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Abstract

In *How Do I Look?* I wish to construct new frameworks for understanding the relationship between the viewer and viewed that allow for movement, reflection and ambiguity. In so doing positions become un-fixed, and the practice of trying out critical positions, acknowledging histories of debate and experimenting with new positions becomes performative. I will demonstrate that the body can be used as a tool for thinking and that taking up the position of the objectified figure may be a critically engaged act.

My own subjective visual pleasures will be a constant throughout the text as I use the trope of the showgirl to investigate theories and practices. Thus, I shall develop my own ‘Showgirlian’ approach.

Background to the Research

Feminist art practice and theoretical writing in the Seventies onwards brought a number of serious issues to the fore, namely:

- Women are constructed as idealised objects to be looked at in the canon of Western painting;¹
- Women have been excluded from the role of image-producers;²
- Cinema constructs the viewer as male, and thus cinematic visual pleasure is directed at men.³

During my art-education I have encountered critical approaches emerging from these discourses. Pushing against the limitations of these theoretical cornerstones I have attempted to embody elements of the discourse and in spite of my intentions, I have been confronted with critical reads that return the work to the very problem I have sought to negotiate. Therefore this research emerges from a desire to create a substantive investigation to underpin my practice that will enable me to demonstrate a level of scholarship required to progress discourses around the representation of women and feminist art practice with integrity.

Looking beyond art practice the continuing popularity of new burlesque and even the pop phenomena Lady Gaga, I see evidence of the need for a more accessible, generous way of considering self-representation. This re-affirms my conviction that there is a place for artworks that attempt to tackle the complications of representing women and the visual tropes such as embodiment, glamour and the abject.

**Research Methods**

Moving through a range of theoretical positions, I shall explore feminist, critical and theatre theories and use critical tools from Butler and Rancière. Interwoven in the text will be the voice of the showgirl, collected through a variety of sources; oral history interviews conducted with former and present showgirl and burlesque dancers, and personal memoirs, archive interviews, blogs, Twitter updates, and other online presences.

I will also include personal analyses of viewing various performances, decoding artworks and artist’s œuvres. In my practice I am photographing and videoing empty auditoria, working out how I may represent the showgirl and thinking about how I might simultaneously embody the role of the theorist and the showgirl.
Literature Review: The Five Modes of Viewing (The Showgirl)  

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

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4 My conception of the showgirl figure is rather broad, I think of her as the heavily adorned woman, with a professional skill, who willingly performs to music in front of an audience.  
5 Judy O’Brien’s (Maureen O’Hara) direct address to the audience in Dorothy Arzner’s (1940) Dance, Girl, Dance [film], RKO Radio Pictures.
The film *Dance, Girl, Dance* directed by Dorothy Arzner, follows the collapse of a dance troupe and the dispersal of the dancers. Bubbles (Lucille Ball) finds a job hula dancing in a burlesque theatre, whilst Judy (Maureen O’Hara), tries to audition for a ballet company, without success. We see the friendship of Bubbles and Judy develop and their two contrasting approaches to their dance careers: that of the burlesque dancer set to make money using her ‘brains’ by giving the audience what they want and the higher-minded, ballet dancer with artistic ambitions, who practices her exercises every night before going to bed. Eventually, Bubbles finds Judy work at the burlesque theatre where she is performing—as the warm-up to her act. Judy’s ballet is hilarious to the burlesque audience, but she takes the job, as she has no other options. Judy ignores their taunts and finally confronts their jeers, delivering a speech that challenges their gaze. Judy sees the audience and recognises multiple motives amongst them. She admits her complicity within their gaze because ‘she is paid’.

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*D Dorothy Arzner (1940) Dance, Girl, Dance [film], RKO Radio Pictures.*
A shift occurs when Judy stops dancing and starts talking. Judy chooses to pause her own display as object; she articulates her own viewpoint thus demonstrating her subjectivity. Her speech causes ‘Miss Harris’ to stand up and applaud her. Earlier, unknown to Judy, Elinor Harris has already defended her decision to dance in the burlesque house, telling her boss Mr Adams, a ballet company director; ‘That’s right, condemn a girl because she has to earn her own living’.7

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

I have appropriated images from this scene as part of a framing device throughout this chapter on the existing literature on viewing the showgirl that my research draws on. The images are accompanied with textual tableaus of viewing practices that I am using to define what I see as a number of different approaches used by theorists that relate to my research. I have divided up the material into what I have called ‘The Five Modes of Viewing’, representing time-periods within the twentieth-century that I see as having a way of theorising looking intrinsic to them.8 I have explored the texts in a chronological order. By adhering to this framing I am iterating theoretical writing as a textual response

