself 'a real do-it-yourselfer' – her glossy blue-black hair is coloured from its natural blonde with Revlon 10-minute dye. 'I always do my own make-up for my shows too.' (West, 2006: 1)

What is important here is the *appearance* of being high maintenance, which attracts attention precisely because it contrasts so strongly with the

contrived effortlessness that has dominated mainstream fashion and beauty since the late 1990s. Part of the problem might be the challenges that burlesque poses to popular models of feminine beauty: for example the article published on the Handbag website states that 'burlesque is about celebrating the contours of the body, so is perfect for curvaceous, womanly figures' (Temple, 2006), a sentiment that sits uneasily alongside the many representations of very thin models that proliferate on its fashion pages. The press coverage is more at ease when dealing with the ways in which burlesque can be seen as high maintenance and hence unattainable. In the *Telegraph* article cited above, the smallest details of von Teese's appearance are read in this way: even her nails, with their unpainted half-moons, are eloquent of the contrast between nature and artifice: the act of leaving a section unpainted draws attention to the act of painting itself, whilst the pattern of red and white reverses that of the 'natural looking' French manicures which were hugely popular during this period.

The burlesque 'look' is coded as transgressive through its association with the excessive sexual display of striptease. Indeed, the red nails with their bare half-moons are themselves suggestive of the partial nakedness of the striptease performance itself. Much of the eroticism of burlesque centres on the tension between clothing and naked flesh. In the original burlesque striptease performances, the paraphernalia of the act such as nipple tassels, feather fans, lingerie and corsets, were intended to draw attention to the nakedness of the performer's body, for example by framing, rather than concealing, the breasts. Here, however, it is the artificial elements of the performance, the *paint*, that is foregrounded as representing a shocking inversion of social norms. The redness of her lips, whilst no more or less artificial, is seen as a deliberate flaunting of artifice. It is not as though women's magazines generally advise readers to wear no lipstick at all – the choice is not a simple one between the labour of applying lipstick and the freedom of going without. Red lipstick is positioned in contrast to fashionable natural-looking colours and glosses which are known, on cosmetics discussion boards like *makeupalley.com*, as 'YLBB' – 'your lips, but better'. The opposition is thus between visible and less visible forms of beauty work: that is, between a desire for self-improvement (which is naturalized as appropriately feminine), and a 'diva-like', 'outspoken' flaunting which draws attention not only to one's femininity *but also to the work that is involved in maintaining it*.

The anxiety around visibly high-maintenance femininity also inspired something of a backlash. The beauty journalist Nadine Baggott writes a blog, *Beauty Secrets*, on which a post advised readers to stay away from the retro shades of red lipstick promoted by companies like NARS and MAC. Under the title 'Beauty or Beast? Red Lipstick', Baggott explains that whilst it may work for stars like Gwen Stefani, red lipstick is 'just too high maintenance'. She outlines the stages she claims are necessary if one is to wear this style successfully:

You need to prep your mouth with base, line your mouth with nude liner, apply the lipstick, blot and apply again, and then don't even think about leaving the

house without your concealer and lipstick to hand to repair and reapply. (Baggott, 2006)

This certainly sounds like hard work, though perhaps not when one reads it in the context of the many and varied practices that Baggott also recommends as essential to the upkeep of an appropriately feminine appearance.⁶ The dangers of red lipstick are seemingly endless: she goes on to warn that 'in real life it tends to bleed and smudge, smear on teeth and glasses, cups and spoons. And don't even think about kissing someone on the cheek or, heaven forbid, the mouth' (Baggott, 2006). She concludes with a warning to readers that they may think red lips will make them resemble Marilyn Monroe, but without the attention of a 'genius makeup artist . . . on hand 24/7', they are more likely to end up looking like Robert Smith, the singer with the 1980s pop band The Cure (who is of course known for his thick, smeared red lipstick).

