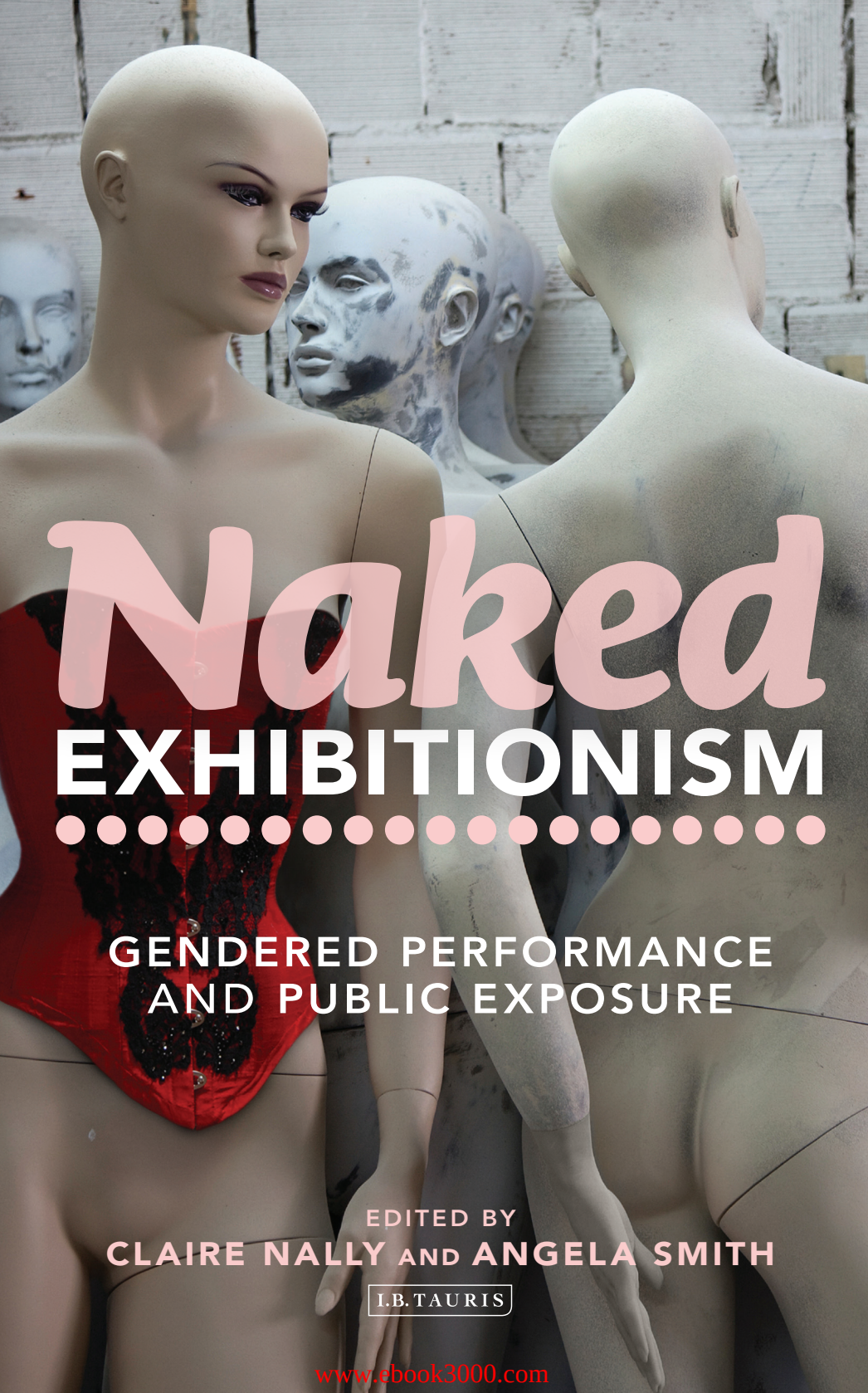

Naked EXHIBITIONISM

GENDERED PERFORMANCE AND PUBLIC EXPOSURE

EDITED BY
CLAIRE NALLY AND ANGELA SMITH

I.B. TAURIS

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INTRODUCTION

Angela Smith and Claire Nally

> ***Exhibitionist***: One who exhibits their skills or material produce. (1821)
> One who displays a tendency towards extravagant behaviour; one who has a psychosexual disorder characterised by exposure of the genitals to strangers. (2011)
>
> (*Oxford English Dictionary*)

Whilst the nuances of meaning attached to the label exhibitionist have changed from neutrality in the early nineteenth century to a disapproving medicalisation in the twentieth, the cultural practices of exhibitionism are recorded as far back as Ancient Greece by Herodotus (1998: 119). Despite this, exhibitionism has received relatively little critical attention in gender studies and indeed in popular culture: extant published material approaches bodily exposure as a pathological, medical and/or psychological disorder (David W. Allen 1988, and Daniel J. Cox and Reid J. Daitzman 1980), but less attention has been paid to such matters as cultural practice. Similarly, although the rise of 'postfeminism' in the 1990s has brought with it a critical reassessment of feminine identity, and arguably a retrenchment in terms of the role of women in the home, the workplace and the public eye, less scholarly debate has been forthcoming in terms of the specific development of exhibitionism since the mid-twentieth century. Thus the current volume, *Naked Exhibitionism*, explores the naked, celebratory and

carnal body, in theatre, literature, popular culture and media from the Second World War to the modern day. Several interdisciplinary essays (from media, literature, film, linguistics, and sociology) build on the research expertise of the editors and essayists, and escalating interest in the areas of performativity, neo burlesque, gender transgression (male-to-female and female-to-male), and postfeminism as problematic sites of cultural representation. In particular, this collection will show how notions of exhibitionism have changed over the course of the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, a context that includes social factors such as changes in the obscenity laws in Britain as well as the wider social context of gender equality and the effects of second wave feminism from the 1960s onwards.

The naked, exhibited female body has been a staple of culture for several centuries, with varying ideological inflections. Predominantly a feature of medieval religious buildings, the Sheela-na-gig is often but not exclusively found in Britain and Ireland, and is essentially a stone carving of a woman exposing her genitalia. Whilst her genitals are represented to suggest a nubile fertility, her head and chest are skeletal, suggesting age. Scholars are divided on the exact role of these figures, as they may be a warning against lust, good luck charms, or part of pagan ritual, but the naked female form clearly exerted both reverence and fear: clergymen frequently destroyed or removed the figures from church buildings, whilst 'archaeologists tended either to ignore them altogether, or to label them as lewd, barbarous, or repulsive. Museums kept them locked safely away from public scrutiny' (Barbara Freitag 2004: 1). Appropriated for the twentieth century, P J Harvey's song 'Sheela Na Gig' (released from her debut album, *Dry*, in 1992) features a female speaker who is rejected by her lover on the basis of her nakedness, her 'unclean' body with its exhibitionist tendencies. Arguably, the song reveals the way in which patriarchy, and also society at large, polices and manages what is acceptable for women to reveal and conceal.

Rodin's *The Kiss* (1889) scandalised early viewers who thought such an open display of eroticism unsuitable for public consumption (resulting in the withdrawal of the sculpture from public view at the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago). With the increasing

sexualisation of the public sphere in advertising, commodity culture and popular branding (*Playboy* for instance), the exhibited body has become progressively more visible. Brian McNair (2002: 7) remarks how consumerist displays of the body have been approached by commentators as inherently negative, but continues to suggest that '[w]hat any particular image means, and what it may predispose, provoke or persuade someone to think or do are as much the product of that individual's personal circumstances (an infinitely complex amalgam of individual and familial history, education, cultural tradition, and all other elements which shape and contrast a person's existence and conscious being) as they are of the image-content' (Brian McNair, 2002: 7–8). For instance, the infamous picture of Sophie Dahl by Stephen Meisel, advertising Yves Saint Laurent's 'Opium', attracted '730 complaints about the picture from members of the public who had found it too sexually suggestive and unsuitable for display on the streets' (*The Guardian,* 19 December 2010). Indeed, the image, deemed by some to be degrading to women, highlights the double-bind in which modern feminism finds itself. Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) notoriously stages a graphic investigation into the female body's hidden geography, with discussions around genital hair, orgasm, pregnancy, lesbianism and domestic abuse reflecting the exhibitionist potential of the second wave. The reclamation of the sexual body from patriarchal value judgments, as Luce Irigaray theorises in her seminal *This Sex Which Is Not One*, is foundational to any feminist enterprise (Luce Irigaray 1985). Indeed, if we consider Marc Quinn's statue 'Alison Lapper, Pregnant' (Rachel Cooke, *The Observer,* 18 September 2005), unveiled as part of the temporary series of exhibits on the 'fourth plinth' in Trafalgar Square, London, we are forced to confront the issue of female nakedness, aesthetics and positive public art. Part of a series of commissions, and juxtaposed with other plinth statues representing the masculinity of military achievement (such as Charles Napier and Henry Havelock), the staged site of the sculpture challenges the invisibility of women's achievement through the revelation of the naked torso. Born with no arms and no legs, heavily pregnant Lapper was sculpted in twelve tons of marble, curiously emulating classical Greek models, whilst simultaneously drawing critical attention to the

absence of disabled motherhood in cultural representation. The notion of public display, the exhibition of the specifically gendered body, is consistently informed by ideological signs, judgments and viewpoints. It is heavily invested in the viewer's perspective, but also its originary cultural moment and compositional intent.

In the context of ideological value judgements, one might consider the most famous case of exhibited black femininity, Saartjie Baartman, whose body was co-opted for a pseudo-scientific discourse in which her physicality was deemed abnormal and therefore subject to the public gaze (Rachel Holmes 2007). She had an elongated labia and steatopygia, or unusually large buttocks, both genetic characteristics of Khoikhoi women. She left her native Cape Town in 1810 to go to London, where she was deployed as an entertainment for the general public:

> Shortly after Baartman's arrival in London in 1810, at no. 225 Piccadilly, members of the public were invited to view the 'Hottentot Venus' for two shillings. Advertised as possessing the 'kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen', she wore a 'dress resembling her complexion' and so tight that her 'shapes above and the enormous size of her posterior parts are as visible as if the said female were naked . . . the dress is evidently intended to give the appearance of being undressed'. She wore beads and feathers hung around her waist, the accoutrements associated with her African ancestry, and, on occasion, would play a small stringed musical instrument. The show took place upon 'a stage two feet high, along which she was led by her keeper, and exhibited like a wild beast; being obliged to walk, stand or sit as he ordered.' (Sadiah Qureshi 2004: 4)

The spectacle of the sexual body (as Venus, with tight dress to reveal her shape) conflates with the overt gesture of the 'keeper', rendering visible, not just colonial power structures but how these are enacted on the body (being like a 'wild beast', her body becomes the subject for 'legitimate' public scrutiny). To complicate the power dynamic of this performance further, Baartman allegedly consented to being exploitatively exhibited in Europe in exchange for financial reward. Whilst her enlarged vulva

was not exhibited when she was alive, following her death in 1815 (after having a career in France as a prostitute when public fascination declined), her skeleton, brain and genitals were on display in Paris's Musée de 'Homme until 1974. What is markedly repellent and fascinating about Baartman's case is her transition from performer in a nineteenth-century ethnological show to a case study of natural history and medicine. In the public scrutiny of her body after death, Baartman's most intimate interior finally became a curiosity for display. The imperial judgments enforced by France and England on colonized peoples reflect in the grotesque exhibition of this woman of colour: 'degenerate' physical features, theorised by Cesare Lombroso in the study of criminals, and later by Max Nordau, became justification for the political domination of racial 'others'.

Perhaps the most famous 'naked exhibitionist' is the legendary Lady Godiva, the medieval English noblewoman who is supposed to have ridden naked through the streets of Coventry as a forfeit for her husband's repeal of unfair taxes on the city's poor. Whilst the legend of Godiva has largely been proven to be fictitious, the fact that this has been retold and reinterpreted over the centuries makes this woman one of the most famous (or infamous) in history. As Daniel Donoghue shows, Godiva has been variously represented as the virtuous, subservient wife (particularly in the Victorian period), or as the playfully erotic exhibitionist. This latter interpretation came about particularly in the early twentieth century when Freud alluded to the Godiva legend as an illustration to his argument which medicalised exhibitionism as the instinct to put one's body on display.

As Donoghue notes, the Godiva legend had been appropriated by various poets and writers in the course of the nineteenth century, including subtle allusions in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857) and the long narrative poems of Tennyson (*Godiva*, 1842) and Leigh Hunt (1850), all of which idolise the figure of Godiva as good and virtuous. Early feminists also drew on the Godiva legend and, as Donoghue observes, from the middle of the nineteenth century, Godiva's exhibitionism came to be seen as a an example of how 'the woman's body, even as it is eroticized by patriarchal authority, becomes a means to challenge that authority and change society' (Daniel Donoghue 2006: 94). For many Victorian women writers, the

legend of Godiva allowed them to place themselves in the arena of public opinion despite conditions imposed by the patriarchal society that required middle-class women to exhibit modesty and virtuousness rather than their actual bodies.

The timing of this appropriation of the Godiva legend can be seen as an example of the incitement to speak about sexuality in the Victorian era that Michel Foucault refers to (1978). According to Foucault, this was stimulated by this era's desire to regulate, classify and control sexual subjects. Foucault's work in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978) identifies how different discourses came to produce and frame what was known as 'sexuality'. These discourses also served to concentrate compelling transfers of power, influencing the social order. Of course, as Foucault points out, where there is power there is resistance, and it is these points of resistance that many of the chapters in this book seek to explore. Sexuality, for Foucault, becomes a 'dense transfer point for the relations of power' (Michel Foucault 1978: 103), where power is seen as a network of forces rather than being confined to the individual. In Niall Richardson's discussion of this:

> These forces are not simply random but occur in specific historical contexts in which certain groups of people or factions do have control or dominance. Foucault argued that modern power does not function through repressing sexual desire but instead by classifying, marginalising and morally ranking these various sexualities. (Niall Richardson 2009: 19)

Thus any discussion of sexuality and gendered performance must be viewed with an eye to the power structures at play. The essays in this book point to the power structures behind the various exhibitionist performances, where disapproving views of various performances need to be read in conjunction with the context of their production and the motivation behind this. Foucault's analysis highlights the multiple locations of power:

> Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere. And 'power', insofar as it is

> permanent, repetitious, inert, and self-reproducing, is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities, the concatenation that rests on each of them and seeks in turn to arrest their movement. One needs to be nominalistic, no doubt: power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (Michel Foucault 1978: 93)

Foucault's powerful influence on gender theorists is marked in the shift away from centralised blocks of power, such as the state and law, towards more dispersed sites of power which are conceptualised as flows and specific convergences and consolidations of talk, discourse and attentions (Angela McRobbie 2009: 13). With specific reference to sexuality, Foucault also points to the various ways in which these power-wielding discourses could be transferred, identifying the:

> . . . wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing and redistributing what is said about it; around sex a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse. (Michel Foucault 1978: 34)

The mid-twentieth century starting point for the chapters in this collection allows for an exploration of these powerful discourses relating to sexuality and gender, many of them highlighting the various devices that appeared at this time as a means for dispersal. Beginning with the appropriation of female exhibitionism by Hollywood in the mid-twentieth century, we seek to show how the latter part of the twentieth century brought about a reappropriation of gendered performances, then how exhibitionism can be performed in a postfeminist era. As contemporary feminists such as Imelda Whelehan and Angela McRobbie have argued, the postfeminist era is exemplified by the notion of 'choice', but this is curtailed by an impetus to revert to certain modes of traditional femininity. Laura Mulvey's best-known

work, 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema' (1975) sets out her argument that classical Hollywood cinema puts the viewer in the position of a male spectator, with the women on screen there 'to be looked at' as the object of their desire. This 'male gaze', according to Mulvey, operates in two distinct modes. These are the 'voyeuristic', in which the women are there to be viewed as 'whores', and the 'fetishistic' in which the women are to be viewed as 'madonnas'. As Martin Shingler (this volume) demonstrates, this 'to-be-looked-at-ness' became the trademark of many female stars of the 1940s and 1950s. The male gaze, as we will see in various chapters in this volume, came to be appropriated in the latter part of the twentieth century, particularly in the postfeminist era, where this was played with a knowing glance by women. However, as chapters by Rina Kim, Claire Nally, Angela Smith and Linda McLoughlin (this volume) show, this is problematic on a number of levels, particularly in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century where developments in feminism (discussed below) saw the apparent appropriation of the male gaze by women.

As many of the chapters in this collection show, visual exhibitionism is often closely aligned with the language used to describe it. What is deemed acceptable for public performance is something that has become enshrined in law in many countries. Early fears of moral decline led to the 1737 Licensing Act in Britain which made it a legal requirement for every play performed in the City of Westminster to be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office, effectively meaning every play was censored for profanity, blasphemy and other 'morally objectionable' aspects of content. This was not abolished until the 1968 Theatre Act came into law. Although no such formal practices were in operation in the United States, censorship could operate at other levels. For example, Edward Albee's best-known play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, was selected for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1963 but the award was withheld by the trustees of the board (at Columbia University) as they objected to what they saw as the use of profanity and sexual themes. (This accounts for the fact that there was no Pulitzer Prize for Drama in that year.) The opening scene of this play references the film *Beyond the Forest*, a film which, as Shingler (this volume) explains, was controversial for its star's bodily exhibitionism; her 'naked ugliness'.

These changes in attitudes in the world of the arts in the 1960s can be linked to wider issues in Western society. Closely aligned with the civil rights movement in the USA in the 1960s, second wave feminism emerged as a political force on both sides of the Atlantic. There is a huge amount of scholarly work that offers a history of this reaching across many disciplines, particularly sociology and linguistics. For example, Sara Mills (1995) describes how the re-domestication of American society in the decade following the Second World War had sought to re-align men and women into traditional gendered roles. The cult of the 'perfect housewife' of the 1950s is one that has been emulated through costume (see Nally, this volume) and behaviour (Smith, this volume). At the time, though, this led to consciousness-raising groups being formed in the 1960s when women began to question then reject the entrenched traditional housewife roles. Elsewhere, this unprecedented social revolution brought into the spotlight social roles in areas such as politics, religion, war, as well as gender. This led to huge changes in society for women, who in the 1970s saw laws introduced to remove discrimination in the workplace, in wages, and in employment rights. The so-called 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s sought to establish a more egalitarian society that rejected traditional models of male-female relationships, and also the slower changes in society that led to greater equality in respect of same-sex relationships.

Second wave feminists also drew attention to the need to avoid mapping gender onto sex, questioning the simplistic allocation of all behaviour presented by men and boys as being 'masculine' and all behaviour by women and girls as 'feminine'. Throughout our lives, we are conditioned, cajoled and prompted to behave in ways that are meant to be acceptable in terms of our gender, and thus our behaviour is aligned with our ascribed sex. Drawing on Ann Oakley (1972), Mary Talbot (2010) cautions us that this mapping of gender onto sex stems from the assumption that 'socially determined differences between women and men are natural and inevitable' (2010: 9). This 'biological determinism' leads to justifications for traditional models of male power and privilege and female nurturing and submissiveness. Many of the essays in this collection directly challenge these long-established deterministic roles, particularly in regard to sexuality.

Following Judith Butler (1990), we will see how gender can be socially constructed, that gender is something we *do* rather than something we *are*. Many writers at this time sought to challenge the literary canon, and as Rina Kim, Anna Watz and Andrew Webb (this volume) show, writers such as Sarah Kane, Angela Carter and Allen Ginsberg can be seen at the vanguard of such challenges.

If the campaigners of second wave feminism strove to achieve equality in terms of employment and pay, then it was left to their daughters to assess what was left. From the 1980s on, feminists started looking back at the achievements of the second wavers and found something lacking. Rachael Moseley and Jacinda Read (2002) have suggested that the achievements of second wave feminists are now largely taken for granted and there was no longer the political motivation to achieve equality through abandoning femininity and being 'one of the boys'. This was a group of young women:

> for whom feminism exists at the level of popular common sense rather than at the level of theoretical abstraction. This is a generation who have found that despite the best effort of feminists, you cannot just wish femininity away, relegate it to the dustbin of history as the bad 'other' of feminism. This is a generation for whom 'having it all' means not giving things up but struggling to reconcile our feminist desires with our feminine desires. (Rachael Moseley and Jacinda Read 2002: 238)

This legitimated rediscovery of femininity is aligned with a confidence gained through the achievements of second wave feminism's equality campaigns. As several chapters in this book show, an assertive female sexuality leads to the making public of previously gendered performances. The 'meanings of choice and individual freedom', Robert Goldman et al. suggest, 'become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their liberated interests' (1991: 338). This may be in the hyper femininity of the burlesque performers, as Nally explores, or in the appropriation of traditionally male forms of sexual assertiveness in the guise of the ladette (see Smith, this volume).

As many feminists claim, patriarchy has not 'gone away'. The reopening of London's Playboy Club in 2011 clearly corroborates the repackaging of stereotyped femininity for the consumption of men. The club recruited women aged between 19–40 (including one aspirational academic called Sarah), with the trademark bunny costume for croupiers still very much at the forefront. Whilst the club maintained '[w]e are not a gentlemen's club, we welcome male and female members', the reopening of the Playboy Club does signify a retrogressive cultural shift in our ideas of femininity (Debabani Majumdar 2011). The appeal of 'glamour' and 'vintage' which the new bunnies identify as a motivating factor suggests a move towards a bygone age of strictly gendered values (see Nally, this volume), and indeed two women's rights groups, UK Feminista and Object, have launched a campaign dubbed 'Eff Off Hef' against the club's opening (Debabani Majumdar 2011). They claim: 'The Playboy Club degrades women as fluffy animals who are marketed as sexual playthings for men' (Debabani Majumdar 2011). This sexualisation of women in the public sphere has been charted by several recent commentators, including Imelda Whelehan (2000) and Natasha Walter (2010). They go so far as to suggest that the 'liberated interests' of women in the twenty first century, leading to powerfully sexualised behaviour amongst other things, is actually part of a patriarchal scheme to provide for the male gaze. Nally and McLoughlin (this volume) interrogate this claim, whilst elsewhere we can see a resurgence of protests about the sexualised images of women in the public sphere. The second wave feminist movement undoubtedly achieved success in limiting the scope of advertisers to use sexualised images of women (see Michèle Barrett 1982), and we mentioned earlier the infamous Yves Saint Laurent Opium advertisements that provoked formal complaint, however a more grass-roots objection to perceived sexist images remains. In the early part of the twenty first century, a chocolate manufacturer's campaign in both Britain and Australia showed a naked woman sprawling across a piece of chocolate, apparently saying 'I'm in Chocolate Truffle Heaven'. Across the world, feminist guerrilla graffiti appeared over this poster, to the effect of adding a further quotation for the naked lady: 'I'm in far too little clothing'. The product name was

Figure 1. An example of feminist guerrilla graffiti on an Australian billboard.

also changed to 'Sexism Heaven' in many posters (see Figure 1). This appropriation of public space images of women was something primarily associated with second wave feminism, as is the witty nature of the graffiti.

Whilst feminists continue to highlight examples of sexualised exhibitionism in the public sphere, the law has also grappled with the nature of public exposure. In Britain, the Criminal Law Act does not limit its definition of indecency to sexual indecency. Instead, it more vaguely defines it as to include anything 'an ordinary decent man or woman would find to be shocking and revolting' (see the Law Commission Consultation Paper no. 193, 2010). The notion of 'public' is also widely defined to include 'exhibitions in all places to which the public have access with as of right or gratis or on payment', the 'public' here generally taken to be two or more people. This law is often called upon in cases where local residents object to plans to open lap-dancing clubs in their neighbourhood. It also links very closely with

the complaints television and film producers receive about the content of their broadcasts, where such complaints are couched in terms of 'taste and decency'.

In Britain, issues of 'taste and decency' in the media were taken up in the 1960s by many social campaigners, most famously Mary Whitehouse, who were concerned about a perceived moral decline in the wake of the civil rights movement. In 1965, the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA) was founded by Whitehouse to campaign against broadcast media content that it considered to be harmful and offensive, particularly in terms of profanity and sex (BBC online, 2001). Whitehouse's figurehead role in campaigning for the NVALA gained a powerful political ally in Margaret Thatcher, whose socially conservative government policies were in tune with the NVALA's stance. Constant lobbying from Whitehouse and others in the NVALA led to changes in various broadcasting laws, including the Video Recordings Act (1984) (which was commonly referred to as the 'Video Nasties Act' owing to its regulation and classification of content with particular reference to sex and violence) and the extension to the 1990 Broadcasting Act which led to the establishment of the Broadcasting Standards Commission to oversee 'taste and decency' in British terrestrial media. Elsewhere, Whitehouse was also influential in legislation relating to sex shops, primarily through the 1981 Indecent Displays (Control) Act. The NVALA itself continues, although it changed its name in 2001 to mediawatch-uk shortly after the death of Whitehouse, who had by that time become a figure of fun. By aligning the campaign with the Conservative government of the 1980s and 1990s, Whitehouse herself became seen as a site for resistance of power with many comedians drawing on her moral campaigning for satirical observations. However, it is clear that conservative attitudes towards gendered performances, particularly as we discuss them in *Naked Exhibitionism*, are predominantly geared towards preserving a (mythical?) status quo.

Thus, whilst our contributors engage with differing theoretical and critical positions in a range of cultural texts, the focus on bodily display and the concomitant potential for ideological censure, containment or celebration remains a recurring feature of each article. Martin Shingler,

in his study of the camp classic *Beyond the Forest* (1949), addresses the notion of 'femininity as masquerade', which, in the persona of Bette Davis, was combined with the grotesque body, constituting a rare and radical way of transgressing gender norms. Davis had built her reputation amongst cinemagoers as a beautiful woman playing the 'bad girl' in a number of films. However, in this film, Shingler argues that as an ageing star this was more problematic. Without ever actually exposing her body (which remains clothed throughout the film), attention is consistently focused on it, particularly her breasts, so much so that many film critics in 1949 considered the film to be in bad taste. The keynote of this film (established in a caption at the very start) is 'naked ugliness'.

Rina Kim's chapter explores the psychological process whereby the act of gazing at the naked body in theatre generates a sense of shame and guilt, using psychoanalytic theories of identification, and Lacan's mirror-stage and Kristeva's abjection in particular. Furthermore, by looking at plays by one of the most controversial female playwrights, Sarah Kane, this chapter shows how playwrights use nudity in order to problematise the naked body as an abject 'Other' rather than as an erotic object of gaze by causing the audience to feel shame and disgust.

This chapter leads into Andrew Webb's discussion of the way nakedness contributes to the cultural purchase of Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' and its author through the late 1950s and early 1960s. Webb argues that nakedness in the 'spiritual', 'poetic' and performed senses is here used to make a stand against the McCarthyite political ideology, and the puritan code of heterosexuality within marriage, then governing US society. The chapter then goes on to explore reincarnations of *Howl* in the postfeminist era, especially the 2010 film, *Howl* (directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, and nominated for prizes at the Berlin and Sundance Film Festivals), as well as recordings of Ginsberg performing the poem on social media sites such as *YouTube*. By considering these retellings of the poem through the prism of naked exhibitionism, Webb demonstrates that *Howl* illustrates the shift from performed nakedness as a scandalous expression of political opposition in the 1950s, through to its celebration in the popular culture of our own time.

Anna Watz addresses exhibitionism in Angela Carter's oeuvre: the peep show in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and the freak show in *Nights at the Circus* (1984). These texts critically engage with a number of questions around notions of the exhibited and exhibitionist woman, and through a series of manipulations of the reader's gaze unsettle the dynamics of both exhibitionism and voyeurism. Carter's long-standing appraisal of the Marquis de Sade, as well as the potential for political radicalism in terms of S&M culture, signify for Watz the way in which the novels resist patriarchal coding by revisiting and revising them. She specifically considers the ways in which Carter's fiction performs the exhibition of female bodies and female exhibitionism in order to interrogate the gendered logic of the gaze. She argues that the novels' manipulation of the reader's gaze undermines a reading of the textual exhibitionism as a simplistic division of power between the subject and object of the look.

