Confronting the Male Gaze: Neo- burlesque as female empowerment
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Introduction

Prior to embarking on this research, and with my then limited knowledge of the neo-burlesque world, I was chiefly moved to consider the extent to which women involved in contemporary burlesque performance had successfully re-appropriated the ideological connotations of their scene. Had they established a mode of performance through which participants could feel empowered rather than merely cater for the male gaze? In other words, had they confronted the omni-presence of the male spectator; through which Laura Mulvey observes Hollywood film production, enabling an operation of modern burlesque on their own terms?

Initially, it seems that we should position neo-burlesque in a very particular, and somewhat unique, social niche; providing a hugely varied demographic a platform through which to celebrate a shared love of lavishly exhibitionist performance, "vintage" revival and a creation of body confidence. However, the perplexing nature of this world, for me, has always been its seemingly oppositional nature. Here is a movement in which women reveal and display their bodies publicly through eroticised performance; essentially constructed around a revival of stylistic elements of production and performance; the evolution of which has developed modern stripping and strip clubs; and yet, burlesque today loudly and publicly claims its feminine focus. It is outwardly a scene in which all (adult) ages, and figures can celebrate their bodies: a deliberate disassociation with the patriarchal coercion or dictated body-types often aligned with pole and lap dancing. Edinburgh's Charm School Burlesque Parties for example claim that their classes are 'enjoyed by ladies of all ages, shapes and sizes'. These apparent contradictions position Laura Mulvey's assessment of women's portrayal in Hollywood film as a useful point of comparison when considering the reality

of these claims and of possible gendered control of the scene. I was interested to know whether the assertions of female appropriation and empowerment were visible in the increasingly commercial reality in which burlesque operates.

In order to focus my study, research was conducted at Edinburgh-based events between February and April 2013, most notably at the *Confusion is Sex* night at Edinburgh's *Bongo Club* but also at numerous other specialist events in the city. I conducted unstructured interviews with eight dancers as well as a photographer and prominent promoter. Interviews were unstructured chiefly out of necessity: it quickly became apparent that performers with varied levels of experience were more apt to provide particular information and thus I was able to individually focus discussion. Through these interviews, as well as observations of performance and commercial organisation, I was able to garner an overview of the scene, as it exists in Edinburgh. Space constraints dictate that focus be placed on one particular encounter and thus prominence has been given to my meeting with the performer, Aurora Winterborn. Particular emphasis has been placed on this informant as Aurora's considerable experience as a pole and lap dancer as well as in burlesque productions, places her in a unique position to provide some degree of comparison with other performance mediums of interest. By the time of our meeting, I was aware of the tightly knit nature of the Edinburgh scene. With this in mind, I ensured the anonymity of all informants while conducting interviews, never mentioning names during discussion as most performers knew each other to some extent: I felt this to be necessary both from an ethical standpoint, but also for objectivity of data. All named parties consented to their inclusion in this project.

My hypothesis that burlesque's erstwhile role as erotic display for men; with its contemporary maintenance and indeed, celebration of much of this original mode of performance; would hamper any modern provision of genuine female empowerment, proved to be an overly simplistic reading of burlesque's ontological origins and indeed, its contemporary development. However, my initial hypothesis does represent a significant point of collation with Mulvey's principal observations of film. The similarity of direction in both Mulvey's study and my own demands comparison: we should consider, for example, the notion that 'the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him. […] [F]ilm reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference that controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle' (1975:1). Taking this observation as a starting point, I aimed to examine the apparently exaggerated manifestations of this concept within burlesque productions and to engage, as Mulvey had with film, a psychoanalytic analysis of the scopophilic considerations inherent in neo-burlesque shows. As Mulvey points out '[t]here are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Indeed Freud identified scopophilia with 'taking other people as objects (and) subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze' (1974:3 my parenthesis). Clearly the applicability of this concept is, if anything, more relevant to such a highly exhibitionist and sexually charged medium as burlesque dance than it is to film. We should consider this both in terms of literal, perceptible appreciation of the visual spectacle; and, the consideration of the male gaze during a show's conception. These questions will go some way to accurately defining contemporary burlesque's relationship to both its subjects and wider society.