7 Ibid.
8 I have chosen concentrate my focus on theories and representations of the showgirl in the twentieth century. This line is somewhat arbitrary, however, I felt that the aesthetic vocabulary of the showgirl and tropes of glamour progress throughout the first part of the century, particularly propelled by the new permissive jazz era. Professor Rachel Cowgill has written extensively about strategies of viewing the musical spectacle in the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, I saw her ‘Une leçon de grace’: Performance, Femininity and Spectatorship at the Italian Opera in Early Nineteenth-Century London at Femininities Conference at the University of York April 2010. What struck me about her research was the way in she had to abandon any preconception of lens-based viewing in order to consider the interactions of the pre-cinema audiences.
to looking—at spectacle, at film, at bodies, at cultural practices. The use of images from film also foregrounds my own particular viewing strategies and returns the theory to the practice of reading images. Thus, I am exploring how I look as a way of mapping out how, why and what these theorists are looking at.
Mode One

The audience sits in an auditorium and watches a spectacle on stage, activated by the showgirl. This takes place as part of a revue, cabaret, burlesque, or music hall, in Europe and America, directed through styling and costuming to various audiences from the masses to high society. The male theorist sits amongst the crowd, observes the audience's encounter with the constructions on stage and theorises them. His authorial voice decodes the vernacular amusements, careful to never infer that he might feel the pleasure of the masses in these contexts. He can theorise in the face of spectacle. Does his theoretical position give him immunity from the charms of what he sees?\(^9\)

Many twentieth-century critical theorists fit within Mode One as they consider the meanings and constructions of cultural production that began to circulate over the last

\(^9\) It may be worth noting that Marx’s influence on critical theory can be used to explain why writers might want to be associated with the masses, even if they do not identify with them.
century. However, I shall focus on two theorists who directly address the spectacle of the showgirl in their writings: Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes. Both observe scenes of popular entertainment and their pleasure-giving devices by sitting amongst the crowd.

Written in 1927, Siegfried Kracauer’s *The Mass Ornament* focuses on the British dance troupe the Tiller Girls to critique what he observes as a trend towards meaningless spectacle that reflects and mimics the factories in which the masses work. For him, their formation lines function as the factory production lines; ‘the hands of the factory correspond to the legs of the Tiller Girls’. The mass of bodies broken up into body parts through their synchronised isolated movements create a shallow spectacle: a mass ornament that is ‘the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires’. For Kracauer, the Tiller Girls are intrinsically linked to the social malaise brought about by capitalism, in a particular time period. He reads the body as emblematic of something that the viewer is invested in outside of the theatre that might enable them to relate to the construction on stage:

No matter how low one gauges the value of the mass ornament, its degree of reality is still higher than that of artistic productions which cultivate outdated noble sentiments in obsolete forms—even if it means nothing more than that.

The use value of the dance-spectacle is that it is real and contemporary, and therefore it disassociates itself from the past yet Kracauer does not investigate the sociological aspect of the dancers’ experience: dancing in a troupe enabled young girls to travel and explore the world in an era when international travel was not available to the masses.

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10 Notably from the Frankfurt School.
11 Whom he mistakes for Americans.
13 Ibid p.79.
14 Ibid p.79.
15 Ibid p.79.
The experience of the dancer on the stage is not addressed through Kracauer’s writing. Instead, the dancers are merely objects in a theatrical presentation, neither sexual beings with appeal nor subjects worth exploring. The essay suggests a tacit presumption of a male spectator/reader of the spectacle.

Roland Barthes’s short essay ‘Striptease’ also interprets the dancing body: the lone female performer as she disrobes. As in his other writing, Barthes decodes the contemporary low culture to reveal the constructions we are unaccustomed to questioning. Barthes considers the meaning and motivation of stripping; its eroticism as well as the profession, thus his style less objectifies the woman stripping and allows access to how she has come to stand for the erotic object. For Barthes, the striptease acts as a social control: an inoculation against greater voyeurism, the little bit of evil that produces the ‘immune Moral Good.’