Claire Nally's chapter considers the neo burlesque as an example of postfeminist culture. Employing the methodologies of recent writers such as Diane Negra (see also Smith, this volume), Nally maintains that burlesque has a potential for activist engagement, through cross-dressing, 'boylesque', and trans-performances, as well as a more problematic and indeed 'public' face, which often reduces the form to an unreconstructed vision of feminine sexual spectacle. Issues of race, curiously replicating the ethnographic stereotypes imposed on Saartjie Baartman, recur in addressing high-profile figures (see Immodesty Blaize's *Burlesque Undressed*, 2010), whilst popular understandings of Dita von Teese, burlesque in makeover shows and in popular music are evaluated to reveal a potentially damaging agenda. Nally also investigates more underground or 'subcultural' materialisations of the form, such as 'boylesque' and correlations with camp, to suggest the multiple ways in which this phenomenon of 'stripping for the middle classes' may be interpreted.

Both Angela Smith and Linda McLoughlin offer critical discourse analysis as a method through which media and especially televisual gestures of exhibitionism can be analysed. Angela Smith's chapter explores the makeover tv programme *Ladette to Lady,* and she argues that exhibitionism in the form of 'ladylike behaviour' is still to be

aspired to, offering a form of female performance we could refer to as 'lady power'. The women in *Ladette to Lady* are encouraged to take up traditionally middle-class feminine domestic roles as they are obliged to make their own clothes, prepare and cook food for others and to attend classes on topics such as elocution and 'sexual etiquette'. The programme is structured to underline the 'exhibiting' of such conventional femininities that seek to constrain these women within traditional roles, and Smith argues that this is done in such a way that the young women who are subject to this 'makeover' are constrained in their own input into the show's production.

Linda McLoughlin's chapter discusses the crucial issues of language as used to mediate bodily imperfections in *How to Look Good Naked,* where participants have extremely low self esteem, predominantly due to their negative perceptions of their body; invariably claiming not to have appeared naked even to their partners. The title is a misnomer as the climax, culminating in the madeover participant's naked photo shoot, is so carefully staged that the audience does not get to see any nudity due to the watershed period in which the programme is aired. Ironically, in an effort to avoid full frontal nudity, the draped poses and carefully angled camera shots are analogous to soft porn. On the surface, *How to Look Good Naked* could offer empowerment for women by advocating that they exercise control over their own bodies, and through its critique of culturally dominant ideals of the feminine body and its condemnation of extreme methods of transformation such as cosmetic surgery. Conversely, McLoughlin's analysis reveals that by careful choice of language and effecting empathy with the audience, Wan secures a powerful position to mould these women, albeit towards a more 'healthy' ideal, nevertheless one which advocates change rather than acceptance of their 'natural' body. The presenter, who is openly gay, minimises any sexual dynamic or tension between himself and the participants; nonetheless, the women, as ever are subjected to the male gaze and consequent approval.

In its totality, the current volume represents a concerted engagement with principles of exhibitionism and the increased sexualisation of society, through an awareness of cultural practice and the gender

dynamics therein, rather than a strictly medicalised discourse which frequently categorises, contains and pathologises such experiences.

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CHAPTER 1

THE NAKED UGLINESS OF *BEYOND THE FOREST* (1949)

Martin Shingler

Introduction

Since its release, *Beyond the Forest* (King Vidor, 1949) has been generally derided as an overblown pot-boiler, widely considered to be of little importance other than for demonstrating the decline of Davis's film career after 1945 and for being a camp classic beloved by gay audiences. It is, however, more interesting than this since it contains one of the most original and radical depictions of the female body of any Hollywood film of the studio era. The keynote of this film is naked ugliness. Although devoid of nudity, the film consistently draws attention to the star's body, particularly her breasts, so much so that many critics in 1949 considered it to be in bad taste and an insult to an actress of Davis's calibre. The suggestion at the time was that Bette Davis was demeaning herself by appearing in this way but, with hindsight, the film can be seen as a demonstration of her courage and originality as a performer and, in particular, her willingness to shock and horrify audiences with an uncompromising portrayal of evil and

ugliness. So shocking was this that the studio inserted a warning at the start of the picture in the form of a written foreword superimposed over the opening images, stating that,

> This is a story of evil. Evil is
> headstrong – is puffed up. For our
> soul's sake, it is salutary for us
> to view it in all its naked ugliness
> once in a while. Thus may we know how
> those who deliver themselves over to
> it, end up like the scorpion, in a mad
> fury stinging themselves to eternal death.

Once the action begins it is revealed that the evil at the heart of this story is female, evil personified in the classic form of the femme fatale.[2] The audience is told that it is in its own interest to look upon this, to gaze upon it in all its naked ugliness to discover how evil women are destined to destroy themselves. Prior to this warning, posters had appeared across the United States announcing the release of the film, declaring that 'Nobody's as good as Bette Davis when she's bad!'

Bette Davis had a reputation for playing bad girls, having done so with great success in *Cabin in the Cotton* (Michael Curtiz, 1932), *Of Human Bondage* (John Cromwell, 1934), *Dangerous* (Alfred E. Green, 1935), *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938), *The Letter* (William Wyler, 1940), *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941) and *In This Our Life* (John Huston, 1942). The claim made by the posters that Davis did 'bad' better than anyone else was supported by her Academy awards for her roles in *Dangerous* and *Jezebel*, and her nominations for *The Letter* and *The Little Foxes*. *Beyond the Forest*, however, was not to be one of her critical successes, with only Max Steiner's music being nominated for an Oscar. Davis's performance was generally derided by the critics as histrionic. Many were appalled by her acting and her appearance. For instance, Otis L. Guernsey Jnr., writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, stated that, 'Miss Davis plays her part to the hilt, and it is perhaps not her fault that the picture has no hilt at all to keep it in limits', adding that, 'There is too much for one actress or one picture

to carry in all this, so much too much that if the fiction didn't expose itself in its own overstatement it would border on bad taste' (Guernsey Jnr. 1949).

'Life in Loyalton is like sitting in a funeral parlour and waiting for the funeral to begin. No, not sitting, like lying in a coffin waiting for them to carry you out.' So says Bette Davis's character Rosa Moline in *Beyond the Forest*. Frustrated by her life as the local doctor's wife in a Wisconsin lumber town, she declares that, 'if I don't get out of here I'll die', adding, 'if I don't get out of here *I hope* I'll die', she pauses, 'and burn'. Like her literary predecessor, Emma Bovary, Rosa yearns for something more exciting than middle-class provincial domesticity and seeks escape via an adulterous affair. Unlike the protagonist of Gustave Flaubert's novel *Madame Bovary* (1857) though, Rosa does not amass huge debts in order to lavishly furnish her home or to buy expensive clothes. Her misdemeanours are much more serious, killing an old man and aborting her unborn child.

In comparison to Emma Bovary, Rosa Moline is much more aggressive and destructive, lacking charm or any other redeeming feature that might lend her some small degree of sympathy. Despite living in the finest house in town, she despises her home, denouncing it as a 'dump'. She treats her maid (Dona Drake) like dirt and is just as dismissive of her husband Lewis, the kindly but dull, ever-patient doctor (Joseph Cotton). In a bid to escape this life, she seduces wealthy businessman Neil Latimer (David Brian) at his twenty-bedroomed hunting lodge in the woods, hoping that he will marry her and take her with him to Chicago. Although fascinated by Rosa, Latimer has no intention of marrying her, at least not at first. By the time he has changed his mind, Rosa has become pregnant with her husband's child. Everything she has dreamed of is within her grasp, if only her lover remains ignorant of her pregnancy. Thus, when the old gamekeeper Moose (Minor Watson) threatens to acquaint Latimer with the true facts, Rosa shoots him, making it look like a tragic hunting accident. She then terminates her pregnancy by throwing herself down a mountain-side, inducing a miscarriage that results in a fatal attack of peritonitis. Rosa's death is not brought about (like Emma Bovary's) by taking poison but it is self induced and ensures

that both her crimes and her vanity are ultimately punished by an ugly death. Despite a raging fever, Rosa adamantly refuses any medication from her husband, accusing him of trying to poison her. In one last desperate bid for freedom, she struggles into her clothes and staggers towards the railway station, still determined to become Mrs Neil K. Latimer. Finally, as the train pulls away, Rosa collapses, falling dead into the dirt.

In August 1949, MGM's lavish production of *Madame Bovary* (Vincente Minnelli) premiered in New York City, starring Jennifer Jones, with James Mason, Van Heflin, Louis Jourdan and Gladys Cooper in the cast. Two months later, *Beyond the Forest* was released as a star vehicle for Bette Davis, this being one of a long series of 'Bette Davis films' to be produced at Warner Bros during the 1930s and 1940s. This, however, was to be the last for some time as, during the film's production, the studio abruptly terminated her contract, thereby ending its eighteen-year association with the actress having made her one of Hollywood's greatest stars and most critically acclaimed screen performers.[1] The film was released in New York in October 1949 to unfavourable reviews and poor box-office returns, failing to match the critical and commercial success of earlier Bette Davis films, such as *Dark Victory* (Edmund Goulding, 1939), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939), *All This and Heaven Too* (Anatole Litvak, 1940), *The Great Lie* (Edmund Goulding, 1941), *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), *Watch on the Rhine* (Herman Shumlin, 1943), *Mr Skeffington* (Vincent Sherman, 1944) and *The Corn is Green* (Irving Rapper, 1945).

This film is nowadays regarded as one of the camp classics of Hollywood cinema.[3] It is deemed so partly for its star's performance, often recreated by female impersonators, and for her character's acid wit, most notably when she delivers the line 'What a dump!' while gazing around contemptuously at her provincial home.[4] It is also the 'too muchness' of the film that renders it camp. For Susan Sontag, 'the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration' (Sontag 2001: 275). Sontag used Bette Davis in her essay on camp, originally published in 1964, to illustrate the concept, describing her as one of the 'great stylists of temperament and

mannerism' (Susan Sontag 2001: 279). 'Camp is a vision of the world in terms of style,' she wrote, 'but a particular kind of style,' adding that, '[i]t is the love of the exaggerated, the "off," of things-being-what-they-are not' (Susan Sontag 2001: 279). Thus, Rosa Moline is camp because of an obvious discrepancy between actor and role, producing the vivid impression of things being 'off'. At forty-one years of age, Davis plays a small town siren, a woman so attractive that she provokes wolf-whistles as she walks down the local high street. However, Davis's rather puffy face, tightly fitting clothes and long black hair (clearly a wig) make this seem unlikely, rendering her character a caricature and enhancing the sense of this being a bad film. Nevertheless, this has ensured its cult status among lovers of camp and bad taste cinema.[5]

For cult audiences, *Beyond the Forest* is proof that nobody's as good as Bette Davis when she's bad, in the sense of being 'off', miscast or appearing in a bad movie. However, alongside the camp and bad taste elements of this film is a radical deconstruction of femininity, which is all the more remarkable given that it was produced at a time when countries such as Britain and America were attempting to reconstitute the conservative gender ideologies temporarily suspended during the years of the Second World War, when millions of women had taken on jobs previously done by men. At a time when Hollywood cinema was part of a more general project to persuade women to surrender such jobs in favour of maternity and housewifery, *Beyond the Forest* posed a rare challenge to orthodox notions of gender. This comes most clearly to light when the concepts of masquerade, the grotesque and the abject are deployed in relation to this film in order to understand how Davis's performance and her physical form exhibit potentially threatening aspects of femininity. By using these concepts, I shall demonstrate how this film exposed what was otherwise generally excluded from most Hollywood films of the classical era (i.e., 1920–1960), thereby resulting in a negative response from film critics and audiences during this period. I shall, however, also reveal how attitudes towards this once despised film have changed to the extent that it has received praise and admiration from a new generation of audiences, critics and film historians in more recent times.

Bette's Bad Body

Bette Davis's body is foregrounded from the start of *Beyond the Forest*, even before the actress appears on screen. Following the written passage quoted earlier, a male voiceover introduces the audience to the town of Loyalton. The narrator then introduces Rosa Moline. Before we see her, we are told that, 'each day Rosa used to walk down to the station, moving easily, freely, every man's admiring eye upon her, Rosa Moline!' In this way, Rosa is introduced not just as an object to be looked at by men but also as a fluid body. The terms used to describe her connote confidence, even wantonness, but they also summon up Elizabeth Grosz's observation that in the West, 'the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self containment' (Elizabeth Grosz 1994: 203). The fluidity of Rosa's body certainly proves to be one of the film's most significant and disturbing aspects, particularly when peritonitis destroys her physical appearance, bringing about her death in the film's final moments. Here she seems to be melting, bathed in sweat and loose-limbed, rolling around in a delirious state. This volatile body not only flows and melts but also erupts, resisting all attempts to contain it until at last it dies. As a result, it demands constant attention. Thus, from beginning to end, images of this excessive body dominate the film and its mise-en-scène. Rosa's continual gazing at herself, along with Davis's emphatic posturing, consistently alert the audience to it. This is a body, moreover, that is both vividly corporeal and inseparable from its environment.

Throughout the film, Rosa's body and her environment are inextricably linked, especially within the cluttered confines of her house, beyond which can be seen the belching chimneys of the nearby factory while, on the soundtrack, there can be heard the incessant and insistent siren screaming out, four times a day.[6] At one point she stands out on the porch, occupying the right hand side of the screen in a medium-close shot, a telegraph pole at the centre of shot (and in the middle-ground) with cables that appear to link Rosa in the foreground

right with (in the background, on the left), a large furnace, consisting of a broad single tower topped by a crown of flames. This huge fiery tower (it requires little imagination to see this as being essentially phallic) competes for attention with Davis's prominent breasts that point towards it, spot-lit from above, highlighting her cleavage in a low cut top. The symbolism of this image is stark, even crude: namely, phallus plus breasts (with the + sign being supplied by the shape of the telegraph pole). This image accompanies Davis's dramatic line that if she doesn't get out of there she'll die and if she doesn't get out of there she hopes she'll die. After delivering this line, the actress moves out of the shot in order to sit down heavily upon a wicker sofa before completing the line by stating 'and burn', with the fiery phallus now over her left shoulder on the right side of the frame. This is just one of many instances in the film where Davis's body interacts directly with her environment but it is one of the more remarkable.

In this instance, it would appear that a connection is forged between the factory furnace that dominates the landscape of the town and Rosa's body (also established as a dominant feature of the town). At one level, it poses a question: namely, is the furnace (i.e., the fiery phallus) the source of Rosa's frustration or is her smouldering desire and distress fanning the flames of the furnace? Either way, there is a correlation between the two, constituting a vital link between the two most outstanding elements of the film's mise-en-scène, as well as between a female body and a powerful symbol of masculinity. *Beyond the Forest*'s narrative, of course, is more concerned with femininity than masculinity. In general, femininity is not only an (unobtainable) ideal but one that involves a denial of corporeality, operating as a mask to disguise the real female body, ordinarily constituted by such things as soft, high-pitched voices, false eyelashes, plucked eyebrows, styled hair, corseted waists, high-heeled shoes, etc. Consequently, this feminine ideal stands in direct opposition to the qualities, effects, needs and operations of the female body. For instance, from the 1940s to the present day, advertisements in women's journals and film magazines have continually stressed that feminine skin should be more like porcelain than flesh, smooth and flawless rather than porous, wrinkled, sweaty, tactile and alive. It is noteworthy that, despite her high heels, tightly fitting clothes, long

hair, long eyelashes and unnaturally high-pitched voice, Bette Davis fails spectacularly to achieve this ideal in her 1949 film.

In 1929, twenty years earlier, the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere published an article under the title of 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', with the intention of demonstrating that 'women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and retribution feared by men' (Joan Riviere 1986: 35).[7] Here, Riviere argued that womanliness, in the form of flirtatious and sexually provocative behaviour accompanied by the wearing of excessively feminine costumes and make-up, could 'be assumed and worn as a mask to avert the reprisals expected if she were found to possess it [i.e., masculinity]' (Joan Riviere 1986: 38). Bette Davis, like many professional and intelligent women, used femininity as masquerade at various times during her career, performing such instances repeatedly in her films of the late 1930s and 1940s.[8] Indeed, by the time she made *Beyond the Forest* she was well versed in this practice, although never before had she presented such an extreme version (see Nally for further discussion of camp as cultural practice).

Throughout the film Davis is seen to adopt aspects of the feminine masquerade, the high-pitched voice, the excessive make-up, the revealing costumes and the wig. The problem is that something else continually seeps through. She is certainly self-constructed, as femininity demands, but she is simultaneously self-*de*-constructing. As such, she wears her mask askew. Indeed, her body seems to have out-grown the mask and, consequently, it no longer fits. Thus, in 1973, writing about *Beyond the Forest*, feminist film historian Molly Haskell declared, 'here is Davis, not beautiful, not sexy, not even young, convincing us that she is all these things – by the vividness of her own self-image, by the vision of herself she projects so fiercely that we have no choice but to accept it' (Haskell 1987: 221). But do we accept it? Does Davis convince her audience that she is beautiful, sexy and young or is she playing a more complex and ambiguous game? For in *Beyond the Forest* Bette Davis presents her character's femininity not just as a masquerade but as a *grotesque* masquerade.

Mikhail Bakhtin, in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1965), defined the grotesque in terms of exaggeration, hyperbolism and excess (the

very qualities of *Beyond the Forest*) and described the grotesque body in terms of the 'gaping mouth, the protruding eyes, sweat, trembling, suffocation, the swollen face' (Mikhail Bakhtin 1984: 308). His description aptly describes Bette Davis as Rosa Moline with her distinctive bulging eyes and her mouth heavily smeared with lipstick. It certainly captures her appearance in the final scenes of the film when she is seen dying of peritonitis, her face swollen and sweating, her body swaying and feverish, out of control. Indeed, in several ways Davis's appearance here epitomizes Bakhtin's conception of the grotesque body, one that 'is not a closed, completed unit', but rather one that 'is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' (Mikhail Bakhtin 1984: 26). The fluidity of Rosa's body and the connection made throughout the film between her body and her environment are symptomatic of the grotesque body more generally, where '[t]he stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world' (Mikhail Bakhtin 1984: 26). Thus, for Bakhtin, the grotesque body is one of apertures and convexities: mouth, nose, genitals, breasts, phallus and potbelly. He also writes that '[t]he body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation' (Mikhail Bakhtin 1984: 26). Once more, these words correspond closely to the images of Rosa Moline during her death scene, drinking pints of iced water directly from a jug in a bid to quench an insatiable thirst. Refusing to die quietly or gracefully, Rosa's death is transformed into a macabre pantomime, a sorry spectacle that makes for a miserable but compelling ending to an extraordinary film.

Having violently refused her husband's attempt to administer life-saving medication, Rosa forces herself from her death bed and, in a state of fever and delirium, she squeezes herself into a tightly fitting frock and dons her high-heeled shoes, brutally rejecting the assistance of her maid. In between ordering Jenny about and insulting her, slurring her words as though drunk, she hums a tuneless rendition of the song 'Chicago', which is also playing in a distorted form on the soundtrack. Having made an ineffectual attempt to tame her wild

long hair, Rosa stands unsteadily before her bedroom mirror applying mascara and lipstick with unseeing eyes, creating a garish image, all eyes (huge, rolling and vacant) and mouth (incessantly licking her heavily smeared lips to take the dryness away) before tottering down the stairs in a series of lunges and halts, propping herself up against the wall before advancing. In this way she makes it to the door and, opening the porch screen, confronts the factory furnace (i.e., the fiery phallus) one last time, seen in the distance still belching flames into the sky. As the siren blows, Rosa collapses to the ground but soon pulls herself up and advances once more, again lunging forward, struggling to maintain her balance, her head lolling about precariously, her arms dangling helplessly at her sides. Thus, Rosa staggers on, propelling her semi-lifeless body along the road, life visibly draining out of her with every step. The road stretches out before her, soon revealing a train standing at the station with two tall columns of steam rising into the air. As a whistle blows, steam erupts from the belly of the engine, initiating a series of shots of the steaming train intercut with close-ups of Rosa's sweating face, her head swinging back, her eyes rolling as she tries to home in on her destination. Finally, a high-angled establishing shot reveals her proximity to the train but as she approaches, it moves off to the left, its bell ringing as it goes. Rosa is then lost from sight while the carriages flit across the screen until a low angled shot reveals her lying in the dirt beside the tracks, her left cheek pressed to the ground, her right eye wide and starring but lifeless, the unmoving fingers of her right hand lying beside her head. A car pulls up behind her, its headlights illuminating the body, slumped inelegantly like a sack of rubbish. Dr Moline runs over to his wife, lifting her, turning her around. As he does so, her left arm drops, limply. The doctor holds her face between his hands, feeling at the throat for a pulse and then, having discovered none, closes her eyes. Standing above her, he gazes down at the corpse, obscuring her with his shadow as the camera rises (on a crane), pulling away to a safe and respectful distance to look down upon the man with a dead body at his feet. A grotesque and unseemly spectacle has reached its inevitable conclusion and an uncontrollable body has at last come to a dramatic standstill.

Mary Russo, in her book *The Female Grotesque* (1994), distinguishes between two kinds of grotesque: the carnivalesque and the uncanny, the former associated with the work of Bakhtin and the latter with Wolfgang Kayser's study *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* (1963); the former linked mainly to comedy and the latter mainly to horror. Given that *Beyond the Forest* is neither a comedy nor a horror film, applying such terms may seem irrelevant or, at best, tangential. Nevertheless, as Russo points out, '[e]ach of these categories relies heavily on the trope of the body' (Mary Russo 1994: 8). The over-determination of Davis's body in *Beyond the Forest* suggests that the grotesque is a concept central to understanding this film. Russo, moreover, recognises the associations of the female body with 'degradation, filth, death, and rebirth', stating that, 'The images of the grotesque body are precisely those which are abjected from the bodily canons of classical aesthetics' (Mary Russo 1994: 8). When Russo states that '[t]he classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek', she could be describing the bodies of Hollywood's legendary leading ladies of the studio era: for instance, Greta Garbo, Katharine Hepburn or Joan Crawford (Mary Russo 1994: 8). In contrast, Bette Davis's body in *Beyond the Forest* is better understood in relation to Russo's statement that '[t]he grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing' (Mary Russo 1994: 8).

In light of these comments, *Beyond the Forest* stands out as atypical of classical Hollywood cinema in terms of its representation of the female body, with Davis's body set apart as the very antithesis of the norm for this mode of cinema, the dominant mode of cinema from the 1920s to the early 1960s. However, although the film may appear to be rather anomalous in this respect, we should not lose sight of the fact that it conforms closely to a rich heritage of literary and cultural texts from across the Western world. For, as Elizabeth Grosz has noted in her book *Volatile Bodies* (1994), '[t]he metaphorics of uncontrollability, the ambivalence between desperate, fatal attraction and strong revulsion, the deep-seated fear of absorption, the association of femininity with contagion and disorder, the undecidability of the limits of the female body (particularly, but not only, with the onset of puberty and in the case of pregnancy), its powers of cynical seduction and allure are all

common themes in literary and cultural representations of women' (Elizabeth Grosz 1994: 203). Such themes certainly appear to be key elements of Bette Davis's 1949 movie, just as her fate is that of the vast majority of literary and cultural representations of dangerous women (aka femmes fatales): namely, an ugly death.

In the end, Rosa is (as the opening caption informs us) a scorpion stung by its own tail. As this symbolism suggests, Rosa is a phallic woman, an identity confirmed by her expert handling of a rifle and a pool cue. 'I'm the shot of the family!' she declares at one point. In spite of her all too apparent feminine attributes, Rosa is revealed to be a masculine woman in terms of her actions and her attitudes, being not only a crack shot but also sexually desiring, aggressive and ambitious. As such, she is masculine *and* feminine. Moreover, as a phallic woman, Rosa aspires to the auto-eroticism of the hermaphrodite and she is certainly depicted in the film as loving herself, frequently shown to be intensely narcissistic. Repeatedly she is seen gazing at herself in mirrors, plucking her eyebrows, filing her nails, examining the ends of her long hair. In one scene, she secretly dons a fur coat belonging to another woman and, gazing at herself in the mirror, she luxuriates in the feeling of the fur against her body, stroking it longingly, as Max Steiner's music builds to an emotional climax worthy of any dramatic love scene.

This point of the film is remarkable in part because it stands out in terms of its revelation of a softer and more sensual side to Rosa's character. From the moment it begins, the romantic strains of the tune 'Chicago' are heard in the background, building and intensifying as Davis runs her hand over the fur coat draped across the back of a sofa. Stroking it gently, she handles it with reverence and delicacy, holding it to her cheek, breathing it in and then gently blowing upon it, playfully, captivated. Standing up before the fireplace, she lifts the heavy coat and very slowly slides her right arm into its sleeve, closing her eyes as she does so, smiling contentedly to herself as though consumed by desire. She closes the coat around her body, wrapping herself up in it, holding it tightly, her hands resting just below her breasts. She bats her long eyelashes provocatively before turning her head to look over her left shoulder, facing away from the camera. Then, after lifting her

long hair over the collar of the coat, she steps onto a coffee table behind her so that from this elevated position she can see herself more clearly in the mirror over the mantelpiece. Thus raised above the ground, she briefly opens the coat again and lets its slide off her shoulders, revealing her body in a tightly fitting low cut white dress that hugs the contours of her ample bosom, exposing a considerable amount of cleavage.

Closing the coat once more, she folds it across her body, her left hand beneath the coat, her right hand upon it, positioned directly over her heart. The music reaches a climax at this point, after which Davis turns away from her reflection, gazing off screen to the right. She pauses, holding her majestic and satisfied look for an instant before the smile drops from her lips and she steps down from the table, a heaviness returning to her gestures, a serious look upon her face, heralding the beginnings of a scowl. She holds the coat away from her chest, holding it a little more tightly than before, moving a little more roughly, while detaching herself from the garment with the merest intimation of repulsion. Having removed the coat, she throws it down onto the sofa, pauses and then sits down beside it, facing the camera in order to light a cigarette with a match and puff out a stream of smoke with the cigarette still between her lips. The music now is insistent, urgent and rather menacing. Removing the cigarette from her mouth with a rapid and forceful gesture, Davis turns her back on the camera once more and then reclines upon the couch, placing her right hand upon the coat, holding it down, not caressing but possessing it, while she continues to smoke. She seems satisfied at last but a little disgusted, even a little deflated as the image fades dissolves into the next scene.

This intensely auto-erotic moment is one of the high points of the film, creating an unusual and intimate spectacle, in which Rosa's self-love climaxes. No other character can offer Rosa this degree of satisfaction or stimulate such desire. Put simply, no one else can love Rosa as much as she loves herself, certainly not the critics who reviewed the film in 1949. Bosley Crowther, the esteemed critic of the *New York Times*, described her as a 'laughable caricature', stating that her 'mop of black hair, excessive make-up and alarmingly low-cut gowns assist in the general reduction of the star to the realms of the absurd',

suggesting that the actress's appearance and performance marked a decline in her abilities as a serious actor once capable of nuanced and naturalistic characterisation (Bosley Crowther 1949). He went on to state that:

> Of all the no-good women that Bette Davis has portrayed in her numerous elaborate demonstrations of the *deadliness* of the female sex, she has never done any more unpleasant nor more *grotesque* than the creature she plays in Warners' *Beyond the Forest*.
>
> . . . She's a callous and calculated *fiend* whose flamboyant self-ishness and cruelties are on a virtually extra-human plane. As a matter of fact, she is so *monstrous* – so *ghoulishly* picturesque – that her representation often slips into laughable caricature. [Emphasis mine] (Bosley Crowther 1949)

Crowther's review captures the truly grotesque nature of Davis's masquerade in all its gruesome detail. Despite his assertion that the ultimate effect of this was 'laughable caricature', few members of the audience in 1949 appeared to find it funny, although it may well have provoked nervous laughter. Indeed, the terms of his description (i.e., monstrous, fiend, ghoulish) indicate something of the horror with which this was originally received. However, while the film reviewers at the end of the 1940s greeted Davis's Rosa Moline with little short of fear and loathing, during the 1990s feminist film historians responded more positively. For instance, in 1993 Jeanine Basinger described her as an 'American hero', stating that:

> Perhaps the oddest female hero in the history of movies is a character who probably no one should define as a hero, but one who, nevertheless, fits the bill. She is Rosa Moline, the grotesque creature played by Bette Davis in the much maligned *Beyond the Forest* (1949). (Jeanine Basinger 1993: 50)

Basinger claims that, for all her crimes and misdemeanours, Rosa's behaviour would have met with some sympathy from the women in the audience, surmising that many of them may have shared her

frustration with being just a housewife, identifying with her refusal to be a nothing and a nobody. Basinger certainly admires her determination to fight to the end, 'gallant but misguided, unwilling to accept repression or restriction' (Jeanine Basinger 1993: 54). Thus, if Rosa Moline is a hero, she is a feminist one.