Although her article is positioned as a kind of all-girls-together act of resistance to the absurdity of cosmetic companies, whom she ostensibly criticizes for promoting an unwearable product, Baggott's comments implicitly invoke an 'ordinary' reader who needs to aspire to normative femininity, not because it is likely to make her more beautiful (despite the title 'Beauty Secrets'), but because it is less likely to expose her to the risk of embarrassing failure. By aspiring to the iconic status of a Marilyn Monroe, the woman who assumes that she can cope with an excessive 'high-maintenance' look is heading for a fall. She is destined to exceed her boundaries, to 'bleed everywhere' and ultimately to embody an abjected form of masculine cross-dressing. Not only that, but in painting her lips she declares herself incapable of kissing: that is, she fails as a sexual object. She may aspire to beauty, but she ends up embodying the beastliness of abject sexuality and class identity. Whilst conventional femininity requires an equal (indeed, a higher) level of work, it is invisible work. Mainstream femininity is grounded in shame; it has as much to do with erasure, with the removal or disguise of the embarrassing and inappropriate (in the obvious forms of 'excess' hair – which increasingly means *all* hair – and fat, but also the disguise of incorrectly shaped features) as with adornment. What is more, the feminine subject must constantly work to conceal the labour and anxiety involved in its production.⁷ In contrast, high-maintenance femininity is shame-less.

Although Baggott is not directly concerned with burlesque, this piece reveals a cultural anxiety about vintage femininity that is indicative of discourses of normative femininity. What is at stake here is the fear of feminine narcissism, of the belief that it is possible to create an image that one finds pleasurable (as opposed to engaging in a constant and incomplete work of compensation for one's flaws). New burlesque precisely embodies this 'beastly' feminine narcissism through the fetishization of cosmetics: the use of red lipstick and vintage compacts anticipates the public application of make-up, indeed this is an integral part of the performance of femininity that new burlesque invokes. Such a public display of narcissism – gazing at oneself in a portable mirror – is troubling because it

disrupts the fantasy of effortless, 'natural' perfection upon which the notion of 'lipstick liberation' depends.

The problem with Baggott's account, as with other popular versions of burlesque, is that it is read simply as a look, such that it becomes detached from practice, as well as from its context within a specific community at a specific historical moment. In contrast, online accounts of burlesque fans and performers reveal an intense pleasure in creating and adapting new feminine identities within a subculture, through a 'DIY' approach to femininity. This insistence on doing it yourself is important, since it is through the process of reclaiming vintage styles of clothing, hair and make-up that adaptation takes place. Whereas mainstream femininity is positioned as empty consumption, and as a source of anxiety, burlesque is aligned with recycling, thrift shopping and the revival of traditional crafts such as knitting and weaving.⁸

The appeal of recovering and re-creating vintage looks is not limited to a fetishistic preference for these objects, but also implies a rejection of mainstream consumer culture in the form of making one's own. Online discussions reveal a sense of dissatisfaction with more culturally visible forms of femininity promoted by celebrity culture and women's magazines. Particular irritants include the low-maintenance look, skinniness, lip gloss, highlighted, layered hair, fake tan, and, perhaps unexpectedly, jeans. These are seen as emblematic of precisely the stereotypical and homogenizing version of feminine identity that Bordo writes against:

Dita VT particularly stands out in this day and age where it seems that the mysterious Blondifier and her evil twin, the Creosoter, get to every female celeb at some point . . . (Bust Lounge; posted on 17 October 2006, 3.32 a.m.)

I really do enjoy burlesque. i enjoy the tease and seduction part of this type of entertainment. i'm very intrigued with dita von tease and all of the other legendary burlesque dancers. i think i like that the women have natural bodies in some way. (Bust Lounge; posted on 8 October 2006, 7.34 p.m.)⁹

The need for a DIY approach is thus inextricably linked to the imperative to resist incorporation by mainstream culture.

So far, I have argued that the burlesque community is engaged in a process of encountering and resisting incorporation within popular cultures of beauty and femininity. However, I have also argued that new burlesque takes up 'lipstick' femininity as a means of resisting the notion that feminism and femininity are mutually exclusive, and that the enthusiastic pleasure taken in feminine identity is inherently problematic. What I want to argue here is that burlesque performances dramatize a form of embodied femininity which is imagined as powerful and pleasurable and which enables critical reflection on the complex interplay between these two categories, but is also particularly revealing of a contemporary manifestation of this historical tension within popular culture.¹⁰ I now want to consider what it might mean to read feminine identity performances such as burlesque as a pleasurable parody of femininity itself, and how this might problematize the ways in which drag has been positioned within queer theory.