The ‘classic props’ of striptease, he continues, locate the female body in the domain of the object: ‘the whole spectrum of adornment constantly makes the living body return to the category of luxurious objects’. Their effect lingers on even after their removal. The final item of clothing, the sequinned g-string, hard and shiny, ‘drives the woman back into a mineral world, the (precious) stone being here the irrefutable symbol of absolute object, that which serves no purpose’. Amateur performers fail to turn themselves into objects through their lack of technique and inability to correctly handle their props. Thus, mastery of technique, dance ability, and adept execution of costume and props are professional skills. The performer must invest effort (tuition, practice, time, purchase of costumes and props) into turning themselves into objects; the striptease and its preparations are acts of self-objectification, prior to any gaze. This contrary idea will be a key tool throughout my research.

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16 This omission has been well addressed by Kate Elswit (2009) Accessing Unison in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility, Art Journal, Vol. 68, no. 2 pp. 50-61.
18 Ibid p.84.
19 Ibid p.85.
Both Kracauer and Barthes establish critical decoding methods, revealing what is signified in the messages that surround us. However, Kracauer does not see that spectacle could ever be a galvanising force, something utilized to subvert itself. Barthes’s observation that the levels of technique and professionalism required to objectify oneself is of great interest to my work, because it recognises the showgirl as more than merely complicit within the gaze, but also a director of the gaze, choosing to use her own labour in the service of the viewer. Yet Kracauer and Barthes remain outside of that which they observe, maintaining a critical distance. They write from a privileged position of spectatorship and do not draw on a personal experience of the gaze. They do not speak from a position of experiencing objectification (and furthermore, this oversight is of no interest to them). What is their stake, we may ask. Is their distance from their subject of inquiry inviting a critical perspective more invested with the problems of viewing the object?
Mode Two

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

The following films are recommended either for their insights into women’s problems or into the society that creates the problems) …

*An American Tragedy.*
*Adam’s Rib.*
*Gaslight.*
*Johnny Belinda.*
*Masculine-Feminine.*
*The Nun’s Story.*
*The Queen.*
*Red Desert.*
*L’Arventura.*
Sandwiched between bibliographies of new feminist writing and abortion counselling services, the above list appears in Robin Morgan’s early radical feminist anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful*. Film was acknowledged not only as a problem, but also as a potential solution. Accessed correctly, films may help you feel better about being a woman, or so this list seems to suggest. Early feminist discourse around film representations in the U.S. attempted to understand the sociological implications of Hollywood; questioning representations of women whilst acknowledging their own filmic-pleasures. This ‘Images of Women’ critical strand exemplified by *Popcorn Venus* (Rosen, 1973) *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Haskell, 1973), and *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film* (Mellen, 1974) used sociological and historical methods to decode the stereotypes.²¹

Well-observed and honest in their own position as seducees of film, these writers tantalise the reader with observations about the actresses’ physicality and sensuality, as in Rosen’s discussion of Rita Hayworth as ‘a frank and open beauty; with a dazzling smile, a fluid lithe body, and a ‘playful abandon that the screen had not seen before.’²²

Other accounts praised the plots and evidenced pleasure in the narrative devices of the films:

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²² Rosen *Popcorn Venus* p.224.
In the screwball comedies where love is consummated in gags, in the Rogers-Astaire musicals, where it is consummated in dance (or in other musicals, in song), there is an equalization of obstacles and a matching of temperaments.23

Their praise of female Hollywood performers is accompanied by an obvious respect for the women who flourished as professional women within the given restraints of the period, making their impact on the world. As Rosen recounts,

By 1920, 14,354 women listed their profession as “actress,” according to the U.S. Labor Department. That number, seemingly small, looms more significant when one considers that it is almost equal to the number of women earning undergraduate college degrees that year.24

Working with an entirely different set of critical tools, Laura Mulvey lit the feminist film theory touch paper with her text *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975).25 Her essay utilises Freud and Lacan to understand how film structures the gaze of the viewer and creates a masculine mode of viewing through its representation of the male gaze, which is both scopophilic and voyeuristic. She critiques the construct of women as objectified image in contrast to the substantiated male character found in Hollywood films:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.26

For Mulvey, the female character is given the visual image in lieu of narrative power, mirroring the social status of women at the time of creation.

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23 Haskell *From Reverence to Rape* p.126
24 Rosen *Popcorn Venus* p.100.
26 Ibid p.19.
In this context psychoanalysis proved to be a forceful tool to show how a patriarchal organisation of the gaze dislocates a female spectator. However, Mulvey’s text continues to presume and construct the viewer as male.

