Adapting Femininities

The New Burlesque

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“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)

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“Perhaps the most surprising idea of contemporary feminism is that women are female impersonators” (Tyler, 1)

3In recent years, femininity has been the subject of much debate in mainstream culture, as well as in feminist theory. The recent moral panic over “size zero” bodies is only the latest example of the anxieties and tensions generated by a culture in which every part of the female body is subject to endless surveillance and control. The backlash against the women’s movement of the late 20th century has seen the mainstreaming of high femininity on an unprecedented scale. The range of practices now expected of middle-class women, including cosmetic surgery, dieting, fake tanning, manicures, pedicures, and waxing (including pubic waxing) is staggering. Little wonder, then, that femininity has often been imagined as oppressive labour, as work. If women were to attempt to produce the ideal femininities promoted by women’s magazines in the UK, USA and Australia, there would be little time in the day—let alone money—for anything else. The work of femininity hence becomes the work of adapting oneself to a current set of social norms, a work of adaptation and adjustment that must remain invisible. The goal is to look natural while constantly labouring away in private to maintain the façade.

4Alongside this feminine ideal, a subculture has grown up that also promotes the production of an elaborately feminine identity, but in very different ways. The new burlesque is a subculture that began in club nights in London and New York, has since extended to a network of performers and fans, and has become a highly active community on the Internet as well as in offline cultural spaces. In these spaces, performers and audiences alike reproduce striptease performances, as well as vintage dress and styles. Performers draw on their own knowledge of the history of burlesque to create acts that may invoke late 19th-century vaudeville, the supper clubs of pre-war Germany, or 1950s pinups. However the audience for these performances is as likely to consist of women and gay men as the heterosexual men who comprise the traditional audience for such shows. The striptease star Dita von Teese, with her trademark jet-black hair, pale skin, red lips and tiny 16-inch corseted waist, has become the most visible symbol of the new burlesque community. However, the new burlesque “look” can be seen across a web of media sites: in film, beginning with Moulin Rouge (Baz Luhrmann, 2001), and more recently in The Notorious Bettie Paige (Mary Harron, 2005), as well as in mainstream movies like Mrs Henderson Presents (Stephen Frears, 2005); in novels (such as Louise Welsh’s The Bullet Trick); in popular music, such as the iconography of Kylie Minogue’s Showgirl tour and the stage persona of Alison Goldfrapp; and in high fashion through the work of Vivienne Westwood and Roland Mouret. Since the debut in the late 1990’s of von Teese’s most famous act, in which she dances in a giant martini glass, the new burlesque has arisen in popular culture as a counterpoint to the thin, bronzed, blonde ideal of femininity that has otherwise dominated popular culture in the West.

5The OED defines burlesque as “a comically exaggerated imitation, especially in a literary or dramatic work; a parody.” In this article, I want to think about the new burlesque in precisely this way: as a parody of feminine identity that, by making visible the work involved in producing feminine identity, precisely resists mainstream notions of feminine beauty. As Lola the Vamp points out in the quotation that opens this article, new burlesque is about “caricaturing or burlesquing the girl”, but also about “showing the girl”, not only in the literal sense of revealing the body at the end of the striptease performance, but in dramatising and making visible an attachment to feminine identity. For members of the new burlesque community, I want to suggest, femininity is experienced as an identity position that is lived as authentic. This makes new burlesque a potentially fruitful site in which to think through the questions of whether femininity can be adapted, and what challenges such adaptations might pose, not only for mainstream culture, but for feminist theory.

6As I have stated, feminist responses to mainstream femininity have emphasised that femininity is work; that is, that feminine identities do not emerge naturally from certain bodies, but rather have to be made. This is necessary in order to resist the powerful cultural discourses through which gender identities are normalised. This model 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, makeup and restrictive clothing. This model of femininity is summed up by Naomi Wolf’s famous statement, in The Beauty Myth, that “femininity is code for femaleness plus whatever society happens to be selling” (Wolf, 177; emphasis added). However, a potential problem with such a view of gender identity is that it tends to reproduce essentialist notions of identity. The focus on femininity as a process through which bodies are adapted to social norms suggests that there is an unmarked self that precedes adaptation. Sabina Sawhney provides a summary and critique of this position:

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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. But surely that is a dangerous assumption, for it not only prioritises certain forms of identity formation over others, but also essentialises a sexual or gendered identity as already known in advance. (5)

8As Sawhney suggests here, to see femininity only in terms of oppressive labour is implicitly essentialist, since it suggests the existence of a primary, authentic “femaleness”. Femininity consists of consumer “stuff” which is superimposed onto unproblematically female bodies. Sawhney is right, here, to compare femininity to drag: however, female and male femininities are read very differently in this account. Drag and cross-dressing are decried as deliberate (male) parodies of “women” (and it is interesting to note that parodies of femininity are inevitably misread as parodies of women, as though the two were the same). However, those women who engage in feminine identity practices are to be pitied, not blamed, or at least not explicitly. Femininity, the compulsion to adapt oneself to incorporate “whatever society is selling”, is articulated in terms of “social pressure”, 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” (10). Resisting the adaptations demanded by femininity thus becomes a way of resisting mindlessness, particularly through resisting excessive consumption.