Confusion is Sex

Confusion is Sex is a night which *The List* magazine describes as a '[t]wisted and freaky mix of burlesque, glam techno, electro, indie punk and rock 'n' roll where "the weird is normal"'. A bi-monthly event in Moray House; the site, at the time of my research, for Edinburgh's *Bongo Club*; located in a part of town better known for the Scottish Parliament building or the tartan and shortbread of the neighbouring Royal Mile than outrageous dress and provocative performance. The *Bongo Club* is an established Edinburgh institution, generally catering for artistic productions or less than commercial club nights. I have visited many times over the years but *Confusion is Sex* presented me with a wholly new side to the club. As the event's website and flyers encourage "appropriate dress" I took the long walk down Hollyrood Road, in the cold and drizzle of a March night, dressed in an outfit that had earlier been described as "Alice Cooper meets Long John Silver": not exactly my usual night-out attire but, as I was to discover, firmly at the conservative end of the dress spectrum on this occasion. Descending the length of the street to the club, a crowd emerged gradually from the numerous little alleyways filtering from the Royal Mile; streetlights shone on the leather and latex of endlessly inventive outfits. Victorian formal wear clashed with bondage and vintage military uniform to form a mass of eyeliner and exotic characters. I had come to meet a friend who had promised me an introduction to one of the burlesque performers appearing that night. Liz and I had taken college classes together before university and had often discussed her part-time work as a stripper. It was, at least partly, Liz's assertion of control in her role within that industry that caused me to consider women's ownership of burlesque as a more publicly acceptable manifestation of her pole dancing contentions.

Introductions were made throughout the assembled group and I noted the unspoken seniority among the older and more outlandishly dressed. This

was no surprise: I remembered my own experience of Edinburgh's rock scene in which there was a very definite "pecking order". As Hodkinson points out: '[m]yths of "authenticity" are always an issue for subcultures, and the persons who are higher status and thus "for real" almost invariably look down on those persons who adopt the subcultural image for recreation or casual lifestyle' (2004:392). Those opting for a more conventional dress code hovered on the periphery while the committed and outlandish dominated proceedings. We eventually squeezed our way into the building's brightly lit entrance hall: something of a nightclub no mans land whose current aroma of detergent would soon give way to the acrid smell of sweat and an underfoot stickiness of endless spilt drinks. It was here that I was introduced to Aurora Winterborn. Whether she had imagined this name for herself or was just the victim of happy coincidence it seemed rude to ask, but her physically diminutive frame filled the room as she approached us dressed like a clash of 1920s chorus girl and Las Vegas magician's assistant: a mass of feathers, silver sequins and blonde bouffant hair, hugging Liz like a long-lost sister. In any other environment, a barely dressed woman in the middle of a crowd might have attracted some attention, but here, Aurora and I were greeted with barely a raised eyebrow as we shook hands in a surprisingly business-like manner. Which is not to say she went unnoticed. To the numerous passers by who recognised her, shouting encouragement and praise, she appeared something of a celebrity. Especially, it seemed, among groups of curvaceous, corset-wearing girls who eyed her with the sort of longing look usually reserved for idolised rock stars. We moved to a small dressing room back-stage and while Aurora pouted in the light bulbs of a rather sorry-looking Hollywood mirror, we discussed, in great depth, the Edinburgh neo-burlesque scene.

It was through Aurora's seniority as a performer that her assessment of the wider scene held weight and has thus been given prominence here. At

thirty-five, her previous seventeen years had been spent dancing in various forms: from lap dance to dramatic performance art. Burlesque, she noted, attracted an unusual mix of participants but perhaps most noticeably, those with a wish to gain body confidence and feel able to celebrate their "natural curves". One informant who expressed exactly this sentiment was Lorraine Ross, performing under the moniker "Hettie Heartache", and a regular photographer within the burlesque scene. She explained her original desire to become a part of the neo-burlesque world, enthusing: "The girls were beautiful without having to be like today's stick-thin models. They looked like real women and they were completely glamorous and confident".