This essay represents only a very small part of the feminist film theory dialogue which has grown in terms of complexity and the range of tools used: semiotics, Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Julia Kristeva have all been applied to the analysis of film. Whilst my research must take in much of this dialogue, I am choosing to avoid using their critical tools because resulting conclusions tend to close down meanings and whereas I wish to open-up possibilities.

Although the psychoanalytic Mode Two authors describe the image in favourable terms, they avoid ownership of the pleasure of watching films and do not articulate any desire for the filmic image; a conscious shift made in order to lend weight to their argument. As a reader, this style seems disingenuous, and without sensing how the writers might feel visual pleasure, the text is clinical. It is worth noting the similarity with the Mode One writers; in reducing the subjects of their texts to a set of signs that point to the construction of the gaze they render the woman on screen invisible, they do not see anything beyond her representation.

Mode Two methods also need to be questioned with regards our contemporary context: what aspects of their theories effectively stand the test of time? The dark, public space of the cinema was the only place to view classic films in the Seventies but since then, developments in viewing technologies mean we can watch films in any type of space and enjoy the benefits of the pause and rewind buttons on our remote control. We catch up with television-on-demand, or watch on YouTube, with its facility to leave and read comments. In other words, ideas must be read in terms of the contemporaneous modes of viewing.

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As ‘Images of Women’ writers voiced their feminist concerns, they also highlighted the possibilities for female agency within the patriarchal film industry. For them, the hope lay not only in feminist critique but in increasing our awareness of the women who have infiltrated the industry and wishing that their ranks might swell. The final words of Rosen and Haskell’s books voice this desire for change, noting how women have breathed ‘life and form and style into motion pictures when they were an impressionable young art form’ and holding on even ‘when the big moneymen moved in’; acting as ‘pioneers’.28

They conclude:

For every stereotype there’s a counter-stereotype and the story of women can no longer be reduced to a recitation of evils […] We want nothing less, on or off the screen than the wide variety and dazzling diversity of male options.29

These calls for an expansion of the female archetypes in film may be slow to come to fruition but maybe, we can acknowledge progression in performance and fine art practice that seeks to appropriate, challenge and critique Hollywood conventions.

29 Haskell From Reverence to Rape p.402.
Mode Three

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

Mulvey’s text undisputedly made an impact on the writing of theorists that followed. Mode Three is a reaction to Mode Two, criticising its focus on heteronormative viewing assumptions; incorporating difference of desire and emerging queer theory. It is driven by the subjectivity of the author, her own identity and desires providing the motivation for her argument and destabilising the presumptions of Mode Two. Mode Three is characterised by its combination of aggressive contestation on the theories that have gone before and its sophistication in its use of methods and sources.
Frustration with *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and its exclusive focus on male visual pleasure is evidently the impetus for Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca in their essay *Pre-text and Text in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.* They make their agenda clear in their first footnote: ‘We are using the term “pleasure” here to refer to enjoyment and delight. We are not using the word to connote a psychoanalytic framework for our analysis.’ Indeed their first few sentences read like a manifesto:

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

Arbuthnot and Seneca proceed to scrutinise the film, interpreting it against a more conventional and perhaps superficial reading in order to locate their own visual pleasure and personal sense of enjoyment. As they explain, ‘the destruction of opportunities for male objectification in this film gave us less pleasure than the construction of opportunities for our own positive identification with women in this film.’

For the authors, the appeal of this film is the genuine affection that the Monroe and Russell characters have for each other, noting ‘the absence of competitiveness, envy and pettiness.’ Continuing on, they also point to the significance of the musical number: ‘The men they supposedly love are never given a musical role, and therefore never convincingly share in the emotional energy between Monroe and Russell.’

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31 Ibid p.84.
32 Ibid p.77.
33 Ibid p.84.
34 Ibid p.82.
showgirl in musical movement displaying her energy, skill and ability is an important site here; a sign with meaning and substance.

If Arbuthnot / Seneca and Monroes / Russell duet, then theorist Judith Butler employs a choir in her attack on the presumptions of Second Wave Feminism in her book *Gender Trouble*.36 She provides an extensive philosophical context; drawing on a broad spectrum of theorists including René Descartes, Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Douglas, Esther Newton, Luce Irigaray and Monique Wittig. The multitude of theoretical positions that she weaves together resists a singular approach. She does not construct a singular voice, but creates a chorus by drawing on such a multiplicity of sources.