Performance and parody

Perhaps the most surprising idea of contemporary feminism is that women are female impersonators. (Carol-Ann Tyler, 2003: 1)

Carol-Ann Tyler notes that some feminist accounts read drag as a hostile parody, not of femininity, but of *women*. Indeed, she argues that the reading of drag performances as 'aggressive burlesques' reveals an anxiety about class as well as gender, for example in Alison Lurie's argument that drag imitates 'the most vulgar and unattractive sort of female dress' (cited in Tyler, 2003: 61). This anxiety, she notes, is not alleviated but heightened when the drag performer is biologically female. Tyler uses Dolly Parton as an example of a female drag performer whose style is 'too tacky, her taste for the excessive in excessively bad taste' (2003: 60). Whilst a middle-class viewer may see her as a female impersonator, an audience from the same background may regard Parton as 'the epitome of genuine womanliness'. What is important, for Tyler, is 'the positioning within multiple differences of her audience'. She argues that feminism, because of its historical association with white middle-class identity, is likely to see Parton only 'through middle-class eyes' (2003: 61). New burlesque, which precisely involves the adoption of 'vulgar' female dress *by white middle-class women*, is particularly troubling in this context.

Although drag is performed by male bodies, and hence potentially from a position of power, a female performer is held to be both complicit with patriarchal power and herself powerless: the performance thus emanates from a doubly powerless position. Because femininity is imagined as a property of 'women', to parody femininity is to parody oneself and is hence read as a performance of self-hatred, or at least of a projected hatred of other women. At best, the performer herself is held to occupy a position of middle-class privilege and hence to have access to 'the fairy dust of irony'. However, she is responsible for imposing a 'politically dubious' model of femininity on other, less powerful women.

Participants in the burlesque scene are highly aware of the possibilities offered by this sense of burlesque as a parody of *femininity* which attempts to work with the tensions inherent in feminine identity: its pleasures *as well as* its constraints and absurdities. As one Australian fan explains:

David Mark: Is there something that unites all those different acts, something that's fundamentally burlesque?

Jac Bowie: The satire. The lowbrow kind of mocking. (Transcript from *PM*, ABC Australia, 17 November 2006)

So far, I have focused on the ways in which the burlesque 'look' has become detached from practice to circulate as an implicit critique of normative femininity. However, an analysis which stopped there would risk repeating the detachment of the new burlesque 'look' from the practice of burlesque performances themselves. As Dita von Teese states in a television interview, 'you can't just put on . . . red lipstick and do the same thing you see a girl doing in a strip club . . . burlesque is the slow reveal and the payoff at the end' (*Faking It*, 2006).

A home-made short film entitled *Fat Burlesque*, directed by Cookie Tuff of the burlesque troupe the Chainsaw Chubettes (posted on YouTube), uses live performance, interviews with amateur performers, still images, and captions to examine how new burlesque, specifically performances by fat women, challenges conventional notions of feminine beauty. The film begins with an amateur video of a performance in which two women, the Chubettes, strip in what appears to be some kind of institutional space, a community centre or lecture hall; to the right of the screen is a fake silver Christmas tree, to the left a stack of plastic chairs. The women, whose faces are not clearly visible, dance in black lingerie, which they gradually strip off to whoops and screams of appreciation from the (apparently largely female) audience, some of whom can just be seen in the foreground. Whilst the home-made costumes and unglamorous setting make this performance seem far removed from von Teese's and Blaize's opulent period pieces, the film deals with the ways in which new burlesque is experienced as a community, and as a queering of normative beauty ideals.

