

Conference Paper

Assembling My Critical Tools & Trying Them Out:

A First Year's Perspective on Research & Evaluating Your Sources

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Introduction

I am an artist, working at present on a practice-led Fine Art PhD. I am researching how the spectacularised body, especially glamorous female performers who are presented to be looked at might claim agency and how the visual codes of glamour can be appropriated in art practice, all whilst trying to reconcile my personal desires to be a 'showgirl' and a 'theorist'.

At present I am exploring the ways in which we can consider the spectacle to have a voice; that is the way that the spectacularised body may register an opinion, a difference, a specific identity, within the context of the spectacle.

This paper is an exploration of three of sources that bear on this research and an attempt to interrogate them with a practical methodology. I wish to challenge theory's role by seeing if I can dance it and so in doing move them from text to art making material.

1 *Dance, Girl, Dance*

The film *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) directed by Dorothy Arzner, follows the story of the collapse of a dance troupe and the dispersal of the dancers. Bubbles (Lucille Ball) finds a job hula-dancing in a burlesque theatre: video clip - Bubbles, "I aint got an ounce of class sugar, honest", duration 1 min 26 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuzG0o_2KF8). Meanwhile Judy (Maureen O'Hara), tries to audition for a ballet company, without any success. We see the friendship of Bubbles and Judy develop and their two approaches to their dance careers; that of the burlesque dancer, set to make money using her "brains" by consciously giving the audience what they want and the ballet dancer with her artistic ambitions.

Eventually Bubbles finds Judy work at the burlesque theatre she's performing at, as the warm up to her act. Judy's ballet is hilarious to the burlesque theatre audience, but Judy takes the job as she has no other options. Finally, Judy gets her own back and stands up to the jeering audience: video clip - Judy addressing the audience, duration 1 minute 34 (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_SwZBUoT-s). Confronting the audience we hear Judy's voice. The object of the gaze speaks and becomes a subject with agency. Judy sees the audience and recognises multiple motives amongst them. She admits her complicity within their gaze because 'she is paid'. She also challenges 'the dress suits', the upper class audience roughing it at the burlesque. In so doing, she becomes the speaking showgirl; an emancipated subject.

The characters of the film represent two archetypes, two kinds of showgirl, the burlesque dancer and the ballet dancer. Can the dances of these two characters be used to critically interrogate the texts of two authors?

2 Judith Butler

Judith Butler's notion of gender as performance, an act, scripted rehearsed, repeated can be used to think through overt displays of gender in a new way. For Butler there is no original gender identity; gender is a *performance*. Butler uses the example of drag queens to illustrate the layers of assumed gender because in drag, the layers are different from one another:

"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." Butler (2006:187)

In other words, how can there be an original gender identity, which is being parodied, as 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, 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”

Butler (2006:191)

Butler’s point reminds me of the new burlesque performer, ‘The World-Famous *BOB*’ who considers herself a female-female impersonator, accessing the world of drag queens as a woman. By separating out the layers of (anatomical) sex and (performed) gender we can think about the striptease artist as aware of her performance of gender, in excess of her anatomical gender. Is self-awareness a subversion of the Butler multi-layering? Can we think of striptease as a gender parody?

Butler’s text performs a mastery of writing in *Gender Trouble*, moving quickly between philosophical ideas, creating densely written passages. The back of *Gender Trouble*’s 2006 reprint carries a warning against misinterpretation:

“Best known however, **yet also most often misinterpreted**, is Butler’s concept of gender as a reiterated social performance rather than the expression of a prior reality.”

Given this backdrop, is it not suitably provocative to enact Butler’s words as a striptease? Butler’s literally striptease depends on the angle and position of the reader to dictate how much of her argument is ‘seen’, how much is revealed and concealed.

NB Whilst discussing Judith Butler the speaker begins to dance, shimmying, hip-circling and burlesquing until finally removing her wrap dress and shoes to reveal a black leotard and tights.

3 Jacki Willson

Striptease; the overt performance of gender brings us quite neatly to burlesque. *The Happy Stripper, Pleasures of and Politics of the New Burlesque* (2008) by Jacki Willson folds together feminism and new burlesque in the first book to theorise of the scene. Willson decodes the performance, context and historical precedents of burlesque to evaluate new burlesque and demonstrate the ways it can be considered feminist. She draws a number of really important and interesting conclusions; “Part of what burlesque achieves is to create a female-defined space of self-realization, fantasy, sexuality and success” (2008:171)

The book locates the friction between feminism and post-feminism i.e. the unresolved issue of femininity. Whilst the book does not try to create a false resolution of the issue, it positions them next to each other in a sort of harmony.

“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.”

Willson (2008:172)

Elegantly written, empowering conclusions drawn, each thought and example in the text is explored and explained. It is a considered demonstration of accessible writing technique. Can *The Happy Stripper* be seen as a ballet dance?

NB During this Willson section the speaker performs some ballet steps, ending the presentation with a pirouette.

Bibliography

Arzner D. (1940) *Dance, Girl, Dance*, RKO Radio Pictures

Butler J. (2008) *Gender Trouble* (reprint) Routledge

Willson J. (2008) *The Happy Stripper: Pleasures and Politics of the New Burlesque* (1st Edn.) I. B. Tauris