Butler’s notion of gender as performance, an act, that is scripted, rehearsed, and repeated, can be used to think through overt displays of gender. For Butler there is no original gender identity; gender is *always* a performance. The example of drag queens is used to illustrate the layers of assumed gender:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.37

In other words, how can there be an original gender identity that is being parodied, when they are all performances?

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body, and hence,

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must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.\(^{38}\)

Reading Butler, I am reminded of the new burlesque performer, ‘The World-Famous *BOB*’, who considers herself a female-female impersonator and thus referencing the world of drag queens as a woman. By separating out the layers of anatomical and performed gender we can think about the knowing, winking burlesque star as playing with this multi-layering. The showgirl is perhaps another outward demonstration of a performed gender-identity that does not necessarily point to anatomical gender underneath the costume.

Rita Hayworth’s dancing, observes Adrienne L McLean in *Gilda*\(^{39}\) also resists a Mulveyian fate.\(^{40}\) McLean perceives the skill with which Hayworth dances; ‘it is not what Gilda lacks that makes her fascinating but what she has – the ability to sing and dance, to perform professionally’.\(^{41}\) She is ‘not merely a leg, a gown, a face, or hair: she is a dancing human being whose three-dimensionality is presented to us kinetically’.\(^{42}\) McLean, writing from her position as a dancer observes nuances in Hayworth’s dancing that were not visible or notable to other writers.\(^{43}\) McLean’s subjectivity enabled her to

\(^{38}\) Ibid p.191.
\(^{41}\) Ibid p.7.
\(^{42}\) Ibid p.7.
\(^{43}\) In a personal email (23\(^{rd}\) November 2010) McLean related to me that ‘I never really wanted to dance professionally but loved all of it, and was a Meadows Fellow in Dance as a result of doing well especially in the teaching and research areas. I admired ballet the most, was more suited physically to modern, but adored tap—I taught that for several years at the university level. I also choreographed and danced for a liturgical dance group for about five years after I got married, not because I am particularly religious but because it paid well and I enjoyed working with the students too.

Personally, it was clear to me that I took up dance, against objections of family (they didn’t “forbid” me to dance or anything like that, they just thought it wouldn’t get me anywhere), precisely because of its connection to the body and joy in trained movement as such. My family is quite repressed about body issues, and I didn’t want to be, and dance helped me understand huge amounts about myself.

It certainly was nice that it DID get me somewhere too—my interest in film is directly tied to dance (I saw dance for the first time in movies, not on a theatrical stage), and since my university days (I got my M.F.A. in 1981, and went back for my Ph.D. in 1994) I have never not thought about dance and film together, to somewhat productive ends.’
see *more* clearly. She picks up the ambiguity of address in the visually pleasing defiant number ‘Put the Blame on Mame’ that ‘does not in the end, play to and signify only male desire. Although the striptease in *Gilda* is obviously provocative in some sense, exactly for whom it is most erotic may not be so easy to pinpoint.’

Mode Three also begins to offer access to the agency of the viewer, and their ability to read against the grain. Arbuthnot and Seneca’s first sentence quoted earlier also structures their endeavour as a model to be replicated by the reader, an invitation to try this at home.

The agency of the performer is also being opened up by these Mode Three viewers. If we can read something in their bodies, their movements, dancing, and singing, then perhaps we can think of the performers as *enabling* possibilities of alternative readings.

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Mode Four

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

This mode of looking is characterised by the way it draws on previous modes of viewing to challenge and expand what has been established. Mode Four embraces the developments in technology that have changed the way we receive information. For Mode Four theorists these changes represent opportunities to challenge the dialectic of viewer / viewed. Mode Four’s reflexivity encompasses a close examination of current trends, innovations on the horizon and a re-evaluation of the past.

45 Please note, this Mode will remain incomplete until Judith Halberstam’s forthcoming book is in print. I heard a section of the book at Femininities Conference at the University of York April 2010, which relates directly what I am thinking about here. However, I wish to wait until the book is in print before I try to represent her views.
Jacques Rancière fits Mode Four as a thinker who draws on histories of philosophy. Of particular interest is his essay *The Emancipated Spectator*, in which he seizes the opportunity to ‘radically distance one’s thoughts from the theoretical and political presuppositions that still shore up, even in postmodern guise, most of the discussion about theater, performance, and spectatorship.’ Whilst the showgirl is not of specific interest to Rancière, his text is a particularly useful tool for re-assessing the power dynamics of the viewer and viewed, as such, we can consider him a friend to the showgirl.\(^{46}\)