In 1999, lesbian film historian Patricia White, in her book *Uninvited*, used *Beyond the Forest* to demonstrate how studio era films for women made visible the differences between women in terms of race and class through, in this case, the doubling of Rosa and her maid, played by Dona Drake. White notes how 'Davis bears an uncanny resemblance to her hostile Latina maid', with them both sporting a similar hairstyle, performing a similar repertoire of sullen and sluggish gestures, culminating in Rosa donning her servant's clothes to impersonate her in order to leave town without attracting attention (Patricia White 1999: 169).[9] White describes this act as a 'masquerade', noting the radical potential of a middle-class white woman posing as a younger, darker, working-class woman in order to attain her ambition of escaping her fate as a provincial housewife. To some extent then, *Beyond the Forest* has been recovered for film history by feminist and lesbian scholarship. However, I would suggest that this film's subversive potential comes to light even more fully when considered in relation to postfeminist and queer theories of the body and, most notably, in relation to Judith Butler's ideas set out in her book *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

Rosa's Nobody

One of the more curious features of *Beyond the Forest* is the way that Rosa Moline is both detached and inseparable from the world she finds so abject. Her home in Loyalton is one she cannot stand even though it constantly reflects her own image back at her, even though she exists at its very epicentre and is the source of this abject domain. Rosa's utterance 'What a dump!' does more than simply define her domestic world, it creates it. Indeed, out of every disparaging and condemnatory remark, including every exasperated and disgusted shrug and sigh, her abjection materialises, gaining material existence, both around her and within her. Thus, Rosa's attempt to love herself has produced a

world that consists largely of all the repudiated elements of herself that she cannot love. However much she insists upon her difference and status as 'Rosa Moline', she remains caught in a circuit of self-loving and self-loathing to the extent that she is all she loves but surrounded by all she hates, exacerbating her need for escape. Moreover, all she has rejected (from herself) lies around her, threatening to contaminate her porous, fluid body, which is no doubt why Rosa must persistently disavow her connections to this world, insisting that she is someone special, a somebody. This requires constant reiteration, Rosa's sense of self brought forth through utterance, 'I *am* Rosa Moline', indeed through performativity.

Demarcating Rosa Moline as a somebody entails excluding Rosa Moline as a nobody: hence the manifestation of the sullen and sluggish housemaid, Jenny, a darker as well as younger version of Davis's character, uncannily similar to her mistress. In this way Rosa's identity is split between Bette Davis, the star of the film, and Dona Drake, the lesser-known supporting actress (i.e., a nobody).[10] The supporting actress may to some extent be over-shadowed by the star, by her centrality and the vividness of her performance, but it is precisely as a lurking, shadowy figure in the background that she is a significant presence. The supporting actress takes her cue from the star, imitating her, but the star refuses to be outdone by her inferior in this way, out-performing her as the better Bette Davis impersonator, ironically rendering the darker version a pale imitation, while making her own performance a form of drag (see Nally, this volume).

It is in her book *Bodies That Matter* that Judith Butler advances her notion of 'ambivalent drag'. For Butler, drag is a vital concept, one that lies at the heart of the heterosexual project. She suggests that heterosexuality is 'beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome', being 'constantly haunted by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself', that domain of sexual possibility being homosexuality (Judith Butler 1993: 125). While, for Butler, heterosexual identity is founded on the repudiation of homosexuality, drag promises to expose the inability of heterosexual regimes to fully achieve or maintain their own ideals, to ever fully eradicate the repudiated alternatives. Moreover, she

states that, '[a]s an allegory that works through the hyperbolic, drag brings into relief what is, after all, determined only in relation to the hyperbolic: the understated, taken-for-granted quality of heterosexual performativity' (Judith Butler 1993: 237). The performative nature of heterosexual identity (otherwise considered in terms of stability, normality and the natural) is thereby exposed.

Bette Davis's hyperbolic performance in *Beyond the Forest* might well be seen to deconstruct norms of acting and appearance but also, more fundamentally, those of hetero-normative ideals of subjectivity, rendering these no more than a series of 'acts' that can be impersonated. Davis's attempt to distinguish herself from fellow actress Dona Drake certainly transforms each statement she makes (e.g., 'I *am* Rosa Moline!') into overstatement. The hollow ring of these statements, it might be claimed, has the potential to expose an empty space in which a non-subject (an abject nobody) can take root, constituting the abject domain *within* the subject that Butler has described as fundamentally part of heterosexual subjectivity.[11] It is, therefore, as an allegory of heterosexuality's inability to detach itself from homosexuality that the subversive potential of *Beyond the Forest* is fully realised for queer audiences.

For queer theorists informed by Butler's work, *Beyond the Forest* can be seen as a palpable manifestation of (subversive) drag. From this vantage point, Bette Davis's creation of Rosa Moline can be seen as a series of performative acts comprised of hyperbolic gestures and utterances embodying ambivalence and operating in opposition to prevalent ideals of hetero-normative femininity. More specifically, through the lens of queer theory it can be seen that Rosa's attempts to create and sustain her sense of self by repeatedly claiming to be somebody summons forth an abject self, who is nothing less than the repository of all that she hates (about herself) and is, therefore, the very repudiation upon which her identity is founded. Seen in this way, Dona Drake's character is a waste product of Rosa's somebody, making her a true nobody. While laying bare the abject horror of this scenario, queer theory reveals the complexity and originality of this film's representation of the femme fatale and the way that it exposes fears about her uncontrollable and contaminating body. No wonder then that it has proved so troubling for mainstream audiences and critics since its initial release.

Conclusion

In the 1940s and 1950s, mainstream filmgoers had few opportunities to glimpse the spectacle of the female body shedding its feminine mask and exposing itself in all its gory detail: fluid, leaky and volatile. However, *Beyond the Forest* provided one such instance. The general consensus at the time was that this was not a welcome sight. This film appeared to confirm the decline of Bette Davis's talent and appeal with critics and cinema audiences, resulting in the termination of her long-term contract with one of the most important Hollywood studios. It would take another thirteen years before Warner Bros would give audiences the chance to gaze upon the uncanny spectacle of Bette Davis's grotesque masquerade but that chance came in 1962 when she played the demented ageing child-star Baby Jane Hudson in Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*[12] For this role the actress developed another extraordinary characterisation, sparing her audiences nothing in terms of the naked ugliness of the evil, madness and vanity of her character. Once again, she created her character through costume: most notably, a dishevelled wig, layers of vividly misapplied make-up and excessively youthful and feminine clothes, ill-suited to a middle-aged woman. Once again she used her arsenal of heavy gestures, the emphatic shrugs and sighs, the contemptuous glances, along with her distinctive brand of manic laughter. In so doing, she revived aspects of her Rosa Moline performance, taking them to even greater extremes. The result was that she shocked and horrified her audiences just as she had done in 1949. However, as *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* was always intended to be a horror film, Davis's performance was widely appreciated, resulting in a nomination for an Academy award. The film, which was an enormous box office hit, proved that there are times when it is not only salutary but also highly profitable to look upon femininity in all its naked ugliness, at least once in a while.

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Notes

1. Davis's contract with Warner Bros was unceremoniously terminated following a dispute between the actress and her director, King Vidor. This action not only saw the actress expelled from the studio after her work on this film was finished but it effectively set her adrift within the American film industry, resulting in her increasing marginalisation during the 1950s.
2. In the introduction to their book *The Femme Fatale*, editors Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe note that the femme fatale is a durable and malleable category, one that is resistant to definition and one that has taken many forms. Although often associated with the Hollywood genre of *film noir*, Hanson and O'Rawe's book is a demonstration of how varied the incarnations of the femme fatale have been, this figure being locatable across many cultures and periods, appearing in the Bible and ancient Greek mythology (e.g., Judith, Delilah, Lilith, Salome, Circe, Medusa), as well as *fin-de-siècle* literature, such as the novels of Rider Haggard and Bram Stoker (Helen Hanson & Catherine O'Rawe 2010: 3).
3. Ed Sikov, in his biography of Bette Davis, *Dark Victory*, writes that, '*Beyond the Forest* is exactly the kind of film that must be seen to be believed, and the belief it inspires is in the essential truth of camp' (Ed Sikov 2007: 276).
4. This is the line famously quoted by the character Martha in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). It is regularly performed by Bette Davis impersonators and almost invariably with a clipped intonation (i.e., 'Whatta dumpp!') with the emphatic sounding of the consonants (t, d, p) rendering it both biting and disdainful. This is in stark contrast to the way Davis delivers the line in the film, where she expels it quite softly on a sigh, suggesting mild exasperation, while fidgeting with a nail file. Despite the understated manner in which it was originally delivered, the line has clearly resonated with audiences, hence Albee's reference to it in his play and the frequent (mis-)performance of it by generations of drag artistes.
5. Lawrence J. Quirk, in *Fasten Your Seatbelts*, writes that director King Vidor 'found it amusing that the film had become something

of a cult. Cult classic status, he felt, was always a wryly amusing mixture of admiration and contempt' (Lawrence J. Quirk 1990: 322).

6. Rosa as a siren (i.e., a dangerously attractive woman) and a factory siren (i.e., a hooter) are implicitly intertwined here.
7. Joan Riviere's 'Womanliness as a masquerade', originally published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1929, is reprinted in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35–44.
8. Instances of femininity as masquerade appear in such films as *Jezebel* (1938) and *In This Our Life* (1942). In the former, Davis as Julie Marsden begs Preston Dillard's (Henry Fonda) forgiveness for her previous bad behaviour in an excessively feminine costume comprised largely of white lace and small flowers, a costume that contrasts with the androgyny of her first appearance in a riding habit. Here her submissive behaviour seems out of character given the wilful, rebellious and transgressive persona she has demonstrated up until this moment in the film. Meanwhile, throughout *In This Our Life*, Davis's character Stanley Timberlake repeatedly flirts with her Uncle William (Charles Coburn) in order to acquire money, gifts and, ultimately, protection from the law, adopting more feminine mannerisms (e.g., a softer voice and fluttering eyelashes) with him than when she is with her sister Roy (Olivia de Havilland). Other notable examples of femininity as masquerade can be found in the films *Mr Skeffington* (1944) and *The Corn is Green* (1945). For a discussion of these, see my essay 'Masquerade or drag? Bette Davis and the ambiguities of gender,' *Screen*, 36(3), 1995, pp. 179–192.
9. By describing Jenny as a 'Latina maid', White implies that she is Mexican or Latin American, whereas the film clearly states that she is a Native American Indian. Dona Drake (originally Eunice Westmorland), although born in the USA, was widely thought to be a Mexican actress, often playing Mexican and Latin American characters in her films. She began her Hollywood career in the mid-1930s, as Rita Rio, the leader of an all-female dance band, in a series of musical shorts, including *Moonlight and Melody* (1935),

Strike Me Pink (1936), *Sweet Shoe* (1938) and *Gals and Gallons* (1939), hence her Latin associations.

10. Strictly speaking, in 1949 Dona Drake was not a nobody. Since the early 1940s she had been cast in supporting roles in hugely popular films such as Bing Crosby and Bob Hope's *Road to Morocco* (1942) and Bob Hope and Betty Hutton's *Let's Face It!* (1943). Prior to *Beyond the Forest* she appeared as a member of the supporting cast in Fredric March's *Another Part of the Forest* (December 1948) and Ronald Regan and Virginia Mayo's *The Girl from Jones Beach* (July 1949).
11. Butler describes the abject as an 'unliveable' and 'uninhabitable' zone of social life, populated by non-subjects (e.g., homosexuals), constituting the defining limit of subjectivity (e.g., heterosexuality) against which subjects constitute their identity. In so doing, identity is founded as a process of repudiation 'through the force of exclusion and abjection' (Judith Butler 1993: 3).
12. Ed Sikov has described Bette Davis's Rosa Moline of *Beyond the Forest* as a 'hearty appetizer served before the main course of Baby Jane Hudson' (Ed Sikov 2007: 276).

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CHAPTER 2

'LOOK! HANDS OFF!': THE PERFORMANCE OF FEMALE EXHIBITIONISM IN ANGELA CARTER'S *THE INFERNAL DESIRE MACHINES OF DOCTOR HOFFMAN* AND *NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS*

Anna Watz

Exhibitionistic renderings of objectified and eroticised female bodies recur throughout Angela Carter's oeuvre. Her intertextual use of pornographic texts and images is indeed one of the hallmarks of her fiction, and is integral to her feminist deconstructionist project. Carter herself, in her 1983 essay 'Notes from the Front Line', declares that she is 'in the demythologising business', and that her fiction is concerned with questioning 'the social fictions that regulate our lives', an endeavour that aims to lay bare the constructedness of gender roles and the oppressive power structures that operate underneath the surface of patriarchy (Angela Carter 1983: 38). By hyperbolically repeating scenes from pornographic art and literature, the sites where the power structures of gender relations are the most starkly dramatised, Carter's fiction thus seeks to expose the hierarchically gendered order

that determines the way in which men view women and, as a result, the way in which women view themselves. This chapter will consider the performance of female exhibitionism in Carter's novels *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984). I will argue that these texts critically engage in a number of questions around notions of the exhibited and exhibitionist woman, and through a series of manipulations of the reader's gaze unsettle the dynamics of both exhibitionism and voyeurism.

An analysis of Carter's controversial use of exhibitionism in her feminist literary project must start with a consideration of her theoretical study *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (1979), in which she provocatively employs the writings of the Marquis de Sade to support her feminist politics of demystification. In this work, Carter advocates the role of a 'moral pornographer', who would use pornography 'as a critique of current relations between the sexes':

> His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind. Such a moral pornographer would not be the enemy of women, perhaps because he might begin to penetrate to the heart of the contempt for women that distorts our culture even as he entered the realms of true obscenity as he describes it. (Angela Carter 1979: 19–20)

Sade, more than any other pornographer, Carter contends, discloses the underlying power structures in heterosexual relations. His pornographic fiction portrays 'not an artificial paradise of gratified sexuality but a model of hell, in which the gratification of sexuality involves the infliction and the tolerance of extreme pain. He describes sexual relations in the context of an unfree society as the expression of pure tyranny' (Angela Carter 1979: 24). Portraying such oppressive sexual relations, Carter writes, will 'render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place and, if described explicitly, will form a critique of those relations, even if that is not and never has been the intention of the pornographer' (Angela Carter 1979: 20).

The *explicit* rendering of sexual oppression is indeed a kind of feminist exhibitionist practice, which aims to lay bare the process through which the objectification of women is constituted. In her project of exposing domination through literary representation, Carter converges with Luce Irigaray, who argues that the extremeness and explicitness of Sadeian violence can have a radicalising effect. She writes:

> After all, it is better for the sexuality that underlies our social order to be exercised openly than for it to prescribe that social order from the hiding-place of its repressions. Perhaps if the phallocracy that reigns everywhere is put unblushingly on display, a different sexual economy may become possible? Pornography as 'catharsis' of the phallic empire? As the unmasking of women's sexual subjection? (Luce Irigaray 1977: 203)

For both Carter and Irigaray, representation should strive to lay bare oppression rather than to cover over it.[1] And when exposed, the misogyny that determines it can be challenged. For this reason, Carter provocatively contends that Sade 'put pornography in the service of women, or, perhaps, allowed it to be invaded by an ideology not inimical to women' (Angela Carter 1979: 37).

One of Carter's main concerns in *The Sadeian Woman*, as in her fiction, is to reject the idealisation of woman as virtuous and passive victim and to alert women to their frequent complicity in their own sexual oppression. According to Sally Keenan, her celebration of Sade's degradation of the figure of Justine – the perpetual victim and martyr – 'is part of Carter's reaction to a mythicization of female virtue that infiltrated aspects of radical feminist discourse in the 1970s' (Sally Keenan 1997: 139). Carter's declaration that women who buy this cultural script are complicit in their own victimisation was both unfashionable and highly provocative amongst feminists in the late 1970s (Sally Keenan 1997: 134). Hence, her assassination of the mythic archetype of the passive suffering woman caused a feminist outcry, not least because she was using the misogynist writings of Sade to support her views. Carter's deliberately provocative concept of a 'moral pornographer' modelled on Sade was naturally also

a bone of contention. However, despite the fact that Carter claims that Sade 'put pornography in the service of women', one should not interpret *The Sadeian Woman* as a straightforward defence of his writings. As Sarah Gamble argues, the book hovers 'between celebration and critique', and is 'a showcase for the paradoxes of Carter's response to pornography' (Sarah Gamble 1997: 99). In Keenan's words, *The Sadeian Woman* should be read as 'an intention to provoke questions rather than to provide answers, to engage with contradictions without seeking necessarily to resolve them' (Sally Keenan 1997: 135). And ultimately, Carter acknowledges that while Sade's pornography can be put to subversive use for feminists, in the final analysis, Sade himself 'is still in complicity with the authority which he hates' (Angela Carter 1979: 136).

Carter's polemic fed into a debate regarding pornography and censorship that would be at the centre of feminist discussions throughout the whole of the 1980s. Andrea Dworkin and Susanne Kappeler – two of the loudest advocates for legislation against pornography – both took Carter to task for what they perceived as her 'disregard for the actual degradation endured by the victims of [Sade's] perversities' (Sarah Gamble 1997: 99). For these critics, Sade's literary perversions must be regarded as being as real as actual sexual violence against women, and should therefore be restricted by censorship laws. Kappeler, in *The Pornography of Representation*, ventures that what she calls the 'pornographic scenario', in which women are invariably objectified and dominated, underpins all forms of representation (Susanne Kappeler 1986: 103). Consequently, not only pornography but all art and literature become complicit in reproducing and perpetuating oppressive structures of power. Kappeler concludes that the committed feminist critic must give up her 'aspiration to the status of artist' and recognise 'no sanctuaries from political reality, no aesthetic or fantastic enclaves, no islands for the play of desire' (Susanne Kappeler 1986: 146, 147). One of Kappeler's main targets in her attack on female literary complicity is indeed Angela Carter. She accuses Carter of 'playing in the literary sanctuary' where the object of her critique, Sade, has been transformed from 'the multiple rapist and murderer' into '[a] literary artefact, removed by convention of the literary beyond the reach of political, of feminist critique' (Susanne

Kappeler 1986: 134). Carter's promotion of the Sadeian text as proto-feminist, by virtue of its revelation of oppressive power structures, is thus seen by Kappeler as a kind of betrayal of feminism itself. However, although Kappeler's and Carter's positions appear to be antithetical, their analyses of the Sadeian scenario, in which women have but two options – willing or unwilling victim – in fact overlap to a great extent. As Keenan has pointed out, both Carter and Kappeler argue that 'the pornographic scenario holds a mirror up to heterosexual relations' (Sally Keenan 1997: 140), although their conclusions regarding the potential feminist value of exhibiting this scenario are violently at odds with each other. While Kappeler advocates a feminist withdrawal from the pornographic scenario, Carter's strategy is rather to repeat by ironic hyperbole, and by so doing reveal the power structures that operate under the surface of sexual relations. In this project Sade becomes her 'unconscious ally' (Angela Carter, 1979: 22).

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman

Carter had already exploited the pornographic scenario in fictional form in her 1972 novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (hereafter *IDM*). This novel is set in a fictitious Latin-American country where a war has broken out between the Reality Principle and the Pleasure Principle. The former is represented by the Minister of Determination, an embodiment of realism and positivism, while the latter is personified by Doctor Hoffman, a power-crazed scientist plotting to subvert the world through a total liberation of the erotic imagination. Narrated in retrospect by its main character, Desiderio, the novel is a picaresque mock-memoir chronicling a bizarre journey through both time and space, the goal of which is to find and destroy the Doctor and thus restore reason and order in a world which has 'become the arbitrary realm of dream' (*IDM* 18). However, Desiderio's pursuit is complicated by the fact that he falls in love with Hoffman's shape-shifting daughter Albertina who in one form or another appears during most of Desiderio's adventures. It is ultimately revealed that the geography Desiderio and Albertina traverse is the territory of their own erotic imagination. The direction of their journey

and the malleable landscape through which they move are determined by a 'set of samples' Hoffman has designed in order to concretise the imagination and transform unconscious desires into material manifestations. In this way he has enabled 'everything it is possible to imagine' to also exist in the material world (*IDM* 97). The magic samples are in the possession of one of Hoffman's associates, the proprietor of an ambulant peep show in which the samples are exhibited.

Issues concerning gender, representation, exhibitionism and voyeurism are at the heart of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, and it is in the description of the peep show that these concerns are most strikingly dramatised. While the novel as a whole includes aspects of both gender-bending and identity-bending, the peep show episodes overtly rehearse a voyeuristic scenario in which the roles assigned to the two sexes are absolutely fixed. In the traditional peep show, the crudest of all stagings of the gendered logic of the gaze, the female body is put on display purely for the delectation of the male eye. In her formative essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), Laura Mulvey identifies the pleasure of the gaze as hierarchically split between active/male and passive/female. 'The determining male gaze', she writes, 'projects its phantasy on to 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 pleasure and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*' (Laura Mulvey 1975: 837). Mulvey locates the tension between the woman as image and the man as owner of the look as a structuring principle of mainstream Hollywood cinema production. More than that, of course, according to psychoanalytic theory this logic structures the unconscious of the whole of patriarchal society (Laura Mulvey 1975: 831). Kappeler, whose analysis is clearly indebted to Mulvey, can see no satisfactory way out of this sexist structure for women except for rejecting representation out of hand. She writes:

> The fundamental problem at the root of men's behaviour in the world, including sexual assault, rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, keeping women in the home and in unequal opportunities and conditions, treating them as objects for conquest

> and protection – the root problem behind the reality of men's relations with women, is the way men see women, is Seeing. (Susanne Kappeler 1986: 61)

Mulvey, however, does not advocate a withdrawal from representation, but rather a 'destruction of pleasure' through analysis (Laura Mulvey 1975: 834–5). This strategy is similar to Carter's, who utilises and reproduces traditional models of representation to explode them from within. Mulvey calls for a 'total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film' (Laura Mulvey 1975: 835). In the parallel medium of literature, Carter's writings perform precisely such a negation, through their stark visualisation of the way in which erotic pleasure is structured in patriarchy.[2]

The narrative of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* overtly performs a male gaze through the voyeuristic perspective of Desiderio. In the peep show episode, this gaze directly implicates the reader, who resolutely becomes pulled into inhabiting it by the narrative's first person perspective. As Desiderio approaches the peeping machines, we witness through him the prospective titillation they produce in the viewer: the machines, each 'the size and shape of an old-fashioned oven', 'were of ancient rusted cast iron decorated with impressions of cupids, eagles and knots of ribbons' (*IDM* 43). At the front, each machine is adorned with 'glass eye-pieces [that] jutted out on long, hollow stalks' (*IDM* 43–4). The baroque description of the peep-show devices works to intensify the anticipation felt by both Desiderio and the reader at the prospect of seeing what is hidden inside. By literally forcing the reader's gaze through the elaborate eye-pieces, we also become voyeurs, just like Desiderio. In this process, the female reader is coerced into becoming a male impersonator and to view the erotic spectacle inside the peeping machines through a desirous male gaze.

In the first of the exhibits we observe '[t]he legs of a woman, raised and open as if ready to admit a lover, form[ing] a curvilinear triumphal arch'. Her feet are 'decorated with spike-heeled, black leather pumps' (*IDM* 44). Thus heavily eroticised and fetishised, the legs act as a frame around the female genital organs, whose surrounding 'dark red and purple crenellations' (*IDM* 44) act as yet another frame for

another peep-hole leading into the interior of the female body. This womb-space is described in Edenic terms that overtly invoke a fantasy of pre-Oedipal maternal plenitude:

> Here endlessly receded before one's eyes a miniature but irresistible vista of semi-tropical forest where amazing fruits hung on the trees, while from the dappled and variegated chalices of enormous flowers the size of millstones, perfumes of such extraordinary potency that they had become visible to the eye exuded as soft, purple dew. [...] It seemed that winter and rough winds would never touch these bright, oblivious regions or ripple the surface of the lucid river which wound a tranquil course down the central valley. (*IDM* 44)

The suspense created by the succession of peep-holes, which like a system of Chinese boxes eventually gives way to the 'moist, luxuriant landscape of the interior' (*IDM* 44), works to reinforce the sense of anticipation, and thus of erotic pleasure, in the viewer. Moreover, the prose with which Carter describes the female body and its interior is as sumptuous as the interior itself. The embroidered literariness of these descriptions on one level seduces the reader into colluding with Desiderio's visual pleasure. Carter's luxurious language has received sharp censure by some critics, such as Robert Clark, who condemns her fiction for failing to include 'within its own critical representation an understanding of the complicity of that representation with the social forces it appears to reject' (Robert Clark 1987: 154). Thus, he argues, Carter's representations of female objectification and victimisation risk perpetuating a phallocentric logic through a voyeuristic 'literary sensationalism' (Robert Clark 1987: 152). While I agree with Clark that the glittering literariness of Carter's prose does produce a frisson of pleasure in the reader, I nonetheless disagree with his conclusion that her lush descriptions 'bind the reader poetically [...] and put the reason to sleep' (Robert Clark 1987: 159). On the contrary, I argue that the language with which Carter describes the peep show forces the reader to take voyeuristic pleasure at regarding the pornographic spectacle. By making the reader experience pleasure at the

sight of female objectification, through colluding with a male gaze that is altogether fixed, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* emphatically alerts the reader to the fact of women's sexual oppression. For, as Sally Robinson argues, Carter's male impersonation in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, 'using Desiderio as the only locus of narrative voice and desire', entails a 'gendering of the "I" that the reader cannot forget for one moment' (Sally Robinson 1991: 102). In this way, the female reader is painfully made aware of the male perspective she is forced to adopt, because, as Robinson maintains, '[t]here is, quite simply, *no place* for a woman reader in this text; and that no place foregrounds the hom(m)osexual economy Carter is mimicking in it' (Sally Robinson 1991: 104–5).[3] Carter's dramatisation of a voyeuristic male gaze that directly implicates the woman reader thus demonstrates how women's own perspective is shaped by a masculine economy of desire.

Through the desiring gaze of Desiderio, the blatant objectification of the female body in the peep show becomes impossible to miss or ignore. The succession of peep-holes that lead to the interior of the womb does not merely add to the visual pleasure of the viewer, but also points to the unequal division of power between the subject and object of the gaze. Carter's visual evocation of the peep-holes repeatedly reminds us that we are the ones who own the gaze, and that what we see is put on display for the purpose of our erotic enticement. The fact that the vagina becomes yet another peep-hole crudely emphasises the subjection of the exhibited woman to Desiderio's and the reader's penetrating gaze. In this way, the gaze is overtly identified with a violating phallus, the force of which the reader as voyeur is driving forth. The female body is here objectified several times over. The woman is put on display for male inspection and visual pleasure, as a sexual object. Moreover, reinforcing her lack of agency, she lacks an upper body and head, and is thus robbed of every sign of subjecthood. The female body has become reduced to nothing but a hole, which the reader both penetrates and controls by peeping into its very interior.