9This anxiety about female excess is echoed in some of the press coverage of the burlesque scene. For example, an article in the British Sunday paper The Observer takes a sceptical position on some performers’ claims that their work is feminist, wondering whether the “fairy dust of irony really strips burlesque of any political dubiousness” (O’Connell, 4), while an article on a feminist Website argues that the movement “can still be interpreted as a form of exploitation of women’s bodies,” (DiNardo, 1), which rather suggests that it is the purpose of feminism to try and interpret all manifestations of femininity in this way: as if the writer is suggesting that feminism itself were a system for curbing feminine excess.

10This is not to deny that the new burlesque, like more mainstream forms of femininity, involves work. Indeed, a reading of online burlesque communities suggests that it is precisely the labour of femininity that is a source of pleasure. Many books and Websites associated with this movement offer lessons in stage performance; however, these real and virtual classes are not limited to those who wish to perform. In this subculture, much of the pleasure derives from a sense of community between performer and audience, a sense which derives mainly from the adaptation of a specific retro or vintage feminine identity. Miss Indigo Blue’s Academy offers courses in the more theatrical aspects of burlesque, such as stripping techniques, but also in subjects such as “makeup and wig tricks” and “walking in heels” (Miss Indigo Blue’s Academy of Burlesque). Burlesque, like cross-dressing suggests that femininity needs to be learnt: and learning femininity, in this sense, also involves unlearning whatever “one [usually restrictive] size fits all” forms of femininity are currently being sold by the fashion and beauty industries. In contrast to this normative model, the 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 makeup that real 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. This is most visible in magazines and Websites such as Bust magazine. 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 pinups 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” (Bust).

11In the accounts cited above, femininity is clearly not imagined through an imperative to conform to social norms: instead, the practice of recovering and re-creating vintage looks is constructed as a pleasurable leisure activity that brings with it a sense of achievement and of engagement with a wider community. The appeal of burlesque, therefore, is not limited to a fetishistic preference for the trappings of burlesque or retro femininity: it is also defined by what it is not. 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 and layered hair, fake tan and, perhaps unexpectedly, jeans. These are seen as emblematic of precisely stereotypical and homogenising notions of feminine identity, as one post points out: “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 Oct 17 2006, 3.32 am)

12Another reason for the appeal of New Burlesque is that it does not privilege slenderness: as another post says “i think i like that the women have natural bodies in some way” (Bust Lounge, posted on Oct 8 2006, 7:34 pm), and it is clear that the labour associated with this form of femininity consists of adorning the body for display in a way that opposes the dominant model of constructing “natural” beauty through invisible forms of labour.

13Burlesque performers might therefore be seen as feminist theorists, whose construction of a feminine image against normative forms of femininity dramatises precisely those issues of embodiment and identity that concern feminist theory. This open display and celebration of feminine identity practices, for example, makes visible Elizabeth Grosz’s argument, in Volatile Bodies, that all bodies are inscribed with culture, even when they are naked. A good example of this is the British performer Immodesty Blaize, who has been celebrated in the British press for presenting an ideal of beauty that challenges the cultural predominance of size zero bodies: a press cutting on her Website shows her appearance on the cover of the Sunday Times Style magazine for 23 April 2006, under the heading “More Is More: One Girl’s Sexy Journey as a Size 18” (Immodesty Blaize). However, this is not to suggest that her version of femininity is simply concerned with rejecting practices such as diet and exercise: alongside the press images of Immodesty in ornate stage costumes, there is also an account of the rigorous training her act involves. In other words, the practices involved in constructing this version of femininity entail bringing together accounts of multiple identity practices, often in surprising ways that resist conforming to any single ideal of femininity: while both the athletic body and the sexualised size 18 body may both be seen as sites of resistance to the culturally dominant slender body, it is unusual for one performer’s image to draw on both simultaneously as Blaize does. This dramatisation of the work involved in shaping the body can also be seen in the use of corsets by performers like von Teese, whose extremely tiny waist is a key aspect of her image. Although this may be read on one hand as a performance of conformity to feminine ideals of slimness, the public flaunting of the corset (which is after all a garment originally designed to be concealed beneath clothing) again makes visible the practices and technologies through which femininity is constructed. The DIY approach to femininity is central to the imperative to resist incorporation by mainstream culture. Dita von Teese makes this point in a press interview, in which she stresses the impossibility of working with stylists: “the one time I hired a stylist, they picked up a pair of my 1940’s shoes and said, these would look really cute with jeans. I immediately said, you’re out of here” (West, 10). With its constant dramatisation and adaptation of femininity, then, I would argue that burlesque precisely carries out the work which Grosz says is imperative for feminist theory, of problematising the notion of the body as a “blank, passive page” (156).