He describes the received idea of the passivity of spectatorship; ‘He who looks at spectacle remains motionless in his seat, lacking any power of intervention’\(^{47}\) and proceeds to invert the positions:

> The spectator is usually disparaged because he does nothing, while the performers on the stage – or the workers outside – do something with their bodies. But it is easy to turn matters around by stating that those who act, those work with their bodies, are obviously inferior to those who look – that is, those who are able to look – that is, those who can contemplate ideas, foresee the future, or take a global view of our world. The positions can be switched, but the structure remains the same.\(^{48}\)

Rancière sets the viewer’s brain in motion and privileges the action of the performer. This revision activates the participants of spectacle and their coming together as a community.

The community of new burlesque would agree with Rancière’s assessment. Jacki Willson’s *The Happy Stripper, Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, the first book to theorise the scene, decodes the performance, context and historical precedents of burlesque to access its efficacy and demonstrate the ways it can be considered feminist.\(^{49}\)

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\(^{47}\) Ibid. p.272

\(^{48}\) Ibid p.277

Willson asks: ‘does new burlesque’s glamorous, lavish, optically edible spectacle have a voice?’

Locating the friction between feminism and post-feminism with regards femininity, the book does not try to create a false resolution of the issue, but suggests that:

In this head-on collision between two systems, burlesque allows the female viewer to question the point where solidarity breaks down. Young women need to be fully aware of the consequences of their display, yet they must not be cut off from their own bodies and the knowledge and personal strength that comes from experiencing and imaging their erotic pleasure. Feminism therefore needs to be equivocally poised between pleasure and politics, and female display must be complimented with a direct address to acknowledge this perceived contradiction. Burlesque performers offer up a powerful position for young women – but in order for there to be pizzazz there must also be a wink, a nudge and a ‘knowing’ smile.

Here, contemporary examples of how women might enjoy visual pleasure, how they identify themselves within a scene and how they may choose to actively take part within the scene are all explored.

This is a very brief synopsis of a still expanding mode of viewing. Theoretical advances continue to be made that deal with the increasing significance of online social networks and our ever-changing relationship to technology.

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51 Ibid p.172.
Mode Five

The showgirl looks at an audience; she knows what they would like to see, but she defies them and performs what she would like to perform.

The object / subject speaks! Mode Five is the self-reflective practice of positioning oneself in front of an audience. It demonstrates an understanding of the other modes of viewing via its sophisticated address to the viewer. Mode Five challenges the relationship between the viewer and viewed by disrupting attempts of viewer passivity. Here, the performer mobilises the audience’s active participation in spectatorship whilst performing her own active subjectivity. On the surface, the gestures performed by Mode Five artists can appear simplistic, but the demarcation of power is being subverted, and the insistence on presence results in a demonstration of individual agency. Critique from within the site of the viewed is difficult; there is a danger that the critique does not register. It is an unstable, but exciting position to be in.
Jemima Stehli adopted the position of the stripper in her photographic series *Strip*, in which she questioned the designation of power in the art world within a voyeuristic framework. She stands with her back to the camera in front of a seated male who is identified only by his job title, ‘Critic’, ‘Writer’, ‘Curator’ or ‘Dealer’. A long cable-release is visible in his hand. In each photograph Stehli is in a different state of undress caught in the act of stripping. The precise moment the photograph was taken during this private strip is controlled by the seated male, his power doubled through the status of his job in the art world. And yet, he is the pawn within Stehli’s game. She has created the scenario; it is her concept, her intellect, her skill, and her body that she chooses to display. She is active. The seated male is unable to not look; he must play the stooge. The photograph registers his level of satisfaction or discomfort: is that us, the viewer, looking at ourselves? Talking about the work, Stehli explains:

*Strip No.6 Critic* (1999) Jemima Stehli

The only way to understand your place as an artist in art history is to acknowledge subjectivity and the circumstances of the work. You can only try to talk directly about your experiences and sometimes for me that means
relating them without taking any position. That’s what I was doing with the Strip works.\textsuperscript{52}

Enacting her subjectivity and allowing herself the room to not take a position enable the work to address her themes in a very generous, fearless and even humorous way.