Both Mulvey's analysis in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and Carter's rendering of the peep show episode in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* rely on a psychoanalytic model of

interpreting the meaning of the image of woman in the patriarchal unconscious. 'The paradox of phallocentrism in all its manifestations', writes Mulvey, 'is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world' (Laura Mulvey 1975: 833). Even when displayed for the visual pleasure of men, the figure of woman always simultaneously represents the absence of a penis, and thus the threat of castration. In this voyeuristic scenario, one strategy for the male subject to fend off the threat of castration is through 'preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object' (Laura Mulvey 1975: 840). Carter too locates the 'fiction' of the castrated woman at the root of women's oppression. The notion of the castrated woman, she writes in *The Sadeian Woman*,

> is a psychic fiction as deeply at the heart of Western culture as the myth of Oedipus, to which it is related in the complex dialectic of imagination and reality that produces culture. Female castration is an imaginary fact that pervades the whole of men's attitude towards women and our attitude to ourselves, that transforms women from human beings into wounded creatures who were born to bleed. (Angela Carter 1979: 23)

The notion of female castration, in Carter's analysis, thus constructs the deeply engrained patriarchal myths of woman as either an inferior (castrated) victim or an embodied threat of castration.

The erotic tableaux in the peep show in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* similarly rehearse images of castration and the castrated woman. While the first image (described above) suggested a staging of a defence against the threat of castration by forcing the male gaze into the female interior, and thereby controlling it, one of the subsequent exhibits in the peep show performs a sadistic punishment exacted on the figure of woman as representative of castration:

> Here, a wax figure of the headless body of a mutilated woman lay in a pool of painted blood. She wore only the remains of

> a pair of black stockings and a ripped suspender belt of shiny black rubber. Her arms stuck out stiffly on either side of her [...] The right breast had been partially segmented and hung open to reveal two surfaces of meat as bright and false as the plaster sirloins which hang in toy butcher's shops while her belly was covered with some kind of paint that always contrived to look wet and, from the paint, emerged the handle of an enormous knife which was kept always a-quiver by the action (probably) of a spring. (*IDM* 45–6)

This decapitated model is adorned in a similarly fetishistic manner as the model in the first exhibit, suggesting an overlap between the two images. The correlation between looking, objectifying, and actual violence, suggestively dramatised through the reader's penetrating gaze in the first exhibit is thus literalised in the subsequent image of the raped and sadistically murdered woman.

The likening of the model's slashed breast to sirloins highlights her status as the ultimate passive object: meat prepared for consumption. Importantly, however, Carter's description of this 'false' plaster flesh also underscores the very artificiality of the models in the peep show display. Nicola Pitchford, drawing on Judith Butler's theories of gender formation, convincingly argues that 'the painstaking artificiality of each detail' in the peep show descriptions works to emphasise 'the very *reproduced*ness of sexual desire' (Nicola Pitchford 2002: 172–3). The wax-work models, although designed to 'achieve the maximal degree of verisimilitude' (*IDM* 44) with their pubic hair and eyelashes 'scrupulously set one by one', instead produce an 'overall effect [...] of stunning artifice' (*IDM* 45, 44). As Pitchford notes, 'this description calls attention to the fact that desire is neither inherent nor natural; it must be artificially produced, or induced, by means of representation' (Nicola Pitchford 2002: 173).

The artificiality of the wax-work figures, and its relation to the reproducedness of sexual desire, is echoed in a later episode in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* when Desiderio visits the 'House of Anonymity', where prostitutes are displayed in cages for the visual enjoyment of male guests. Before being shown into the reception room,

Desiderio and his temporary fellow traveller, the Count, are invited to don hood-like masks and crotch-less black tights that leave their genitals exposed, outfits that 'grossly emphasized [their] manhoods while utterly denying [their] humanity' (*IDM* 130). The prostitutes, through a similar process, are 'reduced by the rigorous discipline of their vocation to the undifferentiated essence of the idea of the female' and 'passed beyond or did not enter the realm of simple humanity' (*IDM* 132). Rendered with grotesque exaggeration, this scene thus posits an aggressive male principle against a passive female one, cut loose from any resemblance to real men and women. As Carter argued in *The Sadeian Woman*, pornography is founded on precisely such an 'abstraction of human intercourse in which the self is reduced to its formal elements [...] the probe and the fringed hole' (Angela Carter 1979: 4). This graffiti-like stylisation becomes, according to Carter, 'a universal pictorial language of lust' in which

> the prick is always presented erect, in an alert attitude of enquiry or curiosity or affirmation; it points upwards, it asserts. The hole is open, an inert space, like a mouth waiting to be filled. From this elementary iconography may be derived the whole metaphysic of sexual differences – man aspires; woman has no other function but to exist, waiting. (Angela Carter 1979: 4)

This basic logic, which according to Carter always structures pornographic representation, also characterises the dynamic of the traditional gaze. Desiderio and the Count's encounter with the caged prostitutes clearly exhibits this 'universal pictorial language of lust' – it is the script they have no option but to follow. Importantly, the exaggeration with which this encounter is described points up the artificiality and constructedness of the notions of femininity that the prostitutes represent. Accordingly, as the Count in a frenzy of sadistic desire sets fire to one of the prostitutes, she is shown to have only been 'a life-like construction of papier mâché on a wicker frame' (*IDM* 134). What these women actually exhibit when on display in their cages, then, is how it is *notions* of masculinity and femininity that often structure sexual desire. Through its exposing of this stylised logic, this scene

highlights the performative nature of both gender and sexuality. In this way, in Butler's famous formulation, gender identity and sexual desire are culturally constructed through 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance' (Judith Butler 1990: 33). A true liberation of the erotic imagination cannot happen, in Carter's analysis, until this frame can be loosened, and the basic patriarchal logic that configures woman as silent object is subverted.

As Pitchford points out, the narrative of *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* establishes a direct link between representation and material manifestations of desire (Nicola Pitchford 2002: 174). Several of the pornographic images that Desiderio sees in the peep show or represented by the magic samples anticipate later erotic encounters in the novel. For example, whilst having joined a travelling fair, Desiderio has sexual intercourse with the gun-woman Mamie Buckskin in the horse stables, a scene that develops into a bizarre orgy, a 'morass of satin limbs and flailing hooves' (*IDM* 110), in which Mamie breaks a rib where a horse kicks her. Desiderio, who remembers seeing a sequence of photographs amongst the peep show proprietor's samples of a girl trampled by horses, confesses that he 'wondered how far I might have prefigured it' (*IDM* 110). When he is later forced to witness Albertina being raped by the entire male part of a community of centaurs, he is again reminded of this image:

> At the back of my mind flickered a teasing image, that of a young girl trampled by horses. I could not remember when or where I had seen it, such a horrible thing; but it was the most graphic and haunting of memories and a voice in my mind, the cracked, hoarse, drunken voice of the dead peep-show proprietor, told me that I was somehow, all unknowing, the instigator of this horror. (*IDM* 179–80)

It is later confirmed that it is indeed the characters in the novel who unconsciously dream the events into existence. In Desiderio's case, it is clear that his erotic imagination has to some extent been inspired by the violent and pornographic images he has previously seen. This

suggests that the gender inequalities that structure much sexual fantasy are partly determined by representation itself. Kappeler makes a similar point when she says that '[s]ex or sexual practices do not just exist out there, waiting to be represented; rather, there is a dialectical relationship between representational practices which construct sexuality, and actual sexual practices, each informing the other' (Susanne Kappeler 1986: 2). For Carter, these representational practices must be put on display, not censored, if we are to fully understand the mechanisms that perpetuate sexual oppression, and be able to effect change.

The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman thus engages with exhibitionism both as a theme and as part of its own methodology. The novel repeatedly portrays objectified women displayed for the pleasure of the male gaze. Carter's adoption of an overwhelmingly male perspective, with which the reader is forced to collude, parodies and exposes the very processes by which this male gaze is constituted. This exhibitionist practice relies upon a kind of Irigarayean 'mimicry', as the text self-consciously rehearses sexual oppression and misogynistic representations of women 'by an effect of playful repetition' (Luce Irigaray 1977: 76). By making the patterns that create this oppression visible, they can start to be interrogated and challenged.

Nights at the Circus

If *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* actively rehearses images of objectified women in order to expose the power relations that structure representation, *Nights at the Circus* (hereafter *NC*) engages with the complex issue of female exhibitionism in a more affirmative way by challenging the gendered logic of the gaze altogether. This novel, as Helen Stoddart points out, 'both exposes the power mechanisms behind the look while also imagining a fictional female figure capable of evading and defying these' (Helen Stoddart 2007: 27). Set in 1899, this novel focuses on the life and adventures of its female heroine, the winged aerialiste Fevvers. Frequently positioned as the object of the male gaze, Fevvers nevertheless manages to escape the passive role normally assigned to exhibited or objectified women. Rather than being the silent object of the male gaze, she is portrayed as an active

agent of her own self-creation. Nevertheless, Fevvers' production of self depends on a 'silent demand to be *looked* at' (*NC* 277); indeed, she craves the gaze of an audience to sustain her singular identity. This dynamic is particularly evident in the first section of the novel, in which Fevvers is interviewed by the young American reporter Walser. In stark contrast to the exhibited bodies in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, this boisterous and confident circus artiste appears to be in complete control of the way in which she is being looked at. As Stoddart notes, there are echoes of Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in the presentation of Fevvers' exhibitionism, although, as we have seen, Carter was clearly engaging with similar concerns even before the publication of Mulvey's influential piece. But indeed, as Stoddart rightly points out, both Carter's and Mulvey's texts emphasize 'the *codification* of female display' which implies that 'female exhibitionism is a set of socially acquired gestures, signs and codes which are learnt through "apprenticeship"; they adorn the female body but do not constitute her and are therefore not essential to her' (Helen Stoddart 2007: 27).

Fevvers' kitsch circus show deliberately showcases the performative acts which constitute her persona. Dressed in a flesh-coloured leotard 'with a spangle of sequins on her crotch and nipples', and with her hair 'hidden away under the dyed plumes that added a good eighteen inches to her already immense height', she confidently flaunts her spectacular wings, a 'furled plumage as gaudy as that of a Brazilian cockatoo' (*NC* 15).

> Look at me! With a grand, proud, ironic grace, she exhibited herself before the eyes of the audience as if she were a marvellous present too good to be played with. Look, not touch.
>
> She was twice as large as life and as succinctly finite as any object that is intended to be seen, not handled. Look! Hands off!
>
> LOOK AT ME! (*NC* 15)

Fevvers thus embraces the spectacle of her performance and, as Christina Britzolakis argues, 'makes a virtue out of her specular objectification'

(Christina Britzolakis 1997: 54). Many feminist critics of this novel see Fevvers' expansive self-staging as representative of a turn in Carter's writing towards a more affirmative vision of femininity. Paulina Palmer, for example, argues that while Carter's earlier texts (such as *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*) typically portray women as puppets, the winged Fevvers by contrast represents 'ideas of liberation and rebirth' (Paulina Palmer 1987: 179–80). Britzolakis, however, warns that Carter's characterisation of Fevvers is a feminist tightrope act, which in its celebration of self-display risks falling into the trap of colluding with patriarchal objectification and commodification of women – the very thing it seeks to resist and subvert (Christina Britzolakis 1997: 54). In my opinion, Carter's employment of the risky strategy of female exhibitionism in this novel succeeds in challenging the gendered logic of the voyeuristic gaze, even if the liberatory efficacy of Fevvers' performance remains open to question. This challenge is achieved, I argue, by the novel's fundamental unsettling of the way in which the dynamics of the gaze traditionally operate.

Walser's interview with Fevvers takes place in her dressing-room after one of her shows, and is as much of a theatrical performance as her circus act. Allowing him to watch her as she removes her fake eyelashes and wipes off her make-up, Fevvers flaunts the careful process through which her embellished femininity is being produced. At the same time she tells him the story of her childhood and adolescence, of how she was '[h]atched out of a bloody great egg' (*NC* 7) and raised in a Whitechapel brothel under the protective watch of her surrogate prostitute mothers. There, she says, she served her 'apprenticeship in *being looked at* – at being the object of the eye of the beholder' (*NC* 23), by being displayed for the customers as the Winged Victory. Fevvers' slogan, 'Is she fact or is she fiction?', while purporting to refer to her 'notorious and much-debated wings' (*NC* 7), is also applicable to the meticulous production of her femininity. The gradual undoing of her spectacular femininity in front of Walser in the dressing-room shows in reverse the painstaking procedure through which it is constructed.

Walser's intention with his interview is to resolve the enigma of Fevvers and expose her wings as a 'fiction', 'to "puff" her; and, if it is humanly possible, to explode her, either as well as, or instead of'

(*NC* 11). However, the more deeply he is pulled into the narrative that Fevvers produces, the more his hard-edged scepticism begins to wear away. Her narrative performance is indeed as theatrical and produced as her circus act. She deliberately sets out to discombobulate Walser, letting 'a ripping fart ring round the room' and then peering 'across her shoulder, again, to see how he took *that*' (*NC* 11). As Robinson notes, '[w]hile Fevvers is placed as the object of various male gazes in the text, she simultaneously places herself as the subject of her own story. Her strategy to this end is to turn the gaze on herself by actively staging her difference' (Sally Robinson 1991: 23). The most significant site of difference is naturally Fevvers' wings. During the interview they are bulging under her dressing-gown, 'shuddering the surface of the taut fabric from time to time as if desirous of breaking loose' (*NC* 8). Accompanying the onset of puberty, with the arrival of Fevvers' women's bleeding and 'the beginning of great goings on in, as you might put it, the bosom department', her downy prepubescent buds start to itch – 'an almost pleasurable irritation, a kind of physical buzzing' – and subsequently transform into wings (*NC* 23).

> 'I spread', said Fevvers. 'I had taken off my little white nightgown in order to perform my matutinal ablutions at my little dresser when there was a great ripping in the hind-quarters of my chemise and, all unwilled by me, uncalled for, involuntary, suddenly there broke forth my peculiar inheritance – these wings of mine!' (*NC* 24)

Seemingly part of Fevvers' sexuality, the wings not only mark her alterity in terms of 'normal' humanity, they also work to unsettle a categorisation of Fevvers as stereotypically 'feminine'. The wings, suggestively quivering under her dressing-gown, are powerful and awe-inspiring, and Walser only seems to be able to make sense of them in terms that are curiously phallic. Fevvers' wings, according to Gamble, 'can be read as visible signifiers of gender disruption which render her less than fully human, baffling any simplistic attempt to signify her as "woman". The result is that she remains an unclassifiable enigma' (Sarah Gamble forthcoming). This blurring of stable gender categories is reinforced,

as Gamble points out, in the description of Fevvers as an unmistakably feminine object of desire, whose beauty is nevertheless 'intermixed with physical attributes Walser can only categorise as masculine', such as her size, muscularity and unconventional vulgarity (Sarah Gamble forthcoming). Indeed, at one point during the interview the thought 'Is she really a man?' flickers through his mind (*NC* 35).

Walser's attempts at containing Fevvers with his gaze are thus undermined by her indeterminate gender identity. In this way, the traditional ordering of the gaze as split between active/male and passive/female comes undone. Fevvers is indeed an image displayed for the pleasure of the gaze, but she also owns the gaze herself. On a number of occasions during the interview, the gaze from Fevvers' 'immense eyes' (*NC* 29) unsettles Walser completely: 'Walser felt the strangest sensation, as if these eyes of the *aerialiste* were a pair of sets of Chinese boxes, as if each one opened into a world into a world into a world, an infinite plurality of worlds, and these unguessable depths exercised the strongest possible attraction' (*NC* 30). Clearly, Walser is not quite sure what he is gazing at, feeling as if he stands 'on an unknown threshold' (*NC* 30), where he is unable to ascertain whether he should regard Fevvers as an authentic bird-woman or a fraud, as a woman, a man or something in between. Importantly, the feeling of vertigo that Fevvers' immense physicality induces in Walser is accompanied by his desire: 'A seismic erotic disturbance convulsed him [. . .] He scrambled to his feet, suddenly panicking' (*NC* 52). Thus, Fevvers' unfixing of the male gaze not only unsettles the traditional gendered logic of the look, but also simultaneously produces *jouissance*.

In this way, while undeniably portraying woman as an object of male desire, *Nights at the Circus* fundamentally undermines the traditional power relations between the subject and object of the gaze. The new model of femininity that Fevvers represents is founded on female agency and subjecthood, something that is completely lacking in the gender configuration of the traditional voyeuristic/pornographic scenario. While *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* diagnoses the oppressive dynamics of the gaze through the hyperbolic repetition of the cultural script that renders women into passive objects, *Nights at the Circus* boldly sets out to rewrite the

script. In the characterisation of Fevvers, Carter imagines the possibility of an alternative erotics of looking, which would allow for both male and female agency and pleasure. Such a mutual gaze would not depend on a simple inversion of the traditional gender positions in the voyeuristic scenario (active/male, passive/female), but on a fundamental unsettling of the way in which the pleasure of looking is constituted.

Notes

1. Kappeler herself explicitly connects Irigaray and Carter's promotion of the Sadeian text (Susanne Kappeler 1986: 209–10). Furthermore, Keenan elaborates the link made by Kappeler between the two writers (Sally Keenan 1997: 143–44).
2. Charlotte Crofts, in *Anagrams of Desire: Angela Carter's Writing for Radio, Film, and Television* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), has convincingly argued that much of Carter's writing engages with concerns remarkably similar to the ones Mulvey discusses in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'.
3. Robinson is referring to Luce Irigaray's concept of 'hom(m)o-sexual monopoly'. Irigaray writes in *This Sex Which is Not One*: '*the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects*. Which implies that there are not really two sexes, but only one. A single practice and representation of the sexual. [. . .] The Law that orders our society is the exclusive valorization of men's needs/desires, of exchanges among men. What the anthropologist calls the passage from nature to culture amounts to the institution of the reign of hom(m)o-sexuality' (Luce Irigaray 1977: 86, 171).

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CHAPTER 3

THE ABJECT BODY IN SARAH KANE'S MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF DESIRE

Rina Kim

Assessing nudity on stage in the USA over the past few decades and specifically referring to the works of experimental theatre groups such as The Performance Group, Sue-Ellen Case states that 'the naked body offered up, in the costume of a "moment of truth," both a demand for change and an appeal to a given condition that social structures oppressed' (Sue Ellen-Case 2002: 186). Indeed, staging bared bodies in the late 1960s through the early 1970s was perceived as theatre participating in social change, represented as the so-called sexual revolution, and calling for a public debate on gender politics as well as sexual drives and relationships. In the history of theatrical experimentation, The Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69* (1968) directed by Richard Schechner was a landmark in exploring the very question of sexual identities, featuring 'what was then perceived to be a scandalous amount of nudity' (Edith Hall 2004: 11). 1968 is also a significant landmark in the British theatre history: the theatrical censorship introduced in 1737 was finally brought to an end. Celebrating this event on 27 September 1968, one day after the abolition of theatre censorship,

the American rock musical *Hair* (1967) – which was banned on the grounds of nudity and obscenity – opened in London (see Webb, this volume, for a discussion of similar issues in the USA). While this particular performance history indicates the stance of the naked body in late 1960's British theatre in relation to the autocratic and institutionalised forces of oppression by the Lord Chamberlain's office, it also opens up a more fundamental question relevant to the contemporary theatre, the operation of self censorship by the general public and the media. As the BBC reports, among all provocative issues that the musical raised including drug taking, 'a strong anti-war message at the height of the Vietnam conflict' and some blasphemy, the scene which 'aroused most controversy' was 'where the cast appears on stage in the nude'.[1] In the contemporary British theatre some degree of exhibitionism has become a common sight and tends to be used as a way of capturing attention and increasing ticket sales in the easiest way possible. However, this chapter will explore how nudity onstage can still function as a powerful means of probing the most naked truth about the self by examining Sarah Kane's plays. Using Freudian theories of spectatorship and Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, this study will identify the damaged naked bodies in Kane's works as correlated with the abject body, and further investigate the ways in which Kane appropriates the strategy of fantasy in order to disturb the spectator's habitual gaze.

As Aleks Sierz comments, if onstage nudity was once 'a symbol of sexual liberation', by the nineties and especially in what he calls 'in-yer-face theatre', it has been seen as a troubling sign of abuse and domination.[2] Considered a key author of this in-yer-face theatre movement, which pioneered a 'new aesthetic' of 'blatant, aggressive and confrontational' (Aleks Sierz 2001: xii) styles and contents, Kane often accompanies nudity with explicit scenes of violence and sexual abuse. According to Sierz, what characterises in-yer-face theatre is 'its intensity, its deliberate relentlessness and ruthless commitment to extremes' (Aleks Sierz 2001: xiii). It also pushes theatre into being 'experiential', aggressively aiming at 'making the audience feel and respond' by transforming 'the language of theatre, making it more direct, raw and explicit' (ibid.). Among all early in-yer-face plays such as

Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (1995) and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), the first play which incited media uproar and was 'attacked by critics with unprecedented fury' was Kane's first play *Blasted*, produced at the Royal Court theatre in London in 1995 (Aleks Sierz 2001: xiii). *Blasted* was 'even discussed on *Newsnight*' and as Kane mentioned, in the week the play opened although there was the largest earthquake in Japan since 1923 which made more than 300,000 people homeless and 'a fifteen-year-old girl had been murdered in a wood', '*Blasted* got more coverage in some newspapers than either of these events' (cited in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge 1997: 130). The harshest criticism came from Jack Tinker who referred the play as '[t]his Disgusting Feast of Filth' in the headline, and continued: 'Some will undoubtedly say the money [from the Jerwood Foundation which supports the Royal Court Theatre] might have been better spent on a course of remedial therapy' (*Daily Mail*, 19 January 1995, cited in Graham Saunders 2009: 152). In his review of Kane's second play *Phaedra's Love* (1996), the *Daily Telegraph*'s Charles Spencer claimed to be 'seriously concerned about Sarah Kane's mental health' and concluded his review, '[i]t's not a theatre critic that's required here, it's a psychiatrist' (cited in Aleks Sierz 2001: 108).

What is intriguing then are such 'unprecedented' and explosive responses to Kane's plays, which include personal assaults questioning the playwright's sanity. Although modern viewers have been increasingly exposed to images of extreme violence and nudity through other media such as films and television, people tend to be more tolerant towards violence and nudity in those genres than in theatre. For instance, in the case of Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), which was produced one year before *Blasted* and influenced other in-yer-face writers like Martin McDonagh, 'critics praised Tarantino for his originality': 'Heralded as representing a new kind of realism, his film "trivializes violence and death" while also making it a source of comedy' (Ann Marie Seward Barry 1997: 322). Both Sierz and Ravenhill suspect that the media frenzy and outrage regarding *Blasted* stemmed from the notion that such a violent play which lacks a clear moral view was written by a twenty-three-year-old woman. This 'seemed to transgress the mainstream media's fantasy that sex

and violence are the preserve of men' (Aleks Sierz 2001: 99). The extreme and gender-biased reactions to Kane's *Blasted* leads us to examine the relationship between visual images, the spectatorial gaze and the psychic mechanism in theatre in comparison to other genres such as cinema. Sierz points out one important difference between the genres by offering an example of naked bodies: 'Nudity onstage is more powerful than nudity in films, paintings or sculpture for the simple reason that a real person is actually present' (Alex Sierz 2001: 8). Headlined 'Real Live Horror Show', David Benedict uses the same logic of 'real' show in his review of Kane's third play *Cleansed* (1998) when explaining how the aspect of 'real live show' can enhance the impact of horror (*Independent*, 9 May 1998). While the aspect of 'real' is central in understanding the effect of onstage nudity and violence to the spectator, there needs to be an appropriate model that can explain the spectatorial gaze and the mechanism of generating pleasures and prohibitions.

The Pleasure of Pain Marked by the Abject

> There are things which we see with pain so far as they themselves are concerned but whose images, even when executed in very great detail, we view with pleasure. (Aristotle 2000: 20)

If Kane's works were initially bombarded by critics, there were also many young audiences who were so enthusiastic about the new plays that she was heralded as phenomenal. As Sierz states, 'the media's moral panic says more about Britain than about *Blasted*' because in many other European countries like Germany and Romania, Kane's plays have met with acclaim, and often their versions increased the intensity of violence and nudity more than the original production: borrowing Kane's words, the first German production 'completely glamorized the violence' and in 'other versions' when implying the protagonist Cate's rape, which happens offstage between Scene One and Two, she was 'lying completely naked with her legs apart, covered in blood, mouthing off at Ian' (Aleks Sierz 2001: 105). While even Kane herself thought that such re-interpretations were

excessive and not appropriate, *Blasted* was received very well in Europe.

One of the pioneering studies that attempts a psychoanalytic interpretation of spectatorial reactions is Sigmund Freud's essay 'Psychopathic characters on the stage' (1905–6). What he first seeks to answer is how we gain pleasure when watching someone suffering in tragedies. Freud begins his essay citing Aristotle, 'the purpose of drama is to arouse "terror and pity" and so "to purge the emotions"' and what is essential in this process is the skills of 'the playwright and actor' that 'enable the audience to *identify himself* with a hero' (Sigmund Freud 1990: 121–2, his emphasis). According to Freud, suffering of 'every kind' is a key 'subject-matter of drama', and especially in what he calls 'religious' or 'social' drama, the dramatist's function is to invite 'the audience [to] take the side of the rebel' against 'God' or 'against institutions' along with the playwright and characters on stage while portraying staged struggles (Sigmund Freud 1990: 123–4). What Freud repeatedly draws upon and which is not fully elaborated in this essay is how we gain 'masochistic satisfaction' in seeing 'the hero in struggles' or 'in defeat' (Sigmund Freud 1990: 122). In his later essay 'A child is being beaten' (1919), Freud further develops his theory of the mechanism of obtaining masochistic pleasure, positions of identification and the manifestation of punishment caused by a male authority. This theory is imperative in understanding the representation of sexual violations in *Blasted* and will be shortly discussed in detail.

At this stage in 'Psychopathic characters on the stage', however, Freud maintains a rather simple view on how the audience gains pleasure. He claims that the audience's 'enjoyment is based on an illusion', and is derived from his or her awareness that 'it is only a game, which can threaten no damage to his personal security' (Sigmund Freud 1990: 122). He goes on to argue that a 'precondition' of theatre is that it 'should not cause suffering to the audience': '[I]t should know how to compensate, by means of possible satisfactions involved' (Sigmund Freud 1990: 123). When it comes to what he calls 'psychopathological drama', however, 'the source of the suffering in which we take part and from which we are meant to derive pleasure is no longer a conflict between' two conscious impulses but 'between a conscious impulse

and a repressed one' (Sigmund Freud 1990: 125). In order to enjoy this kind of drama, the spectator 'should be a neurotic' because it is 'only such people who can derive pleasure' rather than 'simple aversion from the revelation' and 'recognition' of the repressed material (Sigmund Freud 1990: 125). While this is not to suggest that people who enjoy Kane's plays are neurotic, it can be seen that her controversial plays unveil our psychic conditions and deeper layers of repression. As Patrick Campbell points out, according to Freud, 'if this staged struggle is too threatening, the average spectator's defences will inhibit the play of empathy and the generation of cathartic feelings linked to unconscious desire' (Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear 2001: 2). As Campbell claims, in so-called extreme art represented by the body art such as bloody and visceral nude rituals in the Viennese Actionism of Hermann Nitsch, 'this threat is not diverted' (Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear 2001: 2). Instead, this type of performance is aimed 'to unsettle the psyche, to break down the divide between super-ego and id, between socially and culturally imposed patterns of behaviour and the drives of the libido' (Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear 2001: 3). I argue that Kane also employs the same strategy by Nitsch and uses nudity in such a provocative way in order to explore the constitution of the self by way of exposing the most naked body.

