

HOW DO I LOOK?

Viewing, Embodiment, Performance, Showgirls, & Art Practice

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Abstract

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

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

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

I use of a range of methods including producing art works, close-reading of art works and artefacts, watching showgirl shows, conducting oral history interviews with showgirls, drawing on queer theory, considering performative styles of writing, and using films to provide structural devices. I end my thesis by positioning how art work can bring complexity and nuance to the discussion. Across the research, I create my own showgirl performance: in text and in art works.