Similarly the artist Andrea Fraser also takes up the position of the stripping woman. In her performance \textit{Official Welcome}, she addresses an assembled art audience giving an introduction to ‘the artist Andrea Fraser’. The scripted dialogue, in which she performs ‘artist’ and ‘supporter’ quotes a number of collectors’ and artists’ real introductions and acceptance speeches, all delivered whilst Frasers strips naked and then clothes herself again by the end of the performance:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Artist}

Yeah, the art world likes “bad girls.” But if you tell the truth and people don’t want to hear the truth. If you’re honest about how stupid and fucked over life is, you end up in the tabloids. I don’t go looking for it. It just comes in a big stinking tidal wave.

\textit{Removing bra, then shoes, then thong.}

I’m used to it. It’s boring.

[...]
\end{quote}

Supporter
Well, thank you. Thank you for your dedication, for your vision, for your life. I think we all must dare, as artists do, to break free of the past and to create a better future, rooted in the values that never change. That’s the great lesson our artists teach us.  

Fraser’s work can be understood within the context ‘Institutional Critique’, as pioneered by the artists Hans Haacke and Michael Asher. Within this positioning her work takes on an intellectually engaged examination of what we expect a contemporary artist to give us; she subverts what we think art is by conflating the site of the artwork, the museum, the collector, the critic and the performer. Can we be sure where they all begin and end? On one level it appears as though existing positions are recapitulated, but actually the piece serves to destabilise them.

Still from *Viva* (2009) Anna Biller

In feature film *Viva* artist/filmmaker Anna Biller constructed a recreation of a Seventies sexploitation movie. The film is an uncomfortable mix of camp pastiche and truthful real-emotions storyline, which sees Barbie/Viva going on a journey of sexual emancipation. The final scene, celebratory and sad, sees Barbie and her friend in a down-market recreation of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell’s number *Two Little Girls*

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For Biller, the aim is to negotiate how female desire might be represented and provoked. Most interesting to Biller are the responses she receives from female viewers in support of the film; women can read the resistance in the film, but she finds male viewers only see pastiche.

Stehli, Fraser and Biller’s work all demonstrate bravery, a willingness to provoke, experiment, offend, and challenge. By using their practice to address theoretical issues these artists have been misread as recapitulating what they intend to criticise and this concern drives my research: that embodying critique can still acknowledge the contentions that feminism has put forward about women in representation.

The theoretical analyses of viewing (the showgirl) evolve across time as changes in society influence who may take up the position of the theorist/academic, as fields of enquiry open up and take seriously the pleasures and pursuits of the masses and as technological advances shape the ways in which the spectator looks and the showgirl circulates. Although my formulation of the ‘Modes of Viewing’ is broadly chronological, I would suggest that Mode Four remains the current mode for theoretical approaches. I have conceived Mode Five as achronological, the mode that progresses beyond looking, to the position of the viewed who sees and thinks. Taking up this research challenge, as fine art practice-led researcher, a feminist, a showgirl enthusiast, amateur dancer and an i-pod touch owner might just be the right combination to make an original contribution to the discourse that crosses Mode Four and Mode Five.

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36 I talked to Anna Biller about the film in September 2010, LA.
Chapter Plan

Introduction: Background to research

Chapter 1: The Five Modes of Viewing (The Showgirl)

Interlude 1

(A break from the flow of building my argument, I wish to insert ‘interludes’ between chapters, printed recto with a blank page verso) They will be short descriptions and analysis of things I have viewed in relation to my research. Articulating my response as a viewer should support arguments developed elsewhere in the text.)

Watching a burlesque show; description of performance, audience, the performer, the space of the performance, the way I found out about it. Some reflection and analysis of how I felt about the whole thing.

Chapter 2: If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution

In this chapter will explore performativity as I look at the precedents for dancing as a thinking strategy deployed by feminists. I will answer questions like: do feminists dance? and what does the body in motion symbolise? I will look at how the showgirl figure can generate pleasure, and why this might be useful in terms of performance and thinking of feminist forms of resistance. I will also address feminist art practice, which also uses the body in motion.

Sue-Ellen Case (2008) Feminism and Theatre Palgrave Macmillan
Susan Leigh Foster (Author), Peggy Phelan (Author), Andre Lepecki (Author), Stephanie Rosenthal (Editor) (2010) Move: Choreographing You Hayward Gallery Publishing

57 Taken from of the Amsterdam-based curatorial project, which use a quote from the feminist-anarchist Emma Goldman for their name.
Judith Halberstam Forthcoming Book
Artists: Andrea Fraser, Eleanor Antin, Yvonne Rainer

Interlude 2
Moulin Rouge, Lido of Jubilee – i.e. a large-scale showgirl production; content as before e.g. description and analysis of my experience.