The influence of the extreme body art on Kane's work can be found in her interview with *The Guardian* on 20 August 1998. Here, after she draws an analogy between the experience of watching a play and a football match, she talks about what she pursues in her own performance experience, mentioning *Deep Throat* (1996), the work by Mona Hatoum:

> The sexual connotations of 'performance' are not coincidental. Liverpool's Paul Ince publicly admits that he finds tackling more enjoyable than sex. Performance is visceral. It puts you in direct physical contact with thought and feeling . . . [I] found myself longing for a theatre that could speak so directly to an audience's experience. It rarely happens. But it . . . happened at the Mona Hatoum exhibition at the Scottish Gallery of Modern Art. In a tiny cylindrical room I watched a projection of a surgical camera disappearing into every orifice of the artist. True,

> few people could stay in the room as long as me, but I found the voyage up Mona Hatoum's arse put me in powerful and direct contact with my feelings about my own mortality. I can't ask for much more.
>
> (Cited in Graham Saunders 2009: 83–4)

What Kane expresses in this interview then is her artistic ambition: To put the audience in 'powerful and direct contact' with one's 'feelings' about one's 'own 'mortality' through the naked body that marks 'itself as loss' (Sue-Ellen Case 2002: 193) – as Case and Peggy Phelan put it – and as the abject body. More parallels can be drawn between Kane and the Viennese Actionism of Nitsch and Otto Mühl in their ways of employing nudity to display the abject body. In his essay 'Nudity and textuality in postmodern performance', Karl Toepfer offers us various definitions of nudity and strategies for its deployment in performance as a disruptive mode of textuality that impels 'the spectator to see the body in some new way' (Karl Toepfer 1996: 78). What Toepfer calls 'ritual nudity' as represented by Viennese Actionism entails exposing 'what is "inside" it': one of Nitsch's works involved 'the crucifixion of nude male or female bodies, which he drenches with the blood of sacrificial animals, entrails, visceral slime' (Karl Toepfer 1996: 79). Mühl's '"action commune" performed monstrously scatological orgies' in order to make the most 'private' yet 'necessary' bodily functions, 'such as ejaculations, urination, menstruation, excretion, the subject of spectacle' (Karl Toepfer 1996: 79). Toepfer argues that 'the body is "most naked" when we see coming out of it what causes us to fear it: sweat, blood, sperm, excrement, urine, vomit, "mysterious" cellular activity' (Karl Toepfer 1996: 79). Such exhibitionism is only too familiar to the audience of Kane. Towards the end of *Blasted* Kane presents a series of tableaux images of the male protagonist Ian retaining 'private' yet 'necessary' bodily functions:

> *Darkness.*
> *Light.*
> **Ian** *masturbating.*
> **Ian**: cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt cunt

Darkness.
Light.
Ian *strangling himself.*
Darkness.
Light.
Ian *shitting.*

(Sarah Kane 2001: 59)

Equally graphic, *Phaedra's Love* opens with Hippolytus who '*picks up a sock . . . blow*[*ing*] *his nose on it*', '*picks up another sock*' and '*puts his penis into the sock and masturbates until he comes*' while '*impassively*' watching television (Sarah Kane 2001: 66). The play ends with the scene of Hippolytus' public execution, which shows even more visceral and violent images than the first scene, echoing the ritual nude of Nitsch's work:

Man 1 *pulls down* Hippolytus' *trousers.*
Women 2 *cuts off his genitals.*
They are thrown onto the barbecue.
. . .
Theseus *takes the knife.*
He cuts Hippolytus *from groin to chest.*
Hippolytus' *bowels are torn out and thrown onto the barbecue.*
He is kicked and stoned and spat on.

(Sarah Kane 2001: 101)

'Nudity', according to Toepfer, 'is incomplete until the body secretes what the flesh hides', and in this sense the final scene of *Phaedra's Love* exemplifies the 'ritual nudity' he describes (Karl Toepfer 1996: 80). Toepfer goes on to argue that with its 'considerable power to shock audiences', 'what comes out of the body' is always the reminder of 'the ominous fragility of human physiology before a turbulent "inner" darkness' (Karl Toepfer 1996: 80). While Toepfer does not employ Kristeva's concept of abjection in his essay, his point here shares much in common with her theory. According to Kristeva, '[u]rine, blood,

sperm, excrement', vomit and 'spittle' are objects generating abjection (Julia Kristeva 1982: 53, 69). These are 'improper' and 'unclean' objects that need to be expelled from one's body, and 'the disorderly elements of its corporeal existence' must be 'separated from its clean and proper self' in order for us to form a sense of the self (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 86–8). In other words, the process of expelling the abject entity is fundamental in the psychic development of the self and entering into what Kristeva calls the paternal symbolic order. As Elizabeth Gross explains, the objects causing abjection 'inscribe the body in those surfaces' and 'orifices, which will later become erotogenic zones' that 'are structured in the form of the rim' like the mouth, eyes, ears, anus and genitals (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 88). The rim is the 'space between two corporeal surfaces, an interface between what is inside' and 'outside of the body' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 88.). The abject entity, then, causes repulsion, disgust and horror precisely because it is 'undecidably inside and outside the body', and 'disturbs identity, system and order, disrupting social boundaries demanded by the symbolic' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 90).

What must be expelled and abjected from 'the subject's corporeal functioning', however, 'can never be fully obliterated but hovers at the borders of the subject's identity' alarming 'the apparently settled unity of the subject with disruption and possible dissolution' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 87). The abject entity recurs and threatens us 'not only in those events Freud described as the "return of the repressed"', but it is also 'a necessary accompaniment of sublimated and socially validated activities, such as the production of art, literature' and 'socially unacceptable forms of sexual drives' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 87). As Gross emphasises, the abject, like Kristeva's other concepts such as the maternal *chora* and the semiotic – a pre-verbal and poetic language before entering the symbolic – is placed on the side of the feminine, 'opposed to the paternal, rule-governed symbolic order' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 93). Whether or not articulating the abject – the repressed feminine element – can truly disrupt and subvert the patriarchal order and enable us to restore female subjectivity is another big question along with whether 'the speaking subject' occupies 'a sexually coded position' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 101). Whether Kane endorses what French

feminists call *écriture féminine* is not the main focus of this study. As her interview shows, Kane herself did not like the 'woman writer' label: 'My only responsibility as a writer is to the truth, however unpleasant that truth may be. I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don't believe there's such a thing' (cited in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge 1997: 134–5). Quoting the same interview, Elaine Aston positions Kane in the context of the 'postfeminist' 1990s represented as the decade of 'masculinity in crisis' (Elaine Aston 2003: 2–3). Aston, in 'bringing a feminist view to Kane's theatre', claims that it is the 'damaging effects of a "diseased male identity" that are central to Kane's theatre' (Elaine Aston 2003: 80). If, as Aston points out, the press curiously made Kane a 'ladette' of British theatre (see Smith, this volume), in tandem with the emergence in the 1990s of the 'new lad' British culture, by constantly highlighting the 'masculine' side of her and her works – for instance *The Guardian* referred her play as 'Drama with Balls' (cited in Graham Saunders 2009: 84) – such media responses to and fuss about her drama reveal Britain's anxiety about Kane's forbidden transgression, the trespass into the realm of what is considered to be the male domain, a specific representational form for male creativity.

The Body of Signification

> What man suffers from finally is no more the supremacy of spirit over flesh than flesh over spirit; it is the dualism that hurts. (Philip Rief 1959: 344)

The importance and value of Kane's dramatic writing, then, lie in her keen awareness and recognition of the disruptive force of the visceral images of the 'most naked' bodies – the abject bodies that put us 'in powerful and direct contact' with our feelings about our 'own mortality' (cited in Graham Saunders 2009: 84). As such, Kane's writing raises the very question of whether 'the speaking subject' indeed occupies 'a sexually coded position' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 101). Equally importantly, Kane's drama restores the body of signification despite the damaging representation of it within the work, challenging the

dualism of the Cartesian heritage, which imposes 'the supremacy of spirit over flesh' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 101). To some extent Kane also partakes in this heritage by expressing the angst of the mind and body dichotomy, and 'the dualism that hurts' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 101). As Kane's own words suggest, her last two plays *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000) are about 'the split between one's consciousness and one's physical being' (cited in Graham Saunders 2002: 113). One of the voices in *4.48 Psychosis*, for instance, claims '[b]ody and soul can never be married' (Sarah Kane 2001: 212). What is at stake in most of Kane's plays is the connection between them. The voices in *Crave* declare, 'I want to feel physically like I feel emotionally. Starved. Beaten. Broken' (Sarah Kane 2001: 179). The aspect of self-harming and self-mutilation pervasive in Kane's works can be construed as 'a temporary way of connecting mind and body together' (Graham Saunders 2002: 114). In response to the question '[w]hy did you cut your arm?', the voice in *4.48 Psychosis* answers '[b]ecause it feels fucking great. Because it feels fucking amazing' (Sarah Kane 2001: 217). Such a brief span of union between mind and body is also achieved at the end of *Phaedra's Love* cited above. Just before Hippolytus dies, he pronounces '[i]f there could have been more moments like this' (Sarah Kane 2001: 103). Thus the physical pains that Kane's characters pursue are a way of giving expression to what they actually feel emotionally, seeking a momentary unification. Rather than separating the role of the body and corporeality outside of the subject, Kane's plays position the self within the space of its body through the masochistic fantasy that manifests the characters' yearning for a cohesive identity. However 'unpleasant', Kane endeavours to reveal the most naked truth about the self by portraying the exterior body that mirrors the psychical interior. In this way Kane endorses what Gross claims in the following sentence: 'Only if the body's psychical interior is projected outwards, and its material externality is introjected as necessary conditions of subjectivity, can the dualism of our Cartesian heritage be challenged' (Elizabeth Gross 1990: 82).

Kane's later plays tend to focus on the theme of the loss of self in the form of seeking love. As Saunders rightly points out this 'awful physical aching fucking longing' (Sarah Kane 2001: 214) cried out

by one of the voices in *4.48 Psychosis* 'in fact constitutes the search for self-hood' (Graham Saunders 2002: 113). In contrast to her later plays that depict a more abstract psychical world occupied by unnamed and genderless characters, on the surface, as mentioned above, *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love* seem to focus on the 'damaging effects of a "diseased male identity" ' (Elaine Aston 2003: 80). More central to these early works, however, is arguably the 'damaging' of a male identity by exposing their naked bodies to be humiliated and violated. At the beginning of *Blasted*, Ian '*gets up, takes* [*his clothes*] *all off and stands in front of* [Cate]*, naked*' and says '[p]ut your mouth on me' (Sarah Kane 2001: 7). Because the power imbalance between the couple is established in the very first moment they appear (from the beginning forty-five-year-old Ian is verbally abusive to twenty-one-year-old Cate who stutters and behaves naively), Cate's reaction to Ian's request is rather an unexpected one:

> **Cate**: (S*tares. Then burst out laughing.*)
> **Ian**: No?
> Fine.
> Because I stink?
> **Cate**: (*Laughs even more.*)
> **Ian** *attempts to dress, but fumbles with embarrassment.*
>
> (Sarah Kane 2001: 8)

By staring and laughing at Ian, in other words, by merely employing non-verbal language, Cate imposes an acute sense of shame on Ian. Kane exploits the naked body in the opening scene not only to cause humiliation to Ian, but also to reveal the actual vulnerability behind his machismo, exemplifying one of the strategies of nudity described by Toepfer: 'Nudity as disclosure of weakness . . . and the failure of erotic feeling to produce satisfying "connections" between people' (Karl Toepfer 2003: 171). This scene also displays that there is no erotic feeling towards Ian from Cate's side, which makes her later rape more problematic.

As observed above, in *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love* the male protagonist's naked body serves as a source of violence and violation, making

it the abject rather than the object of desire. What is most striking about the scenes of violence and sexual violation in those plays is that neither Ian nor Hippolytus resists when they are brutally attacked, nor do they beg the perpetrator to stop. Instead, as discussed earlier, in the case of Hippolytus when his trousers are pulled down and his body is mutilated, he seems to welcome the punishment and to be seeking 'more moments like this', of masochistic pleasure. Similarly, in the infamous scene in which Ian is raped by the Soldier and Ian's eyes are gouged and eaten immediately after the rape, the stage directions do not indicate Ian screams or vehemently resists. Instead, the stage direction reads Ian '*is silent*':

> **Soldier**: Going to fuck you.
> **Ian**: No.
> **Soldier**: Kill you then.
> **Ian**: Fine.
> **Solider**: See. Rather be shot than fucked and shot.
> . . .
> *The* **Soldier** *turns* **Ian** *over with one hand.*
> *He holds the revolver to* **Ian***'s head with other.*
> *He pulls down* **Ian***'s trousers, undoes his own and rapes him – eyes closed and smelling* **Ian***'s hair.*
> *The* **Soldier** *is crying his heart out.*
> **Ian***'s face registers pain but he is silent.*
> *When the* **Soldier** *has finished he pulls up his trousers and pushes the revolver* up **Ian***'s anus.*
>
> (Sarah Kane 2001: 49)

This scene, which portrays sexual violation in such an explicit manner by exposing and damaging erotic zones like anus and eyes, generated horror and abjection, and aroused a great deal of controversy. Together with the graphic violence, the critics' uneasiness about the scene is related to not only the lack of an apparent connection between two acts of rape but also the play's fractured dramatic form and structure: the domestic first half set in a hotel room in Leeds in the form of realism, which is transformed into a war-zone that lacks external

reality in the second half. Perceived as a most problematic scene, Kane made several remarks defending her artistic choice when the scene was described in many reviews as 'a soldier comes in and randomly rapes Ian' (Graham Saunders 2002: 46): Kane explained that the logic causing 'a common rape in Leeds' has a direct link to 'mass rape as a war weapon in Bosnia': 'One is the seed and the other is the tree' (cited in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge: 131 and Aleks Sierz 2001: 101). She also argued 'what [critics] kept ignoring was the fact that [the Soldier] does it with a gun to [Ian's] head, which Ian has done to Cate earlier – and he's crying his eyes out as he does it. Well, I think both these things have changed that theatrical image completely' (cited in Graham Saunders 2002: 46).

While Kane here criticises the spectators' and critics' tendency to derive aversion from the theatrical images and to repress uncomfortable material by 'ignoring' the significance of the repeated images, it is also important to note that, in fact, the ways in which Kane presents the scene hinder the spectator in forming a position of identification, which, according to Freud, is essential for gaining pleasure when watching someone suffer in a play. For instance, the inclusion of the Soldier '*crying his heart out*' further unsettles the positions of identification rather than offering us an obvious link between multiple acts of rapes. One cannot help but wonder why the Soldier is 'crying his eyes out' when he rapes Ian and why Ian is silent? Does Ian's response in this scene hint at his masochistic pleasure just as Hippolytus's does at the end of *Phaedra's Love*? Or does the scene suggest Cate's sadistic voyeurism and her revenge fantasy whereby the perpetrator of her rape is punished? The unrevealed and repressed elements of the characters' motivations locate *Blasted* in what Freud calls 'psychopathological drama'. Followed by Kane's statement above is her own criticism about critics who 'have problems discussing [the] theatrical imagery' of the play, and who 'just take the meaning from the words' ignoring the significance of the 'image structure' (cited in Graham Saunders 2002: 46). In part, critics' failure to recognise Kane's theatrical imagery stems from their attempt to comprehend *Blasted* in the logic of reason familiar to the naturalistic form. Even though there is an historical reference to the Bosnian War claimed by the writer, *Blasted*, especially the

second half of the play, requires Freudian language and logic of fantasy in order to shed light on Kane's theatrical images and her strategy of unsettling the spectator's habitual gaze.

A Child Is Being Beaten

Central to a theory of spectatorship is Freud's essay 'A child is being beaten', which identifies complex fantasies developed from early childhood. For Elizabeth Cowie, as for Freud, fantasy is found not only in daydreams but also in public forms of fantasy such as 'films, stories, plays, [and] television' which replace 'childish play for adults' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 149–50). As Janet McCabe points out, applications of Freud's essay have played a key role in discussions of pornography and horror films (Janet McCabe 2004: 98). McCabe claims that the excess of 'sex, violence and emotion' that characterises those genres is 'not only written into the bodies on screen (most notably sexually saturated female body)... but also has physical effects on the body of the spectator linked to original fantasies' (Janet McCabe 2004: 98). The rest of this chapter, then, is going to show the ways in which Kane appropriates the function of fantasy that is employed by pornographic and horror films and compels the spectator to confront the most naked truth about the psychical reality and inner darkness. Kane was keenly aware of the nature of fantasy, especially rape fantasy, opposed to reality, that is often exploited in pornographic novel and films. Referring to controversial representations of rape in Andrea Dworkin's novel,[3] Kane problematises our inclination to impose 'moral judgement' on 'sexual fantasy': 'I do always think that in fantasy anything goes, and I do think that it's completely possible to spend your entire life fantasizing about killing and raping people, but actually have no desire to do that in reality at all' (Graham Saunders 2009: 62). Kane goes on to argue that 'I think that most of the time people who are looking at pornography are completely aware that it's a construct, and that's part of what gets them off. It's the fact that it's not real' (Graham Saunders 2009: 62). This matches the definition of fantasy that Cowie draws from Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, the 'setting' or '*mise-en-scène* of desire' in so far as 'desire itself originates as prohibition' (Elizabeth

Cowie 1992: 136, Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis 1986: 27). In re-reading 'A child is being beaten', Laplanche and Pontalis emphasise that fantasy is 'not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images' (Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis 1986: 27). That is to say, the expression of fantasy is marked by the absence of the 'real' object of desire, and the primary function of fantasy is to 'construct' a setting for desire that is prohibited in reality.

The appearance of the subject as a spectator in fantasy also requires more elaboration. Mainly based on beating fantasies amongst women, Freud in 'A child is being beaten' theorises the darker side of sexuality as perversion, the fantasy that is associated with sadistic and masochistic pleasures. A surprising number of female patients professed the same beating fantasy in which the fantasiser silently watches an unknown boy child being beaten by an unknown male adult. The spectacle of the beating fantasy was 'invariably' associated with not only 'a high degree of pleasure' that resulted in the 'masturbatory satisfaction . . . on the genitals', but also a sense of guilt and shame (Sigmund Freud 1979: 163–4). Freud traced the development of the fantasy in girls in three phases, each involving a different subject position: first, my father is beating a child, whom I hate, thus, my 'father does not love this other child, *he loves only me*' (Sigmund Freud 1979: 172). While this expresses the child's passive wish, to be loved by the father, it also shows a form of sadism because her wish made her father beat the other child in fantasy. 'For this to become transposed into' the third-person syntax of 'a child is being beaten', Freud proposed a second phase: 'I am being beaten by my father' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 144). This beating is 'not only the punishment for the forbidden' incestuous wish, but also the 'direct expression of the girl's sense of guilt' which is also 'invariably the factor that transforms sadism [making her father beat the other child] into masochism [father beating her]' (Sigmund Freud 1979: 174–5). In contrast to the first phase that may be remembered through analysis, Freud claims the second phase 'remains unconscious' due to the 'intensity of the repression' (Sigmund Freud 1979: 175). Finally in the third phase, which is a consciously remembered fantasy, a child who is usually a boy is being

beaten by a father surrogate such as a 'teacher' or someone 'in authority' while 'I' look on, therefore making the child appear 'as a spectator' (Sigmund Freud 1979: 176). This fantasy appears to be sadistic in form only, and in fact 'the satisfaction which is derived from it is masochistic' because '[a]ll of the many unspecified children who are being beaten by the teacher are, after all, nothing more than substitutes for the child itself' (Sigmund Freud 1979: 177).

According to Cowie, it is through this 'guise of the third-person syntax that the fantasy escapes repression', and it is also in the defensive processes that 'the adult sadomasochistic fantasy scenarios can be located – a pleasure not so much in being beaten as in what this beating represents, a forbidden transgression' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 145). The benefit of appearing as a spectator in fantasy means that the process of fantasy layers multiple positions of identification as well as 'an interchangeability between active and passive' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 145). Cowie, therefore, argues that forms of identification in pornography are extremely fluid: we cannot assume that 'the man watching the porn film showing scenes of violence' identifies only with the male figure who perpetuates the violence and 'the wish for a passive position in the sexual relationship' is 'extremely common in male sexual fantasies' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 145). Rape fantasy can be understood 'in relation to this reversibility of active and passive in the fantasy scenario' because it involves placing the active part on to the other when seeking to 'control the actions of the other' whereas 'one's own pleasure is also the desire of the other' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 141). For Cowie, the 'substitution of rape for seduction arises in the attempt to disavow the subject's own desire', so that the looked-for sexual activity is 'received in the form of an imposition from outside' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 141). Hence, the aim of fantasy is achieved in the following way: 'the woman resists valiantly but is overcome, so that despite herself she is pleasured' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 141). Employing Cowie's model, Barbara Creed states that just as in the porn film, 'the subject positions with which the horror film most frequently encourages the spectator to identify oscillate between those of victim and monster but with greater emphasis on the former', generating an extreme form of the masochistic gaze (Barbara Creed 1993: 154).

With the power of images that arouse masochistic voyeurism, Creed argues that the horror film returns us to the primal fantasies of 'birth, seduction, castration', by constructing its scenarios in 'a *mise-en-scène* which is marked by horror and the abject' (Barbara Creed 1993: 153).

Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander

Kane too appropriates fantasy scenarios marked by the abject body and horror by presenting a series of rape scenes: Cate's offstage rape, the simulation of sex by Ian while she is unconscious, Ian's rape by the Soldier and finally the violent mass rape at war vividly narrated by the Soldier – the acts he and his fellows executed and his girlfriend's rape perpetrated by the enemy. If porn and horror films offer the scenario of fantasy in which the spectator identifies with the different positions of desire, allowing both sadistic and masochistic voyeurism, Kane in her plays complicates the aspect of the spectatorial gaze even further. While the conventional porn and horror films still tend to feature black and white characters, encouraging either sadistic or masochistic pleasure depending on the situation, Kane's character is often simultaneously a 'Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander' (Sarah Kane 2001: 231), impeding any position of identification. Uttered by one of the voices in *4.48 Psychosis*, 'Victim. Perpetrator. Bystander' epitomizes not only Freud's three phases of the beating fantasy development, but also the ambivalent status of the self that reveals the 'unpleasant truth' about the dark psychical world. The brilliancy of Kane's writing is found in the way in which she layers a series of rape scenarios before the climax scene where Ian is raped by the Soldier, evoking the brutal images and words that have been seen and heard. At the beginning of Scene Two, for example, the first rape image that is resonant with Cate's offstage rape is simulated in a realistic and appalling way. Immediately after Cate's fit, Ian '*goes to her, takes the gun and puts it back in the holster. Then lies her on the bed on her back. He puts the gun to her head, lies between her legs, and stimulates sex*' (Sarah Kane 2001: 27). Kane's explanation of the scene below reveals her intention of using the strategy of fantasy employed in pornography and her comprehensive understanding of the function

of fantasy, which is presented with the telling analogy of a childhood beating fantasy:

> I find that the most disturbing scene, and again it's to do with image: that thing of putting a gun to her head . . . It's not about the rationale of putting a gun to a head. The answer is that it simply turns him on. It's a complete stimuli: he doesn't understand it – he just does it. It gives him an erection and so he brings himself off; and he has no understanding of it whatsoever, which is probably how a lot of pornography and fantasy work. You don't hang around and think, 'Oh this is to do with when my father spanked me as a child.' You just think, 'Whip me!'
>
> (Cited in Graham Saunders 2009: 63–4)

To return to the analysis of the scene of Ian's rape using the Freudian model of fantasy, on the one hand, the scene can be seen as Ian's own rape fantasy which is highly overdetermined, as Freud would put it, due to his previous rape of Cate. As Cowie explains, it is 'a profoundly passive fantasy, and apparently found as commonly in men as in women' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 142). In Ian's rape fantasy masochistic pleasure is doubled because the rape fantasy not only fulfils his wish for a passive position but also becomes the manifestation of his wish for punishment for having violated Cate. The recurring image of the gun on the head then becomes crucial in construing the scene as Ian's rape fantasy because he is the only person who repeats the action either actively doing it or passively receiving it. It is also noteworthy that in this rape fantasy Ian utters exactly the same words – 'No. Fine' – that he previously says to Cate when he demands oral sex. Cate persistently says 'no' and asks Ian to stop whenever Ian sexually approaches her. However, Ian ignores this refusal and violates her, following the common male fantasy that man is giving her the pleasure she denies but actually desires. Ian too says 'no' to the Soldier but only once, and during the rape he is silent. Whereas his silence can be seen as a sign of his masochistic pleasure, even if the scene is understood as his sheer fantasy not as real, it becomes problematic because it seems to confirm the male logic of justification for rape – 'no means yes'. This is exactly

how Kane makes the play all the more provocative. The close link between the two acts of rape makes the surrealistic representation of Ian's rape scene more disturbing. Reflecting the earlier representations of a number of sexual abuses and Cate's unstaged rape,[4] the nightmarish images of rape envisaged in Ian's rape scene breach the spectator's deeper layer of repression, the memory of what has been veiled and unstaged, like the return of the repressed, each act amplifying the impact of horror.

Kane also sees the Soldier as 'a kind of personification of Ian's psyche' (cited in Graham Saunders 2002: 46), which complicates the sadomasochistic implication of the rape fantasy further. When the Soldier cries his heart out, we wonder whether this is the expression of Ian's self-pity by making the personification of Ian's psyche weeps for him. When the Soldier offends Ian, as Saunders points out, he embodies what other soldiers have done to his girlfriend: 'they buggered her . . . He ate her eyes. Poor bastard. Poor love. Poor fucking bastard' (Sarah Kane 2001: 50). After these last words, the Soldier kills himself, and according to Kane 'the only way he can ever learn what his girlfriend had to go through is when he's pulling the trigger . . . the next moment is the moment of his death' (cited in Graham Saunders 2002: 47). While it can be seen that the Soldier cries as a result of empathising with his girlfriend's experience, his sympathetic comment towards the tormentor of his girlfriend is an articulation of self-pity, identifying himself with the tormentor. As such, in this rape fantasy the perpetrator becomes a victim at the same time, generating intense ambivalent feelings to the audience.

On the other hand, as previously argued, Ian's rape scene can also be read as Cate's revenge fantasy whereby the perpetrator of her rape is punished. Kane's own comment that the 'play collapses into one of Cate's fits' is significant in this sense: The realistic style of the first half is 'suddenly and violently disrupted by the entrance of an unexpected element that drags the character and the play into a chaotic pit without logical explanation' (cited in Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge: 130). Cate's absence throughout the scenes between two men until the Soldier kills himself not only removes the possibility of making herself the object of male violence in her own fantasy, but also allows us to see

her as a spectator of the revenge fantasy. In Scene Four when she re-enters after the Soldier's death, her first words addressed to Ian, 'You're a nightmare' (Sarah Kane 2001: 51), become a commentary of her own fantasy. However, even after the downfall of the wicked, Kane refuses to propose conventional poetic justice that rewards a good character until the end. In Scene Five, Cate leaves the stage once again to 'get some [food] off a soldier' by selling herself (Sarah Kane 2001: 58). When she re-enters '*carrying some bread, a large sausage and a bottle of gin*' we see her tormented and damaged body, '*blood seeping from between her legs*' (Sarah Kane 2001: 60). Following this disturbing image is one of Cate eating the sausage, drinking gin, feeding the remaining food to Ian and pouring gin in Ian's mouth. Once again, this image echoes in reverse Cate and Ian's act from previous scenes where she rejects the meat and gin that Ian offers her, repeatedly showing her aversion to 'Dead meat. Blood' (Sarah Kane 2001: 7) to the extent that she '*retch*[*es*]' when she sees sausages (Sarah Kane 2001: 35). Their final words are also worthy of quoting: Cate, referring to Ian says '[s]tupid bastard' as he is 'sitting under a hole' getting 'wet', and conversely Ian says '[t]hank you', expressing his gratitude to her for feeding him (Sarah Kane 2001: 60–1). Here Cate evokes and arguably appropriates the Soldier's final words 'Poor bastard' heard in her revenge fantasy, simultaneously articulating her sympathy and hate towards the perpetrator of her rape. Although Kane claims the last scene can be read as an expression of 'hope' out of a 'feeling of despair' (cited in Aleks Sierz 2001: 91), the powerful and appalling image of Cate at the end of the play anticipates despair rather than hope.