For Lacy Asbill, one of the fans interviewed in the video, the move from a straight male audience to a queer audience is an essential element in the movement from seeing the fat body as 'so monstrous it provoked desire' to 'the fat body as beautiful', a move she explains in terms of queer/lesbian audiences 'supporting' rather than objectifying the performer. Elsewhere, I have referred to new burlesque as continuous from older burlesque performances, but also different from them. One of the differences I identified is a sense of a 'burlesque community'. This film exemplifies what I mean by burlesque community. In this version of burlesque, striptease involves a 'slow reveal' ending in nudity; but this final nudity is not, I think, the only 'payoff' to which von Teese refers in the quote above. In traditional burlesque, the performer is isolated on stage, the object of the audience's desire. The 'payoff' in new burlesque is the mutually constitutive pleasure of performer and audience, which is described in this film as 'taking pleasure in [the] body'. For Asbill, this pleasure is exemplified by the audience's identification of the stripper's ability to 'take command of the stage', which, she says, inspires her to 'claim space for [her]self' in the world: both performers and onlookers realize that 'you can take a lot of pleasure in your body' (*Fat Burlesque*, 2007). This pleasure is variously described in terms of a sense of confidence, occupying physical space in the world, and enjoying the discipline of performance, as well as through sexual self-confidence.

For one performer, Allota Bouté, this meant a move away from seeing her body as shameful. She says that her attitude to her body was shaped in puberty by her mother's reaction to her large breasts, which she describes by making violent 'waving away' motions with her hands: 'I was a double D bra . . . [She said] Oh my God, she has a bust, cover her up, cover her up'. In contrast, in burlesque performance '[I say] you know what, here it is [flings her arms wide]'. Costume plays an important role in this changing experience of embodiment:

You can choose your costume, you can warp your body. I can wear a corset and have, like, psycho hourglass, or I can . . . not wear a corset and drape, like, fringe under my belly roll and let it all shake and have everybody scream for it – it's fun. (*Fat Burlesque*, 2007)

This notion of the 'psycho hourglass' before a queer audience precisely embodies the sense in which new burlesque parodies femininity not through self-hating mockery, but through the production of an excessive feminine self that is experienced as a source of pleasure. At the centre of this parody is a *celebration* of excessive femininity which refuses the injunction, 'cover her up, cover her up'. The 'slow reveal' of burlesque, in which the trappings of femininity are removed to 'show the girl', is powerful precisely in that it rejects the notion of femininity as concealment of 'imperfection', and of flesh as shameful, that is central to mainstream notions of beauty.

Queer politics are often explicitly on the agenda in burlesque performance spaces. However, the term 'queer' is used to refer to not only performances that take place in queer spaces or for a lesbian audience, but to the more general way in which the very idea of women parodying femininity works to queer both feminist and popular notions of femininity that equate it with passivity, with false consciousness. Carrie Paechter has criticized Judith Butler's work on drag in precisely this way, arguing that it does not account for most women's lived experience of femininity. For Butler, she argues, 'doing femininity well', as exemplified by drag queens, involves 'enacting a hyperfemininity that many women, possibly the majority, do not themselves perform'. This results in a 'dramaturgical, glamourized femininity . . . [that] bears little relation to those activities traditionally given over to women and is alien to them' (Paechter, 2006: 255). Yet this form of dramatized femininity is celebrated in burlesque performance, precisely as a means of denaturalizing more normalized forms of identity and of engaging with queer audiences as well as, on occasion, queer theory (as in the workshops offered by Indigo Blue's Academy). Although the satire and mockery that Jac describes are explicitly present in virtual and real-life stage performances – especially in the exaggerated, comic names adopted by many performers – they are also implicitly present in the troubling adoption of alternative femininities by audience members both in club spaces and in everyday life. The relationship is similar to that between drag performance and cross-dressing. Carol-Ann Tyler points out that mimicry is not the exclusive property of male femininities. Instead, women too have always engaged in mimicking practices which work to denaturalize normative gender roles:

[T]he female mimic denaturalizes ideology by calling attention to the conventions that encode her as woman; she reproduces femininity with a playful difference, producing knowledge about it: that it is a role and not a nature. (2003: 23)

In burlesque, femininity is reclaimed through identity practices that re-centre these historic forms of mimicry alongside an engagement with queer theory. Performers' websites stress their continuity with the burlesque performers of the 19th and 20th century, but also with drag performers

(who often appeared on the same bill), thus locating new burlesque in a history of feminine performance and parody. This sense of continuity with the past is constantly disrupted by narratives of difference. Discussions refer to points of distinction between 'old' and new burlesque, particularly in relation to the audience. Whereas historical performances were oriented to the male gaze, the modern adaptation is different:

I don't think its 'just for guys'. I've been to burlesque shows where most of the audience is straight women cheering on other straight women. Its fun! . . . But there is another side to it for sure, and most girls/women don't live in freedom and equality lala land like I do, so they have a totally different perspective. (Bust Lounge; posted on 25 July 2006, 1.45 p.m.)