Chapter 3: Rehearsal and Performance

In this chapter I will use Ranciere to re-evaluate the performer/audience binaries. I shall look at the ways in which identity is ‘rehearsed’ and ‘performed’. How do we consider identity creation and self-representation through appropriation and repetition. I will be looking at the impulse to look backwards to find alternative styles/ideas etc as a way of contending the present.

Erving Goffman (1959) The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Garden City, N.Y:
Interlude 3
Watching the Crazy Horse revue in Paris, which appears to straddle a number of traditions.

Chapter 4: Glamour: The Theorist and The Showgirl

This chapter will explore the appeal of glamour, an examination of the aesthetics and the production of desire through those tropes. A development of my Transmission: Hospitality conference paper, this chapter will consider the applications of glamour, our need to have aspirational figures and why the showgirl and theorist utilise it. This will also be explored by looking at glamour’s relationship to the abject. Does a fear of the abject inform our need for the glamorous? I will draw on Freud and Lacan to inform our understanding of glamour, as well as recent texts that look at the histories of glamour in the twentieth century. Interwoven with the theory I will also cite personal interviews with a variety of performers who use and construct their own glamour.

Mathieu Amalric (2010) *Tournée (On Tour)* [film].
Artists: Rose English, Forced Entertainment, Marisa Carnesky

**Interlude 4**
Watching a mainstream strip show aimed at men e.g. Spearmint Rhino.

**Chapter 5: The Extra-diegetic Voice**

Appropriating the terms diegetic and extra-diegetic from film studies, which itself appropriated from literary theory, I shall develop a number of ideas around the possibilities for considering the voice of the showgirl. I define the diegetic voice as the performer’s individuality/subjectivity coming through within the performance. I see the extra-diegetic voice as the voice-over to the performance in the form of the performer’s online persona i.e. a personal webpage, Twitter, Facebook, Myspace. All ways that a performer might represent themselves that becomes supplementary information to their performance. I will draw on the rapidly expanding literature that explores new technology and performativity.

Susanna Paasonen *Forthcoming book*.

**Interlude 5**
Watching a performance that appropriates from styles of performance mentioned above eg Forced Entertainment, Rose English or Ursala Martinez.
Chapter 6: Conclusion—The Showgirl Speaks

Interlude 6
Watching a performance in an academic context.
Conclusion

This research represents a timely re-examination of visual pleasure, using the body as a tool for thinking and performing subjectivity that seeks to draw on new practices of femininity for example burlesque dancing (both watching shows and attending classes) and glamorous, constructed personas like Lady Gaga and the new possibilities for online social networking such as Twitter that enable immediate commentary from both performer and spectator.

My research self-consciously crosses visual and performing art, media studies, feminist theoretical discourses and I hope it can bridge these different areas of study. In developing new frameworks for understanding the relationship between the viewer and the viewed this research is able to offer something across this range of disciplines.

There is an increasingly broad body of practice-led and academic research that are emerging to address the performativity of social networking, the politics of new burlesque, the histories and pleasures of glamour. Willson's *The Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque*, an accessible book emerging from a PhD, is, perhaps, the closest to my research however, Willson does not draw on interviews to build a picture of the voice of the viewed, unlike in my research. I believe the methods I am developing to claim a new ‘Showgirlian’ position give my research a unique position, and one that dovetails with existing discourses. Namely, by giving voice to the objectified figure of the showgirl and asserting my own pleasures in the constructed, performative and glamorous and weaving

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them together with theoretical scholarship (and demonstrating the glamour of the theorist).

Whilst it is too early to fully envisage the range of who this work might benefit, I feel confident that there is potential for an audience to be developed both within fine art, and beyond into, potentially, the arena of accessible feminism. More precisely, I am the main beneficiary of this work: this scholarship will enable me to grow in confidence as a practitioner and develop riskier, more challenging artworks with a fully developed critically engaged context. This research will directly lead to a new body of work.

Furthermore, my research to date has already been put to use in my teaching practice and this research can easily be translated into pedagogical tools.
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Halberstam J. *Forthcoming Book*


Marwick A. (2010) *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity and Self-Branding in Web 2.0* PhD dissertation, New York University, Department of Media, Culture, and Communication


Susanna Paasonen *Forthcoming book*