Such is the very nature of fantasy – the deferral of a resolution. According to Cowie, as long as 'the wish relates to a prohibition', the effect of repression is still pervasive 'so that where a wish has undergone repression, a fantasy may provide a satisfaction', not by presenting a successful scenario of wish-fulfillment, 'on the contrary by enacting the failure and frustration of that wish', creating 'a fantasy of pain rather than pleasure' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992: 144). Since the achievement of wished-for objects would finally end the fantasy, 'there is an endless repetition, with the same scene or series of scenes reproduced over and over again' (Elizabeth Cowie 1992:

137). Kane's fantasy scenario, her '*mise-en-scène* of desire – in which desire is for the abject' (Barbara Creed 1993: 154) then creates even more painful repetition, presenting the same disturbing images over and over, amplifying the power of the abject body. As this chapter has demonstrated, at the centre of Kane's *mise-en-scène* is the violated abject body that reveals the dark naked truth about the psychical interior, the subject position becoming simultaneously that of victim, perpetrator and bystander. Conversely, if one's wish relates to a prohibition, as Freud argues in *Totem and Taboo* (1912–13), prohibition is also the result of an emotional ambivalence motivated by unconscious desire or longing (Sigmund Freud 2001: 21). The critics' unprecedented fury and resistance towards *Blasted* mean that the play does not display sheer exhibitionism. Rather, *Blasted* has unveiled highly repressed material such as what the flesh hides not by diverting the threat of it but in contrast by increasing it through exposing a number of bodily orifices on the threshold between inner and outer. Kane artfully achieves this by creating the image structure that breaches the world of fantasy and reality represented in *Blasted*. In her search for the most cohesive self through her work, instead of following the social norm that demands us to expel what is considered improper abject entities, Kane restores the abject body compelling us to confront the most naked truth about ourselves as well as our own mortality.

Notes

1. http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/september/27/newsid_3107000/3107815.stm. 17 September 2011.
2. http://www.inyerface-theatre.com/az.html. 17 September 2011.
3. Dworkin's novels include *Woman Hating* (1974) and *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981). In her interview with Graham Saunders, she does not specifically mention the title of the novel.
4. Using Peggy Phelan's theory about the political power of what has been unmarked and unseen, presented in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Kim Solga convincingly reads the political implications behind Cate's unstaged rape. See Solga 2007.

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CHAPTER 4

'WAVING GENITALS AND MANUSCRIPTS': GINSBERG'S 'HOWL' AND BUTLER'S *EXCITABLE SPEECH*

Andrew Webb

'What are you trying to prove?' yelled a drunken heckler at Allen Ginsberg's public reading of 'Howl' in Los Angeles on 30 October 1956. 'Nakedness!' was the poet's bawled reply and, instead of accepting the man's invitation to a fight, Ginsberg advanced on the heckler, stripped naked, and challenged his interlocutor to do the same. Anaïs Nin, the diarist and author of erotica who was in the audience, described Ginsberg's exhibitionism here as having 'so much meaning in terms of all our fears of unveiling ourselves', while Ginsberg later wrote to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, his publisher and fellow Beat poet, that the Los Angeles reading was 'the most wild ever. I disrobed finally' (quoted in Barry Miles 1989: 213). The heckler had objected to Ginsberg's depiction of 'the best minds of [his] generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix', as well as subsequent lines which describe female and male nakedness, and gay, straight, casual sex: characters who 'copulated ecstatic and insatiate' in 'a vision

of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness', as well as those who 'let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy'. By May 1957, these lines were enough to land Ferlinghetti in court for publishing obscene material, a prosecution led by Ralph McIntosh, campaigner for the censoring of California's 'nudist' magazines, as well as Jane Russell's 1943 film *The Outlaw*. His, eventually unsuccessful, prosecution of 'Howl' generated its 'terrific sales' (ten thousand copies by the end of the trial), and contributed to the text's cult status as *the* poetic expression of late-1950s counterculture (Barry Miles 1989: 230).

The anonymous heckler's choice of rhetoric – 'what are you trying to prove?' – is, of course, on one level, a drunken challenge, a handy colloquialism with which to interrupt the reading. It also, however, anticipates the legal discourse of the subsequent court case in which the poem became embroiled. I want to suggest that this heckler's language is – uncannily – close to the mark. 'Howl', I will argue, is a poem concerned from its outset by legality, especially in the areas of obscenity, and the representation of gender and sexuality, a line of critical enquiry that has not been fully explored. Elisabeth Ladenson's 2007 book, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita*, considers a range of cases, but crucially omits to discuss 'Howl'. As Loren Glass points out, this oversight marks a failure to examine 'the crucial relationship between literary obscenity and the cultural politics of homosexuality in the postwar era' (Loren Glass 2009: 873). Another recent publication, *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression*, edited by Bill Morgan and Nancy J. Peters in 2006, treats the successful defence of 'Howl' as a key point in a progressive history of free speech, albeit one that is currently under threat. Taking such a historical perspective, while illuminating in other respects, means that it too omits to explore the relation between 'Howl's representation of 'obscenity', homosexuality and the law, and lacks the critical or theoretical tools to do so. In order to explore this relation, this chapter will employ the work of the theorist Judith Butler, a critic described by Jonathan Dollimore as 'the most brilliantly eclectic theorist of sexuality in recent years' (Jonathan Dollimore 1996: 533). Sarah Salih notes that Butler's work has 'opened up critical debates on identity, gender,

sex and language' and facilitated 'new directions for feminist theory, queer theory and philosophy (among many other areas too numerous to list)' (Sarah Salih 2002: 137).

While Butler's influence has been established largely through her early book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, published in 1990, and to a lesser extent *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, published in 1993, this chapter will primarily employ her more recent work, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, published in 1997. Here, Butler explores, among other things, the relation between so-called pornography or sexual representation and obscenity laws. In this chapter, after a brief discussion of the insights offered in *Excitable Speech*, I hope to offer a new reading of Ginsberg's employment of obscenity in 'Howl'. My argument falls into two halves: the first part, based mainly on chapter two of *Excitable Speech*, 'Burning Acts, Injurious Speech', demonstrates Butler's contention that censorship laws produce the very 'obscenity' that they attempt to outlaw. In particular, the poem's early reference to the publication of an 'obscene ode', for which its author is punished, draws attention to the relation between the law and the 'obscene'. Having established this connection, 'Howl' can be read as a provocative re-performance of 'obscenity', one that, in a sense, 'authorises' a further re-performance: the obscenity trial that followed its publication. It does so, I shall argue, in order to investigate the premise on which it may be deemed 'obscene' in the first place. The second half of my article turns to chapter three of *Excitable Speech*, 'Contagious Word: Paranoia and "Homosexuality" in the Military', in which Butler investigates the relation between homosexuality and the US military. Here, I argue that 'Howl' can be read as a text which does what Butler calls for: it successfully 'disjoins' homosexuality from its typical representation in 1950s US society. By intervening in US society's production of the 'masculinist citizen[s]' necessary for the prosecution of the Cold War, 'Howl' successfully makes the issue of homosexual representation central to attempts to resist the polarising and binary ideology of the Cold War.

In *Excitable Speech*, Butler returns to the Nietzschean idea that 'there is no "being" behind doing, acting, becoming: "the doer" is merely a fiction imposed on the doing – the doing itself is everything' (Judith Butler 1997: 45). This is a premise of the insight in *Gender Trouble* for

which Butler has become so well known – that gender is not innate or 'natural' to the subject, but should be seen as:

> the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (Judith Butler 1990: 33)

This insight into the 'performativity' of gender controversially suggests that it is something that we 'do' (rather than 'are') within a set of possibilities which is limited by the discourse of gender within what Butler calls 'a heterosexual matrix of power' – how 'man' and 'woman' (among other terms) are discursively constructed in a society that privileges and encourages the adoption of heterosexual identities. Within this discourse, 'there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [. . .] identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (Judith Butler 1990: 25). *Excitable Speech* extends this analysis to all speech acts, suggesting that there is no such thing as an obscene speaker, or an utterer of hateful speech; instead, a speaker of such terms has her/his identity performatively constituted by the discourses which render some speech acts obscene or hateful. Like Butler's view of gender formation, this is controversial, implying perhaps that those who use hateful speech are formed by, rather than the originators of, the views they espouse.

Butler then develops her thesis by considering the ramifications of the phrase 'excitable speech', a legal term for utterances which are seen to be beyond the speaker's control, often as a result of being made under duress. Her analysis, however, runs against the grain of the conventional interpretation of the term by making the case that all speech is beyond the utterer's control (Judith Butler 1997: 15). She takes Jacques Derrida's idea that words are not 'saturable', or limitable to the immediate context in which they are used, in order to make the case that no act of speech happens only in its own moment. It is necessarily a 'condensation' of inherited meanings from the past (over which the speaker has no control), as well as present meanings, and those (as yet unforeseen) meanings of the future. In this sense,

argues Butler, any speech act is beyond the utterer's control or 'excitable' in the legal sense: it exceeds 'the moment it occasions' (Judith Butler 1997: 14). She goes on to make the point that no speaker can be understood as the only originator of her/his utterance. It follows that a discourse, rather than an individual, should be prosecuted for a speech act that is deemed unacceptable, but this, of course, is impractical (as well as an inconvenient truth for those who wish to police speech), so legal authorities create the fiction of the sovereign subject who can, of course, be prosecuted (Judith Butler 1997: 45). In fact, the very idea of a sole originator is, argues Butler, a fabrication put forward by legal authorities in order to justify their regulation of speech.

Butler then considers recent US Supreme Court judgements on the applicability, or otherwise, of the First Amendment (which protects free speech) to acts of perceived 'hate speech'. She begins by noting the defence successfully employed in the case of a white man who placed a burning cross on the lawn of a house where a black family lived: that this action should be construed as an act of speech, protected under the First Amendment (rather than an act of racial hatred or destruction). After a series of appeals, the US Supreme Court eventually decided that the burning cross was a 'viewpoint' within the 'free marketplace of ideas' (Judith Butler 1997: 53). Butler then turns to the arguments put forward by anti-pornography campaigner Catharine MacKinnon, whose *Only Words* (1993) conceives of pornographic sexual representation as itself a kind of hate speech targeted at women (Judith Butler 1997: 65). MacKinnon's ideas, suggests Butler, are based on the premise that 'the visual image in pornography operates as an imperative, and that this imperative has the power to realise what it dictates' (1997: 65). By conceptualising pornographic sexual representation in this way, MacKinnon denies it the First Amendment defence of free speech. Instead, the text is assumed to construct the social reality of what it depicts, its authors guilty of an 'obscene' utterance, tantamount to an act of violence. Comparing the two legal positions, Butler contends that, while the burning cross, an act loaded with overtones of racial hatred, can be defended within the US legal system as an act of free speech, a text which represents sex in explicit ways can be designated as obscene, and thereby indefensible on the

grounds of free speech. Butler claims that this constitutes an 'arbitrary and tactical use of obscenity law', when seen in comparison to the earlier-mentioned case, and points up the ideological agendas around race and sex which govern its use. One of its particular effects, she argues, is to restrict gay self representation.

Basing her argument on the idea that all speech is 'excitable' or beyond the control of its speaker, Butler goes on to contend that MacKinnon is wrong to depict pornography in this way. MacKinnon's thesis, she argues, is based on an impossibility: the premise that, of all forms of speech, the pornographic text has the ability to enact what it depicts. Instead, Butler contends that:

> pornography neither represents nor constitutes what women are, but offers an allegory of masculine wilfulness and feminine submission [. . .] one which repeatedly and anxiously rehearses its own *un*realizability (Judith Butler 1997: 68)

It depicts 'fantasies' that are 'impossible and uninhabitable' within the domain of 'social reality' (Judith Butler 1997: 68). Pornographic texts have a 'phantasmatic' power precisely because of their failure to constitute that reality (Judith Butler 1997: 68).

Although Butler's argument here refers specifically to the field of law, I believe that it can also be applied to literature, especially to texts whose publishers and authors have found themselves subject to prosecution under obscenity laws, Ginsberg's 'Howl' being a case in point. Furthermore, while Butler's ideas are readily applied to recent times, most obviously to the intensifying debates in the last twenty years on the legality of hate speech, many of her theories, I suggest, are also relevant to the 1950s. This decade represents a period in US history when, as a result of the post-war re-establishment of a puritan discourse of heterosexuality within marriage, as well as a McCarthyite political ideology, representations of gender and sexuality were highly politicised. From the late 1940s onwards, liberties guaranteed by the US legal system were threatened by growing anti-communist paranoia: according to Ellen Schrecker, for those accused of un-American activities, 'the federal courts were not upholding the First Amendment'

(a protection not restored until the 1960s), while those who invoked their rights under the Fifth Amendment (the right not to incriminate oneself), were considered 'guilty of whatever it was they refused to talk about' (Ellen Schrecker 1994: 58).

My contention is that Butler's work in *Excitable Speech* opens up a new reading of 'Howl', one which presents the poem as a complex intervention into the fields of obscenity, sexuality, performance and censorship in the America of the 1950s. 'Howl', I suggest, re-performs scenes of 'obscenity' in order to challenge the grounds on which they might be deemed 'obscene'. In doing so, it implies that censorship laws produce the very 'obscenity' that they attempt to outlaw. This, in turn, complicates any notion of an 'original' or naked self, from where it is possible to resist the dominant discourse, implying instead that any oppositional self is also formed by that discourse. In these senses, 'Howl' anticipates some of the theoretical positions later set out by Butler. It must be said that such an interpretation runs counter to a conventional reading of the poem. Ginsberg's use of the 'I' voice, for example, is usually read as a search for what he termed the 'Unified Being' (quoted in John Tytell 1976: 16). His exhibitionism at the Los Angeles reading would be read as a straightforward enacting of this quest: the performance of nakedness as a return-to-origins, very much in keeping with his project to reunite body and soul through the 'inspired breath' of poetry. Such confessions have often been taken at face value, and used to inform the prevalent reading of Beat literature. According to John Tytell in *Naked Angels*, for example, the classic account of Beat culture, Ginsberg's goal in 'Howl' was 'complete self-revelation' (John Tytell 1976: 18). Butler's work in *Excitable Speech* offers some critical tools with which to challenge this critical consensus.

The reference, early in 'Howl', to the publication of an 'obscene ode', for which its author is punished, draws attention to the relation between the law and the 'obscene' by recording those:

> who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull

Most critics have gone no further than read this line biographically, linking it to Ginsberg's suspension from Columbia University in 1945

for writing obscenities in the dirt on his window pane. However, the unnamed protagonists' expulsion 'from the academies' for 'publishing obscene odes' immediately sets down a marker that the poem will address this theme. The term 'of the skull' here implies that 'obscenity' is not an act, but a spoken word, or even a thought: although its 'obscenity' is published only within the 'skull' of its authors, this is construed as a punishable offence. The 'windows', meanwhile, are an ambiguous site of 'obscenity', their transparency enables the subject to look out, and another person to look in, characteristics which hint at the non-sovereignty of the authors of the 'obscene ode'. The effect is to raise questions about 'obscenity': on what grounds can a poem be 'obscene'? Can a thought or word, even though it remains within the 'skull' of its author, be considered as such? And who decides?

Having raised these matters, and drawn attention to the way that 'academies' punish those they consider guilty of 'obscenity', 'Howl' goes out of its way to re-perform a 'crazy' and 'obscene ode'. In fact, it goes on, in provocative fashion, to describe numerous occasions that will inevitably be read as 'obscene'. These moments include depictions of masochistic, gay self-representation such as the description of those who 'purgatoried their torsos night after night / with [. . .] alcohol and cock and endless balls' (l. 10). (Perhaps here, in the reference to 'balls', there is an allusion to the 'obscenity' for which Ginsberg was suspended from Columbia University: 'Butler has no balls', a reference to Nicholas Murray Butler, President of the University.) More notable, or notorious, examples of 'Howl's 'obscenity' include the description of male homosexual behaviour, including of those who:

> . . . were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts, who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love

'as well as vivid representations of heterosexual relations, including depictions of those':

> who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and

> continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness

By drawing attention to 'Howl' as a re-performance of an 'obscene ode' for which its authors have already been punished, the poem can be read in a way that lends support to Butler's contention that an obscene speech act should be seen not as the effect of a sovereign speaker, but as the re-performance of a position already made possible by the dominant discourse. Rather than suggesting that the speaker is obscene, it is the speaker, 'Howl' implies, who has her/his identity performatively constituted by the discourses through which her/his speech is made possible. The formal structure of 'Howl', centred as it is on the anaphora of 'who', also supports such a reading. 'Who' does not identify individual characters in the conventional sense; rather, it enables the poem to construct its subjects anonymously as those 'who' have their identity constituted by their experiences they undergo or carry out within the course of the poem. They are not seen as subjects who pre-exist the poem in any way knowable to readers. Indeed, they can only be banded together at all in so far as their actions share a common basis in their predicament (in their relation to the authorities who 'dragged them off the roof', for example), and in the limited agency they find in response ('waving genitals and manuscripts').

Performance is central to 'Howl' from its outset. If we think of the poem along the lines suggested by Butler's analysis in *Excitable Speech*, we can no longer read it as a poem with Ginsberg as its sovereign author. Like any speech act in Butler's schema, it can be read as 'excitable speech' as she defines it: its language, which does not originate with its author, condenses meanings which have developed over years and which will change in ways that Ginsberg cannot foresee. While such analysis is too broad and sweeping to offer a handle on any individual poem, Ginsberg's account of the composition of 'Howl', and its status as a text to be performed, draw attention to the poem as an utterance beyond his control.

Firstly, Ginsberg's notion of the 'inspired breath unit', which governs the form of 'Howl', emphasises the spontaneity of the writing process,

the lack of necessity for redrafting, and a poetic line whose length and rhythm is drawn from speech formed in the moment of composition. This echoes the manifesto put forward by Jack Kerouac in 'The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose', in which he rejects the redrafting process as an act of moral censorship imposed by the unconscious. He likens the true writer to the jazz saxophonist, in which language should be produced in an 'undisturbed flow' from the mind (quoted in John Tytell 1976: 17). In an August 1955 letter to Kerouac, Ginsberg describes how he adhered to this method of composition: the final draft of 'Howl' is 'the 100% original draft [albeit] "recopied" [. . .] I typed it up as I went along' (quoted in John Tytell 1976: 217). In his *Paris Review* interview in 1965, he talks of the need to 'commit to writing, to *write*, the same way that you are!' (quoted in Marjorie Perloff 1990: 202). As late as 1985, in his preface to the *Collected Poems*, he repeats this claim: 'Spontaneous insight – the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind – was always motif and method of these compositions' (Allen Ginsberg 1985: xx). Many of Ginsberg's critics have pointed out that this account of the writing of the poem is false: 'Howl' was redrafted, it contains material that was first penned years before, and reworked into the poem, while the anaphoric 'who' structures the material into a fairly rigid poetic form (albeit an unconventional one). Marjorie Perloff points out that Ginsberg 'has always been the most careful of prosodists [whose] metrical forms [. . .] have never been entirely abandoned' (Marjorie Perloff 1990: 205). Barry Miles records how the composition of 'Howl' involved 'copious crossing out', redrafting the first section in four sections, retyping the lines in 'their new order', and swapping key adjectives (Barry Miles 1989: 187). Most critics are content, having disproved the myth of spontaneous composition, to leave it there. But the question remains as to why, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, Ginsberg continued to insist on it. The tradition of poetic composition as divine inspiration – which has, of course, a long history – becomes a strategy well suited to drawing attention to the non-sovereignty of the individual author. Ginsberg's version of the poem's composition thereby draws attention to the way the poem constitutes utterance beyond the speaker's control. To emphasise the redrafting process, the existence within

the poem of older, reworked material, or the demands of the formal structure is to re-assert the sovereignty of the author, and give the lie to 'inspired breath'. Ginsberg's repetition of the myth of spontaneous, inspired composition is, therefore, in Butler's terms, part of a broader strategy of drawing attention to the non-sovereign author.

'Howl's status as a text to be performed can be seen in a similar light. Unlike many other 'masterpieces' of the twentieth century, public performance was a key factor in 'Howl's eventual achievement of canonical status. It was publicly read on many occasions in California through late 1955 and 1956, prior to its appearance in print in August 1956. Indeed, it was only after Ferlinghetti first heard the poem, at the now famous reading in the Six Gallery in San Francisco on 7 October 1955, that 'Howl' eventually became a published text. The poem was performed and heard aloud before it was read on the page. All this reinforces the perception that 'Howl' is a poem to be publicly performed, a work closer to speech than the written word. Judging from the accounts of its initial readings, we might also infer that 'Howl' is a poem over which many of its listeners felt ownership; it spoke to, or rather, *for*, its audience (an identification that the formal structure with its anaphoric 'who' encouraged listeners to adopt). In Miles' account of the first reading, for example, Ginsberg was accompanied by:

> Kerouac [who] began cheering him on, yelling 'Go!' at the end of each line, and soon the audience joined in. [. . .] Allen continued to the last sob, the audience cheering him wildly at every line. (Barry Miles 1989: 193)

These performances establish the poem in the public sphere in ways that challenge the single, sovereign author model. Not only do they imply that the poem is communally owned, but that the performer, in his role as public speaker of the poem, is not in control of the text, instead rehearsing the given speech like an actor reading his lines. This in itself can be seen as a form of 'excitable speech'. The meaning of each performance, moreover, differs from the last, as Nin's comments on the Los Angeles reading in October 1956 imply. Any notion of 'Howl's meaning therefore necessarily involves factors unique to

each reading (Ginsberg's exhibitionism, and the involvement of the audience, consumption of alcohol, etc.) and add to its status as a form of 'excitable speech'.

Ginsberg's more general recourse to the performance element of poetry sets the stage for 'Howl's specific re-performance of 'obscenity' in which the poem self-consciously draws attention to the gap between the scenes the poetic line depicts and its power to enact them. In this sense, 'Howl' anticipates Butler's conclusion, contrary to the findings of MacKinnon, that the language of sexual representation has no power to enact what it names. The sexual representations already mentioned occupy a liminal position between 'visions' and reality. The picture of those 'dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts' hardly has the power to bring about what it enacts; it is not a depiction of sexual behaviour that might constitute 'a social reality'. The same is true of those who, 'insatiate and ecstatic [. . .] fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness'. Both of these examples draw attention to their own unreality, to their status as 'vision' rather than realist depiction. They are, to use Butler's terms, 'phantasmatic' representations of gender relations which constitute 'the text of gender's unreality, [. . .] chart[ing] a domain of unrealisable positions' (Judith Butler 1997: 68). Many of the occasions described by 'Howl' self-consciously exploit this borderline between the real and visionary. One line describes those 'who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver & waited in vain', actions which, although they begin in the realm of the possible, clearly later draw attention to their own physical impossibility. At another point – when one of the subjects 'jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge' – the speaker interjects to point out that 'this actually happened', once again raising the issue of the reality/unreality of the events depicted. In other words, 'Howl' cannot be read as a literal depiction of events; it self-consciously draws attention to the unreality of the scenes depicting sex, to the gap between scenes the poetic line might depict and its power to enact them. It is precisely this idea – that the language of sexual representation, alone of all discourse, has the power to enact what it depicts – that 'Howl' interrogates. This

is the very fiction that, according to Butler, authorities attempt to establish if they are to maintain effective obscenity laws, and to police representations of sex, sexuality and constructions of gender.

J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*, a text which addresses these issues in theoretical terms, and which forms the departure point for many of Butler's arguments in *Excitable Speech*, was, coincidentally, published in 1955, the same year that 'Howl' was first performed. Austin argues that the action of naming a ship can be seen as a performative action, but, crucially, in order for it to be an effective action, the appropriate contexts and conventions must already exist: 'To name the ship is to say (in the appropriate circumstances) the words "I name &c" ' (J.L. Austin 1955: 6). As Salih point out in her analysis of Butler's use of Austin:

> The phrase 'in the appropriate circumstances' is crucial here, since if the circumstances are not appropriate, the utterance will fail to achieve its desired effect. In another ship-naming example, Austin hypothesizes that he might see a ship that is about to be named, walk up to it and smash a bottle against its side, proclaiming 'I name this ship *Mr Stalin*'. '[B]ut the trouble is I was not the person chosen to name it', Austin writes, which means that the ship in question will not be named *Mr Stalin*: 'it is a mockery'. (Sarah Salih 2002: 101)

Salih goes on to make the point that, for Austin, 'the outcome of a performative statement depends on convention and ritual'; that, in order for the statement to be performative, it needs to be uttered by the person who has the authority to enact what it names (Sarah Salih 2002: 101). Butler counters Austin's view of language by contending that words are not bound by their immediate context, that they are the 'condensation' of past, present and future meanings. She argues that there is inevitably a 'disjunction' between speech and action, a failure of the word to enact what it names (Judith Butler 1997: 112).

Butler, as we have seen, makes use of Derrida's idea that there is necessarily a break between a performative utterance and its context to suggest that all utterances, regardless of the 'position of social power'

occupied by the speaker, are 'equally afflicted by [. . .] failure' (Judith Butler 1997: 150):

> That performative utterances can go wrong, be misapplied or misinvoked, is essential to their 'proper' functioning. (Judith Butler 1997: 151)

Her argument that all performative speech fails to enact what it names because of the necessary break between a word and the unlimited contexts in which it may be invoked serves to focus attention onto the way that law – in its regulation of sexual representation and 'obscenity' – relies on the idea that an 'obscene' speech act somehow 'fails to fail'. Noting that 'obscenity', almost alone of all discourse, is conferred with the supposed power to enact what it names, Butler asks whether:

> the improper use of the performative can succeed in producing the effect of authority where there is no recourse to a prior authorization; indeed, whether the misappropriation or expropriation of the performative might not be the very occasion for the exposure of prevailing forms of authority and the exclusions by which they proceed. (Judith Butler 1997: 158)

The use of 'obscenity' in 'Howl' anticipates Butler's theoretical position here. Ginsberg's use of the 'obscene' serves to point out the failure of the performative utterance (in the sense that the poem self-consciously, playfully and comically draws attention to the 'phantasmatic' or 'visionary' nature of the sex it represents), and thereby to question the status that law confers onto speech acts that it wishes to denounce as 'obscene'. This issue, initially explored by Ginsberg in 'Howl', returns to the fore in 1966 in yet another performance: Ginsberg's decision, as poet and author of 'Wichita Sutra Vortex', to declare an end to the Vietnam War:

> I here declare the end of the War!

This declaration plays with performativity in another way. Ginsberg is here doing the poetic equivalent of Austin naming the ship *Mr Stalin*,

but his declaration is not 'a mockery', at least in Austin's sense of the term. While the publisher of 'Howl' could be prosecuted for 'obscenity' on the premise that 'obscene' words have the power to enact what they name, Ginsberg's declaration that the war is over intervenes to suggest the position that Butler would reach thirty years later: that performative language fails to enact what it names. In Butler's terms, all performative speech necessarily fails to enact what it names, but interventions which offer paths of resistance are still possible. Ginsberg's declaration can be characterised as such an intervention: the deliberate misappropriation of the performative in order to expose the prevailing forms of authority. It explicitly draws attention to the failure of his words to enact what they describe, to their necessary failure to construct the 'authority' under which they may become enacted, and through that, both to the inconsistency of the application of the law, and the conventions through which we accept the 'authority' of those whose language does become enacted. While the law confers on the language of gay self-representation or perceived 'obscenity' the power to unify word and conduct, and consequently prosecutes the agents of such language, Ginsberg – strangely enough – is not prosecuted for bringing an end to the Vietnam War. This ideological ground on which the law is applied have been successfully exposed by Ginsberg's literary intervention, an example of the kind of 'misappropriation' that Butler theoretically maps out.