This model of burlesque as a queer parody of femininity draws out the connections and continuities between male and female 'alternative' femininities, a potentially powerful connection that is suggested by Judith Butler's work. However, Butler's writing on drag does not make this connection explicit. Writing of the need to distinguish between truly subversive parody and that which is likely to be incorporated, she explains:

Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony. (1990: 177)

The problem with Butler's argument here is that femininity, as performed by biologically female subjects, is still positioned as other; as that which presents itself as natural but is destabilized by more subversive gender performances such as drag that reveal it as performative. The moment of judgement when we as queer theorists decide which performances are truly subversive and which are not is divisive: having drawn out the continuity between male and female performances of femininity, it reinstates the dualistic order in which women are positioned as lacking agency. We must be particularly careful of a reading back through which the fact of its incorporation into the mainstream proves that a particular identity performance is not 'truly troubling', if only because such a reading seems excessively pessimistic. By this reckoning, very few practices, including drag, can be held to be subversive at all. What is missing is any sense of the locatedness of feminine identity performances which would account for women's lived experience of femininity.

The new burlesque troubles mainstream notions of femininity on multiple levels. This can be seen in its appropriation of the striptease performance. Striptease clubs are traditionally an example of hyper normativity. Taken out of context, then, it would clearly be impossible to claim striptease as a site of subversion. However, taken in context, new burlesque performances work to disrupt the normative economy of gender in which female nakedness is staged before a heterosexual male spectator by reclaiming the space of the strip club for a female audience. This disruption continues online, where a complex web of intertextual links allows new burlesque to 'speak back' both to feminism and to mainstream

representations of femininity. The new burlesque is constructed through particular events and public stagings of identity, and its ability to trouble established notions of gender identity is precisely tied to its historical, technological and physical locatedness.

What is appealing about Butler's account of gender performance is that it opens up the potentially exhilarating possibility that both male and female bodies might actively be involved in constructing, reworking and critiquing feminine identity. However, having suggested this as a possibility, the implication of continuity between men's and women's feminine identity performances is immediately closed down. Burlesque addresses this problem; indeed, one could say that it is precisely the desire to 'show the girl' as well as to 'parody the girl' that is missing from Butler's account of gender performance. New burlesque performances dramatize the paradoxical nature of femininity which is experienced *both* as lived identity and as performance. The performance embodies this tension, as well as the tension between feminism and femininity, and between normative and 'alternative' femininities. Rather than ask whether burlesque performances are subversive or not, it might be more useful to think of burlesque as a critical reflection on gender identity: a move which disrupts the hierarchy between theory and practice that is implied in Butler's account.

What burlesque demonstrates is that female as well as male subjects may perform different femininities in different social contexts, and that any of these performances may feel more or less determined by social constraints. This is true of cross-dressers, for whom the wearing of mascara in the workplace, for example, may present only the trace of a much more fully developed feminine identity; what is less obvious is that it is also true of women who identify as feminine. Some of the women who attend burlesque nights at Lost Vagueness do not ordinarily dress in vintage clothes. Thus the extreme 'alternative' version of femininity is not simply superimposed on an unmarked body, nor is it continued into everyday life. Instead, these women must negotiate the shift from a mainstream, socially acceptable feminine identity to a look that is experienced simultaneously as subversive and as pleasurable, whatever the limitations of those categories. The social pressure to conform, whether to mainstream standards of beauty or to a feminist imperative to refuse to 'do femininity', is experienced as a pressure to *remove* outward signs of an identity that is lived as authentic. I do not claim that these subjects 'have' an inner authentic self, but rather that the outward signs of femininity are understood, much as with cross-dressing, as the expression of such a self; hence, the need to remove or hide this identity is experienced as violence. Butler has famously argued that performativity does not mean that it is possible to '[wake] in the morning, [peruse] the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, [don] that gender for the day, and then restore the ferment to its right place at night'. It may be that the fantasy of putting femininity on and off in this way – of being '[s]uch a wilful and instrumental subject, one who decides *on* its gender' (Butler, 1993: x, original emphasis) – is itself the basis of burlesque femininity.