Lorraine's statement provides a useful point from which to consider the extent to which the contemporary burlesque world has managed to confront the directing power of the male gaze. We must examine the self-identification that accompanies any performer; noting that the performativity within burlesque, as much as in any other performative sphere, exists as a factor in denoting an understanding of both body and gender. Judith Butler's analysis of this concept is particularly applicable here. She identifies performative acts as examples of authoritative discourse and as such as components of 'complex and convergent chains in which "effects" are vectors of power' (1993:187). This places performance, as an element of discourse that remains existent outwith the dialogue of its original context, making it 'the condition and occasion of further action' (1993:187) in its continually defining role. In this way, Butler conceives of gender; and by association the physicality of body; as the production of discourse, elements of which may be performative. Clearly this results in a self-perpetuating definition of self in the development and maintenance of norms. Butler suggests that a 'subject is addressed and produced by such norms' and that their regulatory power 'materialise(s) bodies' (1993:187 my parenthesis). The importance of this observation in relation to neo-burlesque artists and, indeed the wider scene,

lies in burlesque's positioning as something of a subculture. By classifying gender as performative, we are claiming that this performativity creates a series of effects that define our positions as men or women, therefore, in engaging with burlesque as performers, women can be seen to be utilising this act of discourse in reinforcing their own subcultural brand of femininity.

In this desire to find a medium through which to express their femininity Judith Butler's notions of performative gender definition, in relation to the element of alternative culture within burlesque, clearly make sense. Lorraine, and indeed the majority of those I questioned, spoke of their frustration with modern obsessions with weight loss. In relation to this, their identification with burlesque as a legitimate and attractive medium through which to define and express their femininity without feeling pressured to conform to these "impossible standards", seems wholly convincing.

The frequency with which creation of confidence in relation to body size and image was noted as a factor in women wishing to engage with neo-burlesque performance meant that I wanted to gauge the integrity of the claim that women of all body shapes were actively encouraged to participate in staged performance. Was this loudly proclaimed aspect of burlesque a reality in commercial productions? Or, once women reached the proficiency of performers, did established norms of beauty and body type dominate those hired to dance? Noting Aurora's own conventionally trim physique and, having tried on a number of occasions to organise a meeting with her, her busy schedule seemed testament to her ability to attract business. I wondered to what extent the two were related. When I put this question to Aurora, she seemed initially hesitant to comment but cautiously told me: "Look, the burlesque world is very bitchy. On one level it's all 'everyone's welcome' and 'let's celebrate our bodies', but when it comes down to getting

paid, the bigger girls don't get the work and those that do often do themselves no favours. They choose outfits that really don't work with their bodies and then the bitchy comments really start". She told me of an incident that had occurred a week previously in which a larger woman had worn an extremely "skimpy" outfit on stage: a fellow performer had commented "I can't believe she's wearing *that* with that car crash of a body". Clearly the universally inclusive and empowering nature of burlesque is not quite "as advertised".

Burlesque, on some level, appears a system of engagement, allowing the imparting of narrative through dance but also through participant association with the scene itself. Putting this suggestion to Aurora she concluded that whether it manifested; as in Lorraine's case; in creating a degree of body confidence through her feeling publicly desirable; or, as with herself, in the provision of a platform for self-expression; burlesque was a medium through which these desires, and more, could be achieved. If we place burlesque in this narrative role, we must consider, as Roland Barthes points out, that it is 'impossible to produce a narrative without reference to an implicit system of units and rules (1977:81). I would suggest that these rules provide an unseen underscoring of burlesque, just as they do in wider society. Body image is dictated (even if at a more hidden and spiteful level) by the norms of wider society and, as Aurora pointed out: "since burlesque's revival in the 90s and with the popularity of films like *Moulin Rouge* it has become a business. When people want to make money from a burlesque night, they don't want niche performers"; the inference being that they do want to hire conventionally beautiful women. It appears that burlesque's place in the media has become increasingly perceptible. For example, the casting of Christina Aguilera in the film *Burlesque* (2010) positions one of the world's biggest commercial stars in a film that, while generally slated by film critics,