A court case in which an accused is prosecuted for 'obscenity' is seen by Butler as a further performance of the offending material, in which the state is conventionally believed to be a neutral arbiter, standing above the fray. Butler, discussing a court case in which the alleged homosexual obscenity of an accused African-American is adjudicated upon, questions the state's supposed neutrality. She describes the hearing as 'itself a pornographic scene' in which the legal form of speech – 'testimony' – is reduced to a 'confession of shame' and hence of 'guilt' (Judith Butler 1997: 82). The court case resituates that expression in a supposedly original context in which it is conferred with the power to enact what it describes (Judith Butler 1997: 84). Most significantly, by staging an obscenity trial:

> The state not only constrains speech [as it intends], but in the very act of constraining, produces legally consequential speech:

> not only does the state curb homosexual speech, but produces as well – through its decisions – a public notion of the self-censoring homosexual [a figure who learns that not to censor her/himself is to invite censorship]; similarly it produces a public picture of an obscene black sexuality, even as it claims to be curbing obscenity. (Judith Butler 1997: 98)

The court case in which Ferlinghetti was prosecuted for 'Howl's supposed obscenity could, along these lines, be considered as a further performance of the poem, one through which the authorities intended to remind citizens, through punitive example, of the dominant discourse. Captain William Hanrahan, of San Francisco police, announced that the successful prosecution of 'Howl' would result in further obscenity trials, one consequence of which would have been self-censorship on the part of authors who feared that their work would be subject to such action (James Campbell 1999: 223). The fact that it is Ferlinghetti who was prosecuted (rather than Ginsberg, say, or the groups who participated in performances of 'Howl', or a wider notion of 'obscene' discourse) might be said to support Butler's point that the law needs to arbitrarily fabricate the agency of a supposedly sovereign subject in order to blame it and hold it accountable, and thus to police the discourse (Judith Butler 1997: 45). But while Ferlinghetti is the 'sovereign agent' picked out for prosecution, 'Howl' intervenes in a way which anticipates, and develops a defence against, the premises under which he is charged. The trial, as it unfolded during the late summer of 1957, did not investigate the ways in which 'Howl' undermines the premises on which obscenity laws operate. Instead, as the judge concluded, 'coarse and vulgar language is used [. . .] and sex acts are mentioned, but unless the book is entirely lacking in "social importance" it cannot be held obscene' (quoted in Barry Miles 1989: 230). On the grounds of its social importance, to which various literary critics attested, 'Howl' was exonerated from all charges, a judgment which, while welcome, did not address the points about 'obscenity' made in 'Howl' itself. Nevertheless, 'Howl' does what Butler calls for: it 'expropriat[es]' the 'performative' in order to become 'the very occasion for the exposure of prevailing forms of authority and the exclusions by which they proceed' (Judith Butler

1997: 158). As we have seen, its self-conscious and 'phantasmatic' representations of sex suggest the difference between the power to name and enact, while its depiction of 'obscenity' as a re-performance implies firstly that 'obscene' speech acts are formed only by the dominant discourse (which makes them possible, and construes them as acts which are generated by the very laws which prohibit them), and secondly that the meaning of such speech is not the product of a sovereign author, but that of a wider set of agents and circumstances. In these senses, 'Howl' provokes and 'writes' the obscenity charge laid against it in order to expose the premise under which such legal categories are constituted.

Turning to the second half of my argument, I want to suggest that 'Howl' can be read as a text which 'disjoins' homosexuality from its typical representation in 1950s US society, and that, by doing so, it intervenes in the dominant discourse's production of the 'masculinist citizen' (formed in opposition to the 'homosexual'), the formation of whom were seen as essential to a successful prosecution of the Cold War. 'Howl's 'rearticulation' of homosexuality within this context successfully makes the issue of gay representation central to attempts to resist the polarising and binary ideology of the promoters of the Cold War.

In chapter three of *Excitable Speech*, 'Contagious Word: Paranoia and "Homosexuality" in the Military', Butler argues that expressions of homosexuality are banned by military authorities in order to sustain the fictive unity of a heterosexual male community. In the Foucauldian sense that prohibition provides impetus to the very thing it prohibits, the military discourse around 'coming out' preserves homosexuality in the very structures which ban it. Butler describes how the military thereby generate both the 'homosexual' and 'the masculinist citizen' (Judith Butler 1997: 121). Declaring oneself to be gay is construed as an act of obscenity, and given special status within military discourse as a speech act which has the power to enact what it declares. It is seen as:

> a becoming, a transivity that depends on and institutes the collapse of the distinction between speech and conduct. (Judith Butler 1997: 112)

Hence, there is an association in this discourse between homosexuality and disease: even a declaration of homosexuality is 'a contagious substance, a dangerous fluid' or a virus that has the power to act on the listener and contaminate him too (Judith Butler 1997: 110). Butler argues that the utterances most likely to be viewed as 'contagious' in this sense, and therefore most susceptible to legal prohibition, are 'racially marked depictions of sexuality' and especially those which 'threaten the pieties and purities of race and sexuality' (Judith Butler 1997: 64). She seems to be arguing that the legal prosecution of 'threatening' sexuality will be pursued more vigorously either when the accused are non-white, or when the kind of sexuality that can be presented as 'non-white' threatens to cross over into 'white' culture (in both cases, such prosecutions serve to maintain the fiction that 'threatening' sexualities are racially 'other'). By insisting on the failure of speech to enact what it describes, Butler develops a paradigm of performativity which counters this argument. She insists that utterances do not act on listeners in the way just described, and she calls on critics to 'disjoin' homosexuality from its typical representation, within the dominant heterosexual-military discourse, as a 'contagion'.

Butler's insights into the military discourse on homosexuality suggest some useful lines of critical enquiry. Indeed, 'Howl' anticipates the theoretical possibilities arrived at by Butler, firstly, in the 'crossover' it provocatively suggests between black and non-white culture; secondly, in the way the text 'disjoins' homosexuality from its typical representation within the dominant discourse of the time; and thirdly, in terms of the association it implies between the military machine and the 'masculinist citizen' (a relation which, it suggests, is based on the prohibition of homosexuality).

The connection between 'Howl' and the representation of black culture is well known, the opening lines' mention of 'hipsters' being a case in point. Originating in Norman Mailer's 'The White Negro', the 'hipster' is portrayed as a white youth influenced by black culture, an encapsulation of the 'crossover' later identified by Butler. Miller argued that the acceptability of the 'hipster' would be emblematic of society's wider acceptance, or otherwise, of the goals of the civil rights movement (quoted in John Tytell 1976: 20). 'Howl's identification with 'angelheaded

hipsters' dragging 'through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix' establishes just such a 'crossover' moment at the beginning of the poem. Another 'contagion' between black and white American culture is implicit in the very form of 'Howl' whose improvised long lines after the repetitions of 'who' suggest the influence of jazz music, especially that of the saxophonist Charlie Parker. Later depictions of gay oral sex in which the subjects of the poem 'blew and were blown by [. . .] the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love' specifically names a geography – an ocean and a sea – which cannot be associated with one particular race. Instead, the exchanged fluids of sexual intercourse are linked to the waters which border the Americas, Europe and Africa, while the verb 'blew' suggests both the jazz saxophone and inspired poetic utterance. Indeed, in an August 1955 letter to Kerouac, Ginsberg likens his method of composition in 'Howl' as '[sitting] down to blow', a verb which links the practice of writing with jazz and oral sex (quoted in John Tytell 1976: 217). The associations generated here speak directly to the law's 'unconscious': they make the connections that (Butler would later assert) govern the ideological premises on which obscenity prosecutions are founded.

While 'Howl' seems to thus provoke or imagine its own prosecution, it also rewrites homosexuality. In Butlerian terms, it 'disjoins' homosexuality from its typical representation within the dominant discourse of the time, in descriptions of those:

> who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love

If the ultimate signifier of male homosexuality is the practice of having sex with another man, then, in its description of anal and oral sex between men, the poem cuts to the quick. The social context is also important here: we must not forget that Ginsberg is writing at the time of McCarthyism when gays were not only deemed sexually deviant, they were also politically suspect, linked to communism, and supposedly vulnerable to blackmail (a phenomenon created by a

discourse on homosexuality which made it socially unacceptable). One critic describes how 'the authoritarian culture of the years after the war had categorized homosexuality as a diseased perversion bordering on criminality' (John Tytell 1976: 83). In the context of 1950s America, the positive description of gay sex breaks from how is typically represented.

The extract, however, goes further, specifically 'disjoin[ing]' homosexuality from its representation within the dominant discourse. In particular, it contests, and rearticulates some of homosexuality's characteristics (as defined within this discourse): its common perception as a 'bullying' form of sexual relation in which one man is dominant over the other; its supposed non-existence within the military; the perception that it is a threat to American national security; and its un-Christian associations. It challenges the first of these by depicting a relation in which protagonists participate equally in the sex: they 'let themselves be fucked', they 'blew and were blown'. There is no coercion or inequality involved. Here, the substitution of the word 'joy' (where most readers might expect to see 'pain') emphasises the idea that gay sex is pleasurable. Tytell refers to the unexpectedly 'ecstatic' tone created by the substitution of this word (John Tytell 1976: 102). Meanwhile, the references to 'sailors' might daringly suggest that homosexuality, even though it is unacknowledged, nonetheless existed within the ranks of the US military or merchant navies. Their portrayal as 'caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love' feminises them in a way that directly challenges the idea of the 'masculinist citizen'. It also romanticises them, associating them with seas or oceans, rather than with a particular nation, countering the perception of homosexuals as un-American and vulnerable to blackmail by agents of a hostile nation. Finally, the allusions to a Christian discourse – describing the motorcyclists as 'saintly', and the sailors as 'seraphim' – assert that the language of spirituality is equally applicable to the physical act of gay sex. In these senses, the poem appropriates key signifiers of its portrayal within the dominant anti-homosexual discourse in order to contest and rewrite them.

'Howl's rearticulation of some of the key signifiers of homosexuality in 1950s US society has wider consequences. Butler argues that the

dominant discourse through which the 'homosexual' and the 'masculinist citizen' are formed serves a militarist agenda which aims to maintain the unity of a group of heterosexual fighting men, particularly important at a time of war. So, when 'Howl' contests those signifiers of homosexuality, it is presenting a wider challenge to that dominant discourse, not only to the perceived binaries around homosexuality, but also to the polarities promoted as part of the Cold War ideology. Indeed, by intervening in US society's production of the 'masculinist citizens' necessary for the prosecution of the Cold War, the poem successfully makes the issue of homosexual representation central to attempts to challenge the polarising and binary ideology of that conflict. Ginsberg's portrayal of nakedness and homosexuality in 'Howl' is a form of resistance to the fiction of American unity against the Soviet 'other', put forward by promoters of the Cold War. Take the description of those:

> who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford's floated out and sat through the stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi's, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox, who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge, a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists

The language here shows how the Cold War contaminates the description of culture. The application of the adjective 'desolate' (with its hint of post-nuclear 'desolation') to the bar, 'Fugazzi's', as well as references to the 'hydrogen jukebox' and the 'crack of doom', ensuring that even the most 'innocent' social situation must be read through the lens of the nuclear threat hanging over them. Meanwhile, the description of this group as a 'lost battalion' invites comparison to the maintained unity of the group of heterosexual men of whom a battalion is usually comprised. This dissolute group is, by contrast, engaged in the less productive activity of 'talk[ing] continuously' rather than fighting, something, of course, that the two superpowers of the Cold War will not do. 'Howl' thus suggests that one front on which the battle against the binary polarities of Cold War ideology must be fought is that of gender and sexual representation: by rearticulating

the formation of homosexuality and the representation of so-called obscenity within the dominant discourse, the poem calls into question the way that the dominant discourse privileges the 'masculinist citizen'. 'Howl's portrayal of a 'lost battalion' – haunted by the Cold War, a group who pointedly 'talked continuously', published obscenities and practised homosexuality – links the subversive depiction of gender and sexuality to the dominant discourse's attempts to form gender in ways that serve the agenda of the prosecutors of the Cold War. It demonstrates the kind of change that Ginsberg anticipated in a letter to his father:

> To get America into a situation and sense of understanding that would actually provide peace would be a complete change of values [. . .] a series of personal changes as violent as a personal breakdown (quoted in Michael Davidson 1989: 29)

Butler's theories afford insights into 'Howl' which suggest that, more than half a century after its first performance, in ways that its author did not envisage, it has the power to effect radical change to our understanding of gender in society.

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CHAPTER 5

CROSS-DRESSING AND GRRRLY SHOWS: TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BURLESQUE

Claire Nally

Introduction

Writing in 2008, Germaine Greer explored the connection between art and exhibitionism and why the body is a 'medium and message in women's art' (Germaine Greer 2008). Greer maintains that 'the woman who displays her own body as her artwork seems to me to be travelling in the tracks of on outworn tradition that spirals downward and inward to nothingness' (Germaine Greer 2008). However, others firmly assert the emancipatory potential of such a gesture. Camille Paglia maintains 'the feminist line is, strippers and topless dancers are degraded, subordinated, and enslaved; they are victims, turned into objects by the display of their anatomy. But women are far from being victims – women *rule*; they are in total control' (in Melanie Wells 1994: 132). Clearly a sensitive and rigorous theoretical analysis of such exhibitionist practice is essential in order to navigate our way through the critical minefield. In this chapter, I want to address some of the

contemporary notions of neo burlesque, the effects of its politicisation and popularisation and its playful abuse of gender stereotypes.

In her study of the twenty-first century woman, *Living Dolls*, Natasha Walter identifies the 'undressing-as-empowerment rhetoric' (Natasha Walter 2010: 43) which is often the foundation of neo burlesque shows. Immodesty Blaize, generally acclaimed as the UK's answer to Dita von Teese, addresses this very question in her documentary film, *Burlesque Undressed* (2010). When asked about the notion of empowerment, Blaize answers, 'it's funny the word empowering gets used a lot and I think that word is a red herring. Because it's used in the sense that it's empowering to take your clothes off. Well taking my clothes off doesn't empower me, the act of performing empowers me. I'm in control when I'm onstage. Now what I think burlesque does is it glorifies the notion of the woman and it puts the idea of the goddess centre stage' (*Burlesque Undressed* 2010). The burlesque performance, perceived as an expression of female sexuality which has been suppressed for decades and indeed centuries, centres on the moment of 'the reveal'. The reveal rarely if ever includes full nudity, but rather is the culmination of breathless eagerness, the revelation of pasties and nipple tassels, often the climax of a particular performance. As Jo Weldon explains in her *Burlesque Handbook*, 'burlesque audiences live in a pleasurable state of anticipation . . . They're waiting to hear the humour of your music choice, see the glamour or humour of your costume, laugh or make sounds of awe as you reveal your theme and character, and finally, *be amazed and amused by the way you display and enjoy inhabiting your body*' (Jo Weldon 2010: 191). However, the apparent co-option of exhibitionism for a feminist agenda is not uncomplicated. Blaize comments that 'I call myself a showgirl, I produce pieces of theatre . . . I am a burlesque performer . . . but if I really want to ruffle some feathers, then I'll just get it out on the table – I'm a stripper (laughs)' (*Burlesque Undressed* 2010). Indeed, promotional material for The Immodest Tease Show (TITS) was pulled from many advertisements because of the taboo acronym, a testimony to the potential for objectification which still inhabits the burlesque agenda.

In one burlesque show (The Jeepers Peepers Club at The Cluny, Newcastle, UK, 9 July 2010), among a mixed audience of rockabillies,

goths and more 'conventional' attendees, a small coterie of middle-aged men, located at the back of the audience, shouted 'get yer tits out' to a burlesque artiste onstage.[1] Similarly, on the same night, a performer, Dixilicious, appeared decked in green silk underwear, but she is also known as a professional stripper. The compere was also encouraged to remove items of clothing, and many performers arrived onstage in bra and knickers or bikini sets, all suggesting less tease and more strip (essentially, what is there to remove?). This is not an uncommon experience. As Miss Roxy Velvet explains in an interview with Laurie Penny: 'Certainly when I started performing, people would do more unusual shows – really playing with gender and politics . . . Maybe it's the circles I move in now, but it doesn't seem to be like that any more. There are a lot of burlesque clubs that are really oversexualised, really horrible. And I think a lot of girls feel pressured to strip' (Laurie Penny 2009). The 'undressing as empowerment' rhetoric may have its supporters, but it also has many detractors, especially considering how any exhibitionist strategy can be a politicalised force for change: 'the pervasive sexualisation of women in the public realm cuts away at their true empowerment' (Natasha Walter 2010).

Indeed, burlesque has now itself become the subject of satire, rather than a medium for social critique: Brabbins and Fyffe (Victorian alter-egos featured in *The Armstrong and Miller Show*) delivered a comedic musical hall rendition of why burlesque is high culture (BBC 1, screened 4 November 2010), proclaiming:

> Admittedly they strip
> But it's witty, like a quip!
> An ironic take on glamour and allure.
> And I tell you this for nowt
> As I watch them prance about
> My stiffy is equally ironic, be assured!

Bethan Benwell has identified that irony is often used as a strategic device to simultaneously articulate and deny an often objectionable political discourse or belief system, and arguably, this notion of irony as defence is ridiculed here, although irony itself is commonly used as

a defence by the burlesque community (Bethan Benwell 2004: 3–21). Undoubtedly, burlesque's popularity and frequently unsophisticated co-option has diluted the possibility for radicalism which the early neo burlesquers may have possessed, and opened up the field for comedic lampooning of the form. This culture of female exhibitionism, of liberation and sexual freedom, clearly has its downside. Many amateur performers see burlesque as 'self affirmation', as Glorian Gray, a semi-professional on the scene, comments:

> Within this [scene], you see hen night workshops, and women doing classes in order to make female friends, to feel sexy, glamorous and better about their bodies and within themselves. Women will often start out this way and keep going, ending up taking it all the way to semi-pro . . . Using burlesque in this way can be controversial within the scene, which is now flooded with (what many consider to be) below-standard 'burlesque by numbers' performers expecting to be paid to do fabulous shows. This is a particular concern with professional performers who make a living from paid events, and for those that fear the bar for the art will be lowered by the influx of hobbyist or have-a-go performers. (Glorian Gray 2010)

This popular form is perhaps the most ideologically complex in terms of exhibitionist strategies – women somehow feeling empowered by the removal of clothes in a theatrical environment and seeking payment for such performances.

Hitman Hearn/Justin Pants, a DJ and performer who has worked at some of the most important burlesque venues in London and the USA, (he was the main DJ at the Whoopee Club, regular DJ at Torture Garden, as well as at the New York Burlesque Festival, the Tease-O-Rama Festival (San Francisco) and the Vancouver Burlesque Festival), has noted a definite shift in the motivation of performers:

> I started DJ-ing at the Whoopee Club from their second show in 2002; the acts were fairly cutting edge. The girls' acts were very comedic, soundtracked from a wide range of genres. Yes, there

> were acts that used fans and were to fifties music but there wasn't a conveyer belt of them. Plus, shock horror, the joint headliner act was a man, the amazing Walter.
>
> Anyway, the first wave of girls were going out and performing, their agenda was to have fun, be thought-provoking, [and] if an man in the audience found them sexy, that was a side issue. Now I go to a night, and you can immediately tell that for some performers, their main reason for doing it [is] they want to be a pin-up, they like and need the adulation: the idea of doing something silly and making themselves look ridiculous would be completely out of the question. (Hitman Hearn 2011)

Such burlesque implies a popular interpretation of the form which deflates its radical potential. It is hardly an activist gesture likely to gain equal pay, employment rights or social change. But burlesque also has some very sophisticated practitioners, whose practice of cross-dressing and camp have the effect of revisiting some of society's most deeply cherished discourses. In the earlier years of neo burlesque, there was a concerted effort to unite radicalism with provocative sexual display: The World-Famous *BOB*, Dirty Martini, Empress Stah, and others, all practise a self-aware and ironic take on the genre.[2] However, with its greater prominence on the world's stage, there is also the concomitant problem of how far burlesque can be considered an innovative or activist form and how a feminist critique can be employed in such a practice.

Postfeminist Readings

My reading of neo burlesque is informed by a postfeminist methodology: a situated critique which is part of and influenced by feminism, but which also seeks challenging ways to reconsider feminist tenets. This positioning is not uncomplicated, as many feminists acknowledge the idea of 'revision' frequently necessitates depoliticisation (Sarah Projansky 2000: 66). In common with Imelda Whelehan, my argument maintains that 'the repacking of feminism (as "new", "post", "power" and so forth) is not of itself destructive' (Imelda Whelehan 2000: 81).

Like her, I also seek to argue that severance of such a discourse from politics necessarily undermines the foundation of any feminist reading. Diane Negra comments that postfeminism 'inevitably or exclusively correlates to the re-energizing of patriarchal agendas and standards of value' (Diane Negra 2009: 4). However, she also notes that some of the most visible forms of postfeminism do equate with masculine hegemony – an ill-considered celebration of 'femininity' for instance, or the ladette trend in contemporary culture (see Smith, this volume).[3]

Many simplistic arguments against feminism – that it demands the censorship of women's choices just as much as any patriarchal system – overlook the subtle nuances of the second wave. For instance, Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1971) commented:

> Most women would find it hard to abandon any interest in clothes and cosmetics, although many women's liberation movements urge them to transcend such servile fripperies. As far as cosmetics are used for adornment in a conscious and creative way, they are not emblems of inauthenticity: it is when they are presented as the real thing, covering unsightly blemishes, disguising a repulsive thing so that it is acceptable to the world that their function is deeply suspect. (Germaine Greer 1971: 325)

In short, if a woman is aware of the nature of cosmetic adornment, this is clearly less suspect than if it is presented as both a prerequisite and indeed constitutive of women. The apparel, make-up and overall theatrical presentation of the burlesque performer is only a problem when applied uncritically.

My more general point is that like feminism, postfeminism is not a simple term, especially with regard to women's apparel and the construction of self. Negra documents how postfeminism is frequently aligned with 'self care, personal empowerment, essentialized femininity, devotion to family, the celebrity as lifestyle guru and the entitlement to female sociality' (Diane Negra 2009: 122–3). Citing the fitness craze of poledancing as an example, Negra continues: 'the postfeminist commodification of corporeal perfectionism achieved through disciplined (though also erotic and playful) regimes of exercise . . . gives

evidence of the ways that "the body is forever being creatively reimagined in ways that ratify existing social premises about gender" ' (Diane Negra 2009: 123, citing Laura Kipnis 2006: 67). It is easy to see how poledancing classes (and indeed burlesque classes) represent a commodification of the body, and moreover, an uncritical but commercial approach to female disempowerment – women are still encouraged to look taut, sexual, and maintain a specifically feminine image, even if they claim they are emancipated by such exercise. However, it is also the case that many burlesque performers depart from this model. Equally, many venues hire performers of all shapes, ages, races and sizes, with only the most commercially-minded shows presenting an idealised vision of a woman's figure.

Crossing Over: Drag Queens and Kings

Writing in 1869, William Dean Howells stated of one of the founders of burlesque, Lydia Thompson and her British Blonde burlesque troupe: 'though they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them, with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which put to shame' (Robert C. Allen 2006: 25, citing William Dean Howells 1869: 635–44). The idea of 'an alien sex', a parody of both masculinity and femininity, retains influence in some contemporary burlesque circles, and has much to contribute to the confounding of traditional roles through dress codes and the extravagant performance of gender bending. As Stephen Whittle notes, 'transgendered behaviour not only challenges sexual dimorphism in that boundaries are crossed, but it provides a challenge to the boundaries ever being there' (in Richard Ekins and Dave King 1996: 205). Similarly, in her study on cross-dressing (both male-to-female and female-to-male) throughout history, Marjorie Garber presents the 'third term' as a critical method for approaching the cross dresser. She claims that whilst there is a commitment in the academy to explore cross-dressing, there is an equally persistent desire to incorporate the practitioner unquestioningly into fairly typical binary notions of male and female: 'This

tendency . . . to appropriate the cross-dresser "as" one of the two sexes, is emblematic of a fairly consistent critical desire to look away from the transvestite as transvestite, not to see cross-dressing except as male or female manqué, whether motivated by social, cultural or aesthetic designs' (Marjorie Garber 1992: 10). In Garber's argument:

> [Cross-dressing] offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'male' and 'female', whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural . . . The 'third' is that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis – a crisis which is symptomatized by *both* the underestimation *and* the overestimation of cross-dressing . . . The 'third' is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a space of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, of self-sufficiency, self-knowledge. (Marjorie Garber 1992: 10–11)

It suggests a crisis, not only in gender, but also in our mode of categorisation itself. As such, an account of cross-dressing practice must provide some account of its theatrical incarnation: that of drag, as carefully distinguished from transvestism.

One compere of burlesque nights in Leeds and Manchester, a humorously vitriolic drag queen, Lady J. (who also performs as a 'boylesquer' or male burlesque dancer), states:

> I believe in making use of the contrasts in my performance and I am more than happy to take the choice to 'rip off my wig' and shatter illusions for comic effect . . . I purposely eschew breasts/tucking away my 'bulge' and I switch my personal pronoun whenever I remember to create as genderless/multi-gendered character as possible . . . I occupy that realm all good drag queens do – a genderless cloud of glitter humour. (Lady J. 2008)

Rather than representing stereotypical misogyny, the sensitive burlesque drag artist holds up to ridicule, not women, but gender assumptions as a whole. The very excess of the costume and campery points to

a parody of gender. Drawing a distinction between drag and transvestism, Daniel Harris suggests:

> The stylistic ideal of the drag queen . . . is screaming vulgarity, the overstated look of the balloon-breasted tramp in the leopard-skin micro-mini skirt who strives to be loud, tawdry and cheap. The transvestite, in short, tries to tone it down; the drag queen, to tone it up . . . the drag queen doesn't flee from his gender but actually incorporates it into his costume. Nor does he fear disclosure as the transvestite does; he invites it. A gesture of electrifying revelation is often central to the comedy of his strapless ball-gowns, bulging panty hose, and plunging necklines; the startling exposure of the prosthetic breasts, the impulsive removal of the wig, or even more brazen acts of exhibitionism, as in the time-honoured drag convention of the floor-length cape which, like a flasher's raincoat, can be flung dramatically open to reveal the flat-chested and scantily clad male body beneath. (Daniel Harris 1995: 62)

Thus I would argue the burlesque performance must be aligned with camp, with a heavy criticism of hetero-normative genders, and ultimately with the queering of identities. Susan Sontag, in her 'Notes on Camp' (1994), positions camp with a love of artifice and exaggeration, identifying Greta Garbo, Oscar Wilde, Jayne Mansfield, Bette Davis and Tallulah Bankhead as chief exemplars (Susan Sontag 1994: 279–80 and 289; see also Shingler, this volume). Most notably, perhaps, Sontag employs the metaphor of performance in her evaluation of camp: 'To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre' (Susan Sontag 1994: 280). Problematically, she also suggests camp sensibility is 'disengaged, depoliticized, or at least apolitical' (Susan Sontag 1994: 277). Maintaining a critique of Sontag's 'apolitical' model, Moe Meyer maintains that in the postmodern age, 'camp emerges as specifically queer parody possessing cultural and ideological analytic potential, taking on new meanings with implications for the emergence of a theory that can provide an oppositional

queer critique' (Moe Meyer 1994: 10). As such, Lady J. ('The Slippery Belle', Leeds, UK, 'Subculture', 30 November 2007) walks on stage in stilettos, garter belt, heavy 'theatrical' make-up and fishnets, and proceeds with a performance dripping in barbed humour. But crucially, like the tradition of Lydia Thompson in her various roles as a male character, there is no real attempt to 'pass' as a woman, and as such the performance is constantly drawing attention to its own artifice, occupying a medial or 'third gender'. The humour and the vibrancy of the performance is contained in the bizarre and alarming juxtaposition of male/female characteristics – confounding the usual expectations of gender alignment and speculating on the fluid possibilities of gender outside a traditional patriarchal and/or straight schema.