Notes

1. In this article, I discuss a selection of indicative websites, but these are representative of a much larger web presence. For just a few other examples and links, see Faux Queen Diva (<http://tribes.tribe.net/fauxqueendiva>), The Girl Can't Help It (<http://www.thegirlcanshelpit.com/>), The Whoopee Club (<http://www.thewhoopeeclub.com/>), London School of Striptease (<http://www.londonschoolofstriptease.co.uk/>).
2. After all, the trend arguably originated not from any underground club night, but from the success of the film *Moulin Rouge* in 2001 and the subsequent revival of the corset as an item of fashionable dress. More recently burlesque has featured in film (*The Notorious Bettie Page*, *Mrs Henderson Presents*), novels (such as Louise Welsh's *The Bullet Trick*), and music, in the iconography of Kylie Minogue's *Showgirl* tour and the stage persona of singers such as Alison Goldfrapp.
3. They can also be the means of reproducing live performances, especially through the increasing use of photo- and video-sharing sites including Flickr and YouTube: through the use of these technologies, the previously private club space becomes publicly visible.
4. Indeed to some performers, as in the film *Fat Burlesque* which I discuss below, it is a central concern.
5. Indeed, as Julie Bindel has noted, red lipstick was worn by women in the suffrage movement as a symbol of defiance, to draw attention to first-wave feminists' commitment to social and sexual self-determination (Bindel, 2005). This tension can also be seen in earlier feminist writing about the phenomenon of the 'lipstick lesbian'. Noting the increasing number of young lesbians who chose to wear stereotypically 'feminine' clothing and make-up, Marjorie Garber recorded a sense of cultural anxiety around the ways in which lipstick lesbians may be 'read' within dominant culture, which resulted in the view that they were 'abandoning a long and important commitment to political visibility' (1992: 160). Others, paradoxically, were concerned that lipstick lesbians may be *too* visible in contexts where the audience may be incapable of recognizing their inherent subversiveness: for example Sherrie Inness asked, 'do women's magazines recognize that lipstick lesbians are rebellious, or do such media forms simply try to incorporate lipstick lesbians into dominant forms of acceptable femininity?' (1997: 74).
6. Including, in the same month's post, eyelash extensions, which cost £150 a set, last for an unspecified though limited amount of time and are 'liberating . . . will change your life'; this despite the fact that they cannot be washed, leading one enthusiast to shower wearing a snorkel mask (Baggott, 2006).
7. As Paula Black has pointed out, recent years have witnessed an increasing growth in salon treatments, such as hair removal, that are seen as private, shameful and embarrassing. These 'treatments' are not about vanity or being beautiful, she argues: rather, they 'throw into relief the work that must be done to police the boundaries of feminine normality and artifice of such a supposedly natural state' (2004: 18). In contrast, burlesque is threatening precisely because it is concerned with highly visible marks of femininity, such as bright red lips.

8. This is most visible in magazines and websites such as bust.com. This magazine, which launched in the early 1990s, was an early forerunner of the burlesque revival with its use of visual imagery taken from 1950s women's magazines alongside pin-ups of the same era. The website has been selling Bettie Page merchandise for some time alongside its popular Stitch 'n Bitch knitting books, and also hosts discussions on feminism, craft and 'kitsch and make-up'.
9. In order to protect the anonymity of posters, I have not given included screen names for these comments, or the precise location where they were posted. However, they are indicative of discussions on the Bust Lounge bulletin board, which I have included in the references.
10. The tension between feminism and femininity which, I argue, is played out in the new burlesque scene, is also indicative of a wider tension that has been explored in debates around post-feminism and what might be termed post-femininity. Although debates surrounding post-feminism are outside the scope of my argument here, it should be noted that many of these debates centre on the production of feminine identity that positions itself against feminism. For further discussion of the relationship between post-feminism and popular representations of femininity, see for example Holland (2004), McRobbie (2004), and Hollows (2000).

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