received enthusiastic praise among the neo-burlesque community. One post on the "ministryofburlesque" message board passionately claims '[s]uddenly the very word burlesque, not a derivative, is being splashed across outdoor, online, print, social networks and TV – all forms of media with two of the biggest stars in showbiz right alongside the word'. It seems evident that whatever narrative role burlesque fulfils on an individual level, overwhelmingly the commercial market provides Barthes' necessitated framework or rules, and their directing power clearly influences the direction of burlesque as narrative and, by association as a social scene.

Following our interview, I watched Aurora prance on stage to whoops and cheers from what appeared, if anything, a female dominated crowd. In viewing her performance in line with Mulvey's assertion of an ever-present societal male gaze, I became increasingly aware of her use of two enormous blue feathers during her routine. Using these feathers she would block off and hide sections of her body while pausing her dance. One minute the crowd would see her legs protruding from beneath a feathery screen, the next her torso would be on display, later again her buttocks and so on. Mulvey noted, in respect of film actresses: 'her presence tends to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation' (1975:5) she becomes 'a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look' (1975:7). In Aurora's performance, we see a direct example of the self-application of exactly this concept in a burlesque setting. In Mulvey's assessment, the fragmenting of a female body enables the male spectator to dismantle the threat posed by an active woman on-screen. Consequently she becomes simply a pair of breasts or stocking-clad legs; consider the number of film posters portraying women in precisely this way. Aurora's use of "fragmented masking" was by no means unique, I saw similar moves repeated regularly in

performances. I found it fascinating that performers were choosing to display their bodies in this manner: surely providing a clear direction for visual focus through framed presentation of portions of their bodies.

But how does this relate to the degree to which neo-burlesque has remained dominated by the considerations of the male gaze? Should we not simply view these moves as a quaint nod to tradition? When Slavoj Zizek asks: '[w]hat creates and sustains the *identity* of a given ideological field beyond all possible variations of its positive content?' (2002:87). We are presented with a question that should be asked of neo-burlesque performance. Mulvey's observations of film assume a patriarchal domination of society, and by extension, the film industry, to the point that imagined spectators are assumed to be male. Can the same be said of contemporary burlesque? Responses from informants to this question were completely mixed. When I asked whether they felt the physicality of their performance to be ultimately directed at (heterosexual) men, I received responses ranging from "absolutely not" to "ultimately, yes". Aurora's revelation that the biggest promoters of the Edinburgh scene are both married men suggests at least an interest in this direction. Therefore in response to Zizek's question it would appear reasonable to assume a continued domination of the male gaze as a constant and sustaining element within burlesque.

Conclusion

This research project has provided enormous quantities of data: as such I have aimed to provide as succinct an account of the highly complex nature of this medium as possible. As a heterosexual man, I was frequently something of an anomaly at specialist nights such as *Confusion is Sex*. However, I also observed shows in more mainstream settings, for example at the *Scottish Tattoo Convention* where I was, if anything, part of the majority. Informants generally felt that such engagements were becoming more common and that

straight men comprised a growing section of their audience. Unfortunately, space constraints have prevented a discussion of the impact of burlesque's online presence: a medium through which straight men increasingly contact performers in a highly sexual manner. Equally I have been unable to discuss the comportment of performers. Iris Young claims that 'women live their bodies as *object* as well as subject' (2005:17) and this provides an interesting insight into the socially dictated nature of feminine motion. We must return to the endless contradictions within neo-burlesque: to some it is empowering and liberating; to others it subtly oppresses and restricts women outside the "ideal" body-type. Mulvey suggested the patriarchal domination of Hollywood in its direction of women's on-screen representation: it would seem that all too many of these observations can be applied equally to burlesque in its modern form and thus it becomes very difficult to say that the scene has been successfully re-appropriated by women.

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