One contemporary female example of this gender-crossing is self-styled neo burlesque and 'fetish' artiste Empress Stah ('Peek-A-Boo Burlesque' at the Stardust Bar, Sheffield, UK, 18 August 2007), assuming as she does both male and female characters in the same evening. In the 'Queen of the Night' (a performance derived from Stah's appearance in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in 2005), the scene opens with Stah decked in black cape, heavy ruffled collar, and black lingerie with Peaches' 'I U She' declaring 'I don't have to make the choice / I like girls and I like boys.' Stah employs her crystal ball to summon a lover, with part of the 'occult' ceremony including the piercing of her eyebrows with large needles, to signify devilish horns. She exploits men for sex and donning a dildo, proceeds to gleefully abuse a male prop doll dressed as a sailor, with Eartha Kitt's 'I Want To Be Evil' as theme music. At the end of the performance, Stah pops a champagne cork from between her thighs (to the tune of 'Is That All There Is' by Peggy Lee), an obvious union of phallic substitute, ennui, comic deflation (in all senses) and symbolic usurpation of patriarchal authority. On the surface, one may consider the performance as a mere reenactment of the stereotype of vamp, whore, and *femme fatale*:

> The *femme fatale* can appear as Medusan mother or as frigid nymph, masquing in the brilliant luminosity of Apollonian high glamour. Her cool unreachability beckons, fascinates, and

> destroys. She is not a neurotic but, if anything, a psychopath. That is, she has an amoral affectlessness, a serene indifference to the suffering of others, which she invites and dispassionately observes as tests of her power. (Camille Paglia 1990: 15)

However, the theatrical persona of Stah is far from conventional: she is pierced, petite but with a shaven head, and the physique of a trained athlete, owing far more to subcultural influences of the fetish scene than to the mainstream visions of burlesque to which we have become accustomed (Stah has performed at London's Torture Garden, for instance). Additionally, as Camille Paglia has pointed out, the *femme fatale* 'cannot be perfectly translated into male terms' (Camille Paglia 1990: 15). In short, she cannot be judged exclusively as a male paradigm of reductive female sexuality. Eroticism, and even fantasy figures such as the *femme fatale*, are impossible to reduce to any all-encompassing formula (be they patriarchal, feminist, or otherwise), and Stah highlights this evasiveness in her routine. The subsequent act reveals Stah deftly donning the sailor costume herself and challenging any assumptions her audience had already made about gender or indeed the stability of male and female personae (this time, with 'Love to Love You, Baby' by Donna Summer as soundtrack). She then gracefully ascends a trapeze hoop, and performs in the masculine role. As the emcee of the evening noted: 'The Queen of the Night summons the unsuspecting sailor into her underworld and unleashes her fetishistic desires upon him. Now we see Empress Stah return as the sailor . . . how does he feel about it all?'[4] Inhabiting such disparate roles on stage reinforces the constructed nature of gender and the fluidity of sexuality. Stah's choice of sailor as character is crucial here. For Marjorie Garber, the military and its use of uniformed paraphernalia poses some interesting questions: 'Does the sight of women wearing medals or "orders" attached to their lapels suggest that such "orders" can be *un*pinned, *de*tached, from *men*?' (Marjorie Garber 1992: 55). The choice of a conventionally 'masculine' uniform being paraded on a female body in comedic routine has the effect of interrogating and defamiliarising the very hegemonic and overtly masculine institutions which such uniforms are generally accepted to represent.

At this point, one may consider the work of Judith Butler, one of the founders of queer theory. She famously maintains that gender is constructed, rather than innate and correlated to one's sex. Behaviours considered 'masculine' or 'feminine' correlated in normative terms with one's sex (male or female) are in reality cultural inscriptions. Indeed, Butler highlights drag as one of the key ways in which it is possible to resist these inscriptions:

> The notion of an originary or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing, and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities . . . the performance of drag plays upon the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed . . . *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*. (Judith Butler 1990: 187)

This confounding of gender norms is presented with wry humour in neo burlesque. As Stah claims: 'Comedy is a huge part of my act . . . most of it is devised and performed with my tongue firmly in my cheek' (Empress Stah 2007). The idea of drag, more commonly associated with male-to-female performers, can be usefully applied to the female-to-male persona (we need only think of Mae West or Marlene Dietrich). With specific reference to the idea of 'drag kings' (female-to-male impersonators), Judith Halberstam makes this important distinction:

> A drag king is a female (usually) who dresses up in recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume. Historically and categorically, we can make distinctions between the drag king and the male impersonator. Male impersonation has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years, but the drag king is a recent phenomenon. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act. (Judith Halberstam 2000: 232)

As such, with the aggressive substitute phallus, the exploitative sexual spectacle, and the femininity of the sailor on the hoop trapeze, Stah has more in common with the drag king phenomenon than a simple impersonator. At no point does she try to 'pass' as a man: quite the opposite. But she does take gestures, themes, and stereotypes of 'masculine' behaviour and parade them for comedy and satire. Stah herself confesses: 'I think that the burlesque revival in contemporary culture has been led by women . . . for women. As far as the female performers are concerned I consider the desire to eroticize themselves as an unconscious backlash against feminist ideology' (Empress Stah 2007). In this way, what becomes apparent is how the postfeminist woman is prepared to stage her very composite sexuality, as opposed to a denial of her desire.

Fashion and Resistance: Subcultural and Mainstream Visions of Neo Burlesque

Another significant issue is the identification of a distinction between the subcultural and the mainstream forms of burlesque in order to ascertain any possibility for political radicalism in the genre. As Dick Hebdige comments, subcultures express 'forbidden contents (consciousness of class, consciousness of difference) in forbidden forms (transgressions of sartorial and behavioural codes, law breaking etc.). They are profane articulations, and they are often and significantly described as "unnatural"' (Dick Hebdige 1979: 91). One may note a profound difference in ideological intent between the high street shops selling seamed stockings, feather boas, nipple pasties and 'risqué' lingerie, and a performer or audience member who has a heavy investment in Goth, punk, fetish, rockabilly or its contemporary version, psychobilly.[5] This is not to make distinctions between true and false, or 'authentic' and 'inauthentic', but rather, to tease out the commercial and the extant subcultural forms. But such incorporation into the mainstream also has its roots in the evolution of any subculture: 'The process of recuperation . . . [includes] the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e. the commodity form)' (Dick Hebdige 1979: 94). For burlesque, the idea of *difference,* central to all

subcultures, is articulated through sexuality, gender and social class. However, in the attempt to rebel or situate themselves in a subculture, 'people end up simply rebranding themselves as hardcore, thrasher and punk . . . this rebranding is the exact same quest for distinction that has been driving competitive consumption in the first place' (Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter 2006: 187).

Like its self-proclaimed heroine and commercial representative, Dita von Teese, modern burlesque is saturated with vintage images, apparel and cultural referents, which on the surface seem to be limiting rather than liberating. But one must be aware that neo burlesque is a fluid and multifaceted phenomenon. Whilst Dita von Teese leads the vintage burlesque, we also have burlesquers such as Dirty Martini and performance artists like Annie Sprinkle who have a clear political agenda. As Bella Besame ('The Slippery Belle Burlesque'), commented: 'The whole movement of burlesque positively encourages individuality; in size, shape, height and general appearance, which is a far cry from the uniform look of thin, tanned young girls which is foisted on the public on a daily basis' (Bella Besame 2008). Michelle Baldwin confirms this:

> Burlesque glamour . . . is larger than life, filled with innuendo, and coated with glitter. Burlesque offers something different than the standard mass-produced culture. In burlesque, girls can have curves, often big curves. They can be loud and funny and still be sex symbols. The basic elements of burlesque are things that are missing from contemporary life. (Michelle Baldwin 2004: 30)

However, this claim is not always sustainable. In common with Hitman Hearn (cited earlier), Laurie Penny remarks that 'since its 1990s revival, burlesque has gradually shifted focus from social satire to simple stripping. This has been sold to the public as something subversive, even feminist – a democratic form of objectification which welcomes any woman, regardless of age or dress size. In practice, this seems to add up to the less-than-radical notion that women who have cellulite can be sex objects too. According to some, this is fantastic

news for feminism but "body confidence" doesn't feature highly in my memories' (Laurie Penny 2009). Indeed, considering the Hawaiian Kalani Kokonuts' account of her own body in *Burlesque Undressed* may invite heavy denunciation from any feminist commentator: 'I *love* implants. Unless you have perfect breasts which are very very rare, but sometimes you need help . . . I work out hard, I go to the gym, I take care of myself, I do my nails, you know, I tan, I do whatever it takes, because back in the days of burlesque, unless you did those things, you were not going to get a job' (*Burlesque Undressed* 2010). Culturally, women's bodies have always been situated in the public domain, subjected to debate, censure and current trends. Myra Macdonald notes that such discourses 'encourage women themselves to perpetuate the objectification of their bodies . . . The materiality of the body, which women feel to be such an intrinsic part of their own subjectivity and identity, becomes a detachable asset, malleable to whatever aspirational purpose postfeminist woman chooses' (Myra Macdonald 1995: 202). Such discourses, as in Kalani Kokonut's statement (manicures, tanning, exercise, implants), oscillate between pleasure, pampering and rigorous self-discipline, which emulates Foucault's notion of the body as a site of contested power (Myra Macdonald 1995: 201). As the female body is historically a public possession, the construction of that entity is figured through culturally sanctioned images.

Kalani Kokonuts' set, as featured in *Burlesque Undressed,* is not without intellectualisation, but it is also decidedly problematic. She offers a Japanese-styled performance, with a costume clearly influenced by the painting 'Under the Wave Off Kanagawa' by Hosukai. Despite both poise and reflection, however, one finds oneself speculating on the nature of female exoticism and exploitation, a point further demonstrated by Perle Noire, who delivers a Josephine Baker tribute in the same documentary. Baker (1906–1975) was known for her contribution to the Civil Rights' Movement in the USA, she was the first African American woman in a major film, worked for the French Resistance and was probably bisexual. However, Perle Noire, in her emulation of Baker, suggests that people wanted to see 'a jungle woman', so she delivered just that persona. She claims: 'When I do the banana dance, I feel proud. I don't feel demeaned, I feel proud' (*Burlesque Undressed*

2010). Wearing a skirt of bananas, a large necklace and nipple pasties, Noire gyrates and feverishly dances in homage to one of the twentieth century's most complex black women. Baker's *danse sauvage* is, despite Perle Noire's valiant claims to the contrary, quite a politically compromised affair. Performed in Paris (1925) as part of the Revue Negre, the dance summarised how the female black body of Baker is invested with stereotypical sexualisation, becoming 'for her audiences, the personification of the exotic primitive . . . It can be read as a move to sensationalize and dramatize blackness – the move to personify and embody stereotypical performances of blackness for the pleasure of an audience' (Debra B. Silverman 1993: 599). Indeed, Baker's undulating buttocks, her facial expressions and her thrashing about onstage suggest the irrational, overwrought and orgasmic native. Can such a spectacle ever be received as anything other than a power dynamic reflecting colonial ideology, Otherness and the fetishisation of the black female body? Janell Hobson notes that black female bodies have been 'widely excluded from dominant culture's celebration of beauty and femininity' (Janell Hobson 2005: 7). Potentially, the representation of black beauty on stage might be an attempt to 'write back' those narratives into mainstream history, but in many ways, it is difficult to see how such an exhibition of colonial stereotypes as Perle Noire describes can be inflected with a political radicalism.

Dita von Teese's high-profile coffee table book, *Burlesque and the Art of the Teese* (2006), has signalled burlesque's entrance into the mass market, along with Immodesty Blaize's appearance in Goldfrapp's music video 'Train' (from the album *Black Cherry,* 2003), as well as Madonna's retro appeal in *Vogue* (1990). These examples all suggest how commercial both sexuality and burlesque have become, but they also invite complex readings in terms of theatrical display. Jacki Willson highlights a complicity in gender stereotyping through her study of Dita von Teese:

> I find Von Teese's imagery problematic. Without being coupled with an ironical, critical or reflective questioning of sexual power, erotic display risks falling immediately back into unchallenging, stereotypical, 'off the shelf' readings of female sexuality. (Jackie Willson 2007: 149)

Even a cursory glance at von Teese's book confirms such a reading. Posing in a red and white polka dot bikini, she claims 'even as a little girl, I understood that beauty was a luxury ticket to the world' (Dita von Teese 2006: 14). Then she proceeds to take us through her transformative journey from poised but gauche child to a master of 'makeup application and curling irons [in order to] artfully master the world' (Dita von Teese 2006: 15). Von Teese also details her childhood fascination with vintage, with bygone eras and costumes reminiscent of another age:

> I really was a girl from the twenties aboard the doomed luxury liner, *Lusitania.* I dressed the part, of course – long black gloves, hat, and veil. I was a connoisseur of dress-up in those days, and my mother picked up vintage things in resale shops just for my games. I thought I looked glamorous and mysterious, and besides, it gave me a thrill to pretend I was someone long gone. (Dita von Teese 2006: 14)

Historical facts aside – the Lusitania sank in 1915 – this reads like a burlesque version of the *Bildungsroman,* but the fantasy level of this nostalgia has an important corollary in postfeminism. Nostalgic desire, the attempt to replicate a prior period of history, or even to model oneself on starlets and performers from the 1920s through to the 1950s, has its roots in *retrosexuality.* Diane Negra notes that 'disordered temporality' marks the postfeminist narrative, often through a co-option of the 1950s (which is a staple of burlesque style). She says: 'when we can't confidently see a way forward we very naturally look back.' (Diane Negra 2009: 51). Most recent feminist criticism has frequently identified that hard-won female emancipation also 'comes at the price of instability' (Rebecca Mead 2008: 73). The ideal feminine image vaunted in history is therefore reclaimed by postfeminism through *retrosexuality* as a means of offering security based on gendered behaviour. Such a view offers a 'dialogue between the past and the present and is symptomatic of a real fear about a future where male hegemony might be more comprehensively and effectively attacked than has so far been the case' (Imelda Whelehan 2000: 11) (see Smith, this volume).

Dita von Teese's own forays into the commercial world, including the production of a flipbook set featuring her classic Martini Glass routine (Dita von Teese and Sheryl Nields 2009), as well as numerous calendars, posters and tv appearances, has culminated in her collaboration with Cointreau as 'Global Ambassador' for the drink, which has to date included the launch of a 'My Private Cointreau Coffret' – a beauty and cocktail kit costing £199 (Jessica Bumpus 2010). As of 2010, she also advertises Perrier bottled water (www.perrierbydita.com), hosting a scene in the 'Perrier Mansion', where a (clearly male) viewer is invited to view two scenarios online ('The Darkened Room' and 'Roll the Dice'). In 'The Darkened Room', the heterosexual male viewer is situated as an amateur photographer as Dita unpeels her clothes and drinks bottled water. In the second scenario, the viewer is asked to throw dice (marked variously with words such as 'squeeze' and 'breasts'), and Dita willingly obliges as instructed. In the final scene, as Dita performs her own 'private strip' for the viewer, the advert requests 'don't touch Dita with your mouse', setting up an exoticised and high status version of a strip club. Finally, the viewer is ejected from the mansion since he 'did not respect [Dita's] rules'. In every instance, the advertisement is constructed exclusively for masculine pleasure. In 1975, Laura Mulvey theorised the idea of the 'male gaze' in her study 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (reprinted 2009), exploring the erotic potential of visual display and the power relationships inherent in that schema. These are usually gendered:

> 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 phantasy 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 and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness.* Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Laura Mulvey 2009: 19)

The display of Dita's body (by amateur photographer or fondling of breasts determined by the roll of a dice) focuses on voyeuristic enjoyment and male appraisal. The woman on display functions 'as erotic object for the spectator' (Laura Mulvey 2009: 20). It also, in a neat convergence of commodity and desire, presents the humble bottled water as a high status commodity: 'Perrier and Vichy, both associated with spas, are now brands so venerable that they have themselves been embedded in cultural meanings, associated with healing and the tables of the elite' (Richard Wilk 2006: 308). Combining high status, luxury, female sexuality, and branded goods, the Perrier-Dita partnership represents the most traditional illustration of burlesque and commodity values in our culture.

So have we seen the death of burlesque? Or is it possible to recuperate a hidden agenda? Liselle Terret, who performs as Doris La Trine and who has worked with such self-consciously political performers as Annie Sprinkle, directly positions herself against mainstream ideology regarding the female form. For instance, one of her pieces, 'Birth of a Porn Star', is a commentary on 'the grotesqueness of cosmetic surgery' (Doris La Trine 2008). Here, La Trine uses a marker pen and brands her body with the slogan 'Cut Here', and finally emerges as a newly-born cosmetic woman wearing inflatable breasts, a transparent mask, locating herself as utterly artificial and disturbingly monstrous. Like The World Famous *BOB* in some respects, Terret also views herself as a 'queer comedic neo burlesque performer': she identifies the costume of her piece 'Climb Inside' as being 'quite drag' (Doris La Trine 2008). Again, the emphasis on traditional concepts of femininity through costume and apparel actually produces a critique of such judgments. Terret also demonstrates how burlesque can emerge as a self-satirising and self-reflexive form: 'People have commented that I parody burlesque, using it to subvert ideas of the objectified woman: Dita von Teese uses a champagne glass to crawl around inside, and I use a large pink toilet' (Doris La Trine 2008). Referring to it throughout as 'him', the toilet (see Figure 2) not only debunks the glamorous object of von Teese, but also explores the current social climate where women

Figure 2. Liselle Terret, performing as Doris La Trine. Photograph courtesy of Angell.

desperately grasp for a visual ideal and attempt to navigate feelings of powerlessness and abjection:

> My original intention was to create a piece that was loosely based on my experiences of having an eating disorder many years ago – bulimia . . . I wanted to reposition people's ideas about bulimia and say that there are clear social/cultural/societal reasons behind it, and I wanted to use metaphors and comedy to do this. I play with the idea of the glamorised and sexually objectified woman and then subvert this . . . [such as] a woman scrubbing herself with her toilet brush – she becomes an extension of the toilet, desperately trying to scrub herself clean, trying to rub herself out until the piece ends with her trying to put the toilet brush down her throat. (Doris La Trine 2008)

Rather than conforming to the mainstream image of burlesque, Terret actually forces an audience to shift perspective. Likewise, as with Negra and other feminist scholars, she sees the postfeminist

implications of the neo burlesque phenomenon as being far from unproblematic:

> There seems to be an ongoing resurgence of the commercialism of soft porn and women flashing their breasts to young middle class white men . . . [and] there seems to be a normalisation of seeing women performing their bodies in a very overtly sexualised way. There is a lot of glamour and celebrity and 'fun' linked with this . . . Perhaps there is a confusion with young women understanding the idea of 'sexual freedom and sexual liberation', and linking it solely to empowerment – meaning that one has to take off one's clothes in an extremely sexualised way in public, and also, perhaps, being sexually promiscuous . . . I think that, on the positive side, perhaps women are tired of never being the authors of their own stories, of always being the object and never the subject. (Doris La Trine 2008)

Thus, burlesque is Janus-faced: simultaneously seeming to reproduce stereotypes whilst also operating to question them. As Rachel Shteir notes:

> To some contemporary women, performing retro striptease is a feminist act and a social obligation, a way to wrest the art of stripping from the world of pornographers. These women argue that their work is a political reaction to twenty-first century reform forces seeking to foil female sexual expression and that by giving the striptease acts of the fifties an ironic tone, they are updating them, doing a kind of performance art. (Rachel Shteir 2006: 3)

The Gaze of the Audience

So far, this chapter has discussed the nature of the performance and the performer in burlesque, but as indicated in my own observations of various neo burlesque shows, there is the equally valid perspective of the audience member. For theatrical criticism generally, the process

of recovering the demographic of any given audience is notoriously difficult:

> It is not easy to locate the contemporary spectator, much less the historical. From the past, our evidences are fragmentary, partial and contradictory – defensive actors, nostalgic memorialists, narratising journalists, anti-theatrical pamphleteers and social reformers. Within this frame the spectator is almost always silent, unless a theatre critic. (Maggie Gale and Viv B. Gardner 2001: 26)

Historically, we do know that burlesque attracted male and female audiences, with the decline in female attendees only really occurring when burlesque focussed more on the 'strip' than the satire (Robert C. Allen 2006: 77 and 152). In terms of my own short survey of modern audiences across the UK, the trend is somewhat similar. Most performers concur that during their shows, the audience is composed of mainly women or couples, with a usual ratio of 70%-30% in favour of a female-based spectatorship (with variance depending on the nature of the night – 'straight', mixed vaudeville/burlesque/cabaret – as well as location). For Lady J., the audience is part of the unfolding drama of burlesque and a component of its radicalism: 'I will be looking at the audience, catching eyes and bringing them "onto" the stage with me . . . I use observational comedy (picking on audience members) [and] engage people in conversation' (Lady J. 2008). There are no footlights here – the venues for burlesque can vary enormously, and do not always have a conventional stage, but can often feature a designated performance area, which again means the show is conducted *among* the audience, rather than removed from it. There is no hierarchical division of audience/performer, and this registers a theatrical democratisation. So what implications does this 'unconventional' forum have for how a performance is received? Recent critics have identified the notion of the 'female gaze', which is of particular relevance here. The female viewer, faced with her image on stage (especially so if she is decked out to mirror the gaudy finery of the performer, as many audience members are), is more given to identification than a critical appraisal:

> Such a range of looks – often fragmented and contradictory – perhaps more importantly constitutes an overall female perspective. This shift warrants further examination for it suggests that mainstream genres can facilitate a dominant female gaze and a route whereby feminist meanings can be introduced in order to disturb the status quo. (Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment 1988: 12)

The very diverse nature of female/male audiences, along with male and female performers who queer identities in all manner of ways, reveal the 'gaze' to be more complicated than Laura Mulvey allows. For instance, during Empress Stah's act, a male attendee commented to me: 'Who is this for? It's not for men, and I'm not sure it's for women either.' Stah, like many other performers, defeats any simple understanding of the gaze, and such performances can wrestle with the objectification of women, and work towards a feminist goal. Indeed, superficially, this is what makeover shows aspire to do, such as Gok Wan's *How to Look Good Naked* (see McLoughlin, this volume).

Thus, when female audience members are presented with a thoughtful and complex burlesque performance (such as Lady J.'s drag performance, with an audience composition drawing from communities of all manner of straight, gay, lesbian, bi, and Goth/metal subcultures), there is a collapse of the strict lines between performer and audience, and therefore we must speculate how far the 'gaze' is a hostile, heterosexual one, or whether there is a sense of celebration, internal interrogation, and identification. When the audience members are emulating the stage characters, in feather boas, corsetry and fetish staples such as stockings, stilettos and other extravagant apparel, arguably the appeal of the show is mutual questioning, highlighting both interrogation and the possibility of identification. Indeed, it also marks a collapse of the distinctions which make simple designations such as 'male' and 'female' obligatory. One can see that the show is less about materialist consumption, and more about active production: a dialogue between the showman/woman, rather than passive reception. Similarly, with the level of audience participation in some acts, one may envisage that 'when the scopic drive is brought into focus, the viewer also runs the

risk of becoming the object of the look' (Katherine Liepe-Levinson 2001: 15). Thus the male audience member who, in one show with Lady J. ('Slippery Belle', Leeds, UK, 'Subculture', 30 November 2007), was dubbed 'Maybellene' for the entire evening by the compere, becomes the clear focus of humour and gender parody (whilst neatly providing a parodic conflation of cultural reference points: the cosmetic company Maybelline, and the Chuck Berry song of tragic romance from 1955). The control at this point rests firmly with the performer: 'In the case of burlesque, the power relationships at work between performer and spectator were much more complex than the terms "display" and "scopic desire" suggest. Desire always entails a partial relinquishing of power to that which is desired. The spectator might feel his position as customer establishes him as the party for whose benefit the performance is staged, but it is the performer who controls what is offered' (Robert C. Allen 2006: 152). This is particularly the case with the burlesque compere, who sets up what is permissible and acceptable within the forum of the performance, as Lady J. again notes: 'As long as the audience understands the rules of the space and the performances: they are there to celebrate the performers, not to objectify them. As a compere you just need to make sure they all understand the rules' (Lady J. 2008). In this way, the scopic focus ultimately shifts to the audience itself, and there is a genuine resistance to objectification in burlesque performance. The performer returns 'the gaze' through gesture (winks, glances, expressions directed at particular audience members), and thus confounds an audience-driven scopic drive. This is not a new phenomenon, but can be traced back to the beginnings of burlesque in the nineteenth century, where the performer gave winks and come-hither glances. Burlesque is thus distinguished from other forms of spectacle (such as ballet) because of the practitioner's 'awarishness' (Robert C. Allen 2006: 129). It was a form of self assertion and self possession, a woman confident in her body and in her sexuality, collapsing the distinctions between the public and the private spheres (see McLoughlin, this volume).

In summary, most polemics on burlesque have sought to defend or condemn the genre. On the one hand, it is a highly sexualised performative strategy which provokes a strong critique from some feminist

circles, and on the other, it maintains a bid to prove itself an intelligent, if provocative, shocking and complex, *art form.* The current evaluation regards it as a phenomenon which is strategic, polysemic and eminently playful, albeit one which has in many cases moved from its subcultural positioning to a more commercially-aware phenomenon. However, the very diversity of performances (straight, queer, 'vintage', 'fetish') throughout the country, and indeed the world, as well as the complexity of audience demographics and responses, suggests that any simplistic readings of empowerment or patriarchal domination should be withheld: 'Strip shows are strange cultural artefacts because they both uphold and break traditional female and male sex roles and other related cultural rubrics – thus aggravating activists on both the Right and the Left for different reasons and purposes' (Katherine Liepe-Levinson 2001: 6). What does emerge is an awareness of *gender* as performance, whilst the overt and excessive presentation of femininity and gender coding in burlesque actually invites us to revisit cultural conventions.

Notes

1. Natasha Walter, *Living Dolls* (2010: 44), refers to one burlesque performer, Laurie, who had a similar experience at a ball in Oxford, where the audience 'just saw it as a strip show, they were shouting "Get them off" through my act, and I felt absolutely awful'.
2. See Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004: 44 and 99), for a discussion of The World Famous *BOB*'s satire on McDonald's and modern consumerism, as well as her status as 'female-to-female impersonator'. See also Jessica Glasscock, *Striptease: from Gaslight to Spotlight* (2003: 169), for discussion of Dirty Martini's juxtaposition of ballet, fetish and striptease.
3. Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded* (2009: 9) notes that the Wonderbra has become symbolic of some postfeminist discourses, in that it suggests empowerment is a choice to appear confrontationally and publicly sexual, but realistically it merely appeals to the 'male gaze'.
4. 'Peek-A-Boo Burlesque', The Stardust Bar, Sheffield, UK, 18 August 2007.

5. For a further discussion of these influences on burlesque, see Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (2004).

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CHAPTER 6

FROM GIRL POWER TO LADY POWER?: POSTFEMINISM AND *LADETTE TO LADY*

Angela Smith

'Exhibitionism' can be taken to mean more than just bodily exhibitionism. Extravagant behaviour, in a 'look-at-me' way has often been considered undesirable, particularly in women, whether this be in the context of attitudes towards allowing women on the stage or, as we will see here, the gendered performances of young women who do not conform to expectations of female decorum in public and private places. Concerns about the exhibitionist behaviour of young women in public have long been open to media comment. As Carolyn Jackson and Penny Tinkler (2007) have shown, women in the public sphere, particularly young women, have been the subject of social condemnation throughout the twentieth century. In the early part of the century, the newly emancipated female was disparagingly referred to as the 'flapper' whose hedonistic disregard for the social propriety of her Victorian mother manifested itself in displays of public drinking, taking pleasure in the freedoms afforded by the demise of the chaperone coupled with increased wage-earning capacities. Such behaviour attracted media attention again in the last

decade of the twentieth century where the freedoms and equality earned by second wave feminists was appropriated by a new generation of young women. Initially celebrated by the media as 'ladettes', this positive approach soon changed to one of concern then condemnation. As Kate Day et al. (2004) have shown, many British national newspapers in the early part of the twenty-first century reported studies on teenage drinking which claimed that young women were 'bigger binge drinkers' than their male peers. Such articles can be linked to wider moral panics about young women's behaviour which seek to represent young women as a threat to themselves (highlighting a greater risk of physical and sexual assault as well as long-term health problems) and to patriarchy (by challenging the long-established norms of female passivity, particularly in the public sphere). This attention and disapproval of female exhibitionist behaviour, as mentioned above, is not new but as this chapter will show, what is different is the widespread media condemnation of such behaviour that extends into television entertainment programming. This means that the type of behaviour more usually associated with young men – heavy drinking, sexual promiscuity – when adopted by young women is now open to wider criticism.

As Natasha Walter has pointed out, throughout twenty-first century Western culture, 'it is constantly suggested that women's journey to self-fulfilment will inevitably lie in perfecting their bodies' (Natasha Walter 2010: 66). She goes on to suggest that 'much of the culture around young women centres on the idea of the "make-over" ', where the imperative is a physical re-making rather than intellectual or emotional growth (Natasha Walter 2010: 66). However, I would suggest that this is too simplistic and examples of television programmes such as *Ladette to Lady*, *From Asbo Queen to Beauty Queen* and *The Swan* carry with them an imperative to behave differently, particularly emphasising 'ladylike' decorum as part of this