14If some feminist readings of femininity have failed to account for the multiplicity and diversity of feminine identity performances, it is perhaps surprising that this is also true of feminist research that has engaged with queer theory, especially theories of drag. As Carol-Ann Tyler notes, feminist critiques of drag performances have tended to read drag performances as a hostile parody of women themselves (60). I would argue that this view of drag as a parody of women is problematic, in that it reproduces an essentialist model in which women and femininity are one and the same. What I want to suggest is that it is possible to read drag in continuum with other performances, such as burlesque, as an often affectionate parody of femininity; one which allows female as well as male performers to think through the complex and often contradictory pleasures and anxieties that are at stake in performing feminine identities.

15In practice, some accounts of burlesque do see burlesque as a kind of drag performance, but they reveal that anxiety is not alleviated but heightened when the drag performer is biologically female. While 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 open to being read as a performance of self-hatred. At best, the performer is herself held to occupy a position of middle class privilege, and hence to have access to what O’Connell, in the Observer article, calls “the fairy dust of irony” (4). For O’Connell however the performer uses this privilege to celebrate a normative, “politically dubious” form of femininity. In this reading, which positions itself as feminist, any potential for irony is lost, and burlesque is seen as unproblematically reproducing an oppressive model of feminine identities and roles.

16The Websites I have cited are aware of the potential power of burlesque as parody, but 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. Such a thinking-through of femininity is not the sole preserve of the male drag performer. Indeed, my current research on drag is engaged with the work of self-proclaimed female drag queens, also known as “bio queens” or “faux queens”: recently, Ana Matronic of the Scissor Sisters has spoken of her early experiences as a performer in a San Francisco drag show, where there is an annual faux-queen beauty pageant (Barber, 1). I would argue that there is a continuity between these performers and participants in the burlesque scene who may be conflicted about their relationship to “feminism” but are highly aware of the possibilities offered by this sense of parody, which is often articulated through an invocation of queer politics.

17Queer politics is often explicitly on the agenda in burlesque performance spaces; however the term “queer” is used not only to refer to 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. While burlesque does celebrate extreme femininities, it does so in a highly self-aware and parodic manner which works to critique and denaturalise more normalised forms of femininity. It does so partly by engaging with a queer agenda (for example Miss Indigo’s Academy of Burlesque hosts lectures on queer politics and feminism alongside makeup classes and stripping lessons). New Burlesque stage performers use 19th- and 20th-century ideals of femininity to parody contemporary feminine ideals, and this satirical element is carried through in the audience and in the wider community.

18In burlesque, femininity is reclaimed as an identity precisely through aligning an excessive form of femininity with feminism and queer theory. This model of burlesque as queer parody of femininity draws out the connections as well as the discontinuities between male and female “alternative” femininities, a potentially powerful connectivity that is suggested by Judith Butler’s work and that disrupts the notion that femininity is always imposed on women through consumer culture. It is possible, then, to open up Butler’s writing on drag in order to make explicit this continuity between male and female parodies of femininity. Writing of the need to distinguish between truly subversive parody, and that which is likely to be incorporated, Butler explains:

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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 (Gender Trouble, 177).

20The problem with this is that femininity, as performed by biologically female subjects, is still positioned as other, as that which presents itself as natural, but is destabilised by more subversive gender performances, such as male drag, that reveal it as performative. The moment of judgment, 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. If a practice is ultimately incorporated by consumer culture, this does not necessarily mean that it is not troubling or politically interesting. Such a reductive and pessimistic reading produces “the popular” as a bad object in a way that reproduces precisely the hegemonic discourse it is trying to disrupt. In this model, very few practices, including drag, could be held to be subversive at all.

21What is missing from Butler’s account is an awareness of the complex and multiple forms of pleasure and desire that characterise women’s attachment to feminine identities. I would argue that she opens up a potentially exhilarating possibility that has significant implications for feminist understandings of feminine identity in that it allows for an understanding of the ways in which female performers actively construct, rework and critique feminine identity, but that this possibility is closed down through the implication that only male drag performances are “truly troubling” (Gender Trouble, 177).

22By allowing female performers to ”parody the girl”, I am suggesting that burlesque potentially allows for an understanding in which female performances of femininity may, like drag, also be “truly troubling” (Butler, Gender Trouble, 177). Like drag, they require the audience both to reflect on the ways in which femininity is performatively constructed within the constraints of a normative, gendered culture, but also do justice to the extent to which feminine identity may be experienced as a source of pleasure. Striptease, in which feminine identity is constructed precisely through painstakingly creating a look whose layers are then stripped away in a stylised performance of feminine gesture, powerfully dramatises the historic tension between feminism and femininity. Indeed, the labour involved in burlesque performances can be adapted and adopted as feminist theoretical performances that speak back to hegemonic ideals of beauty, to feminism, and to queer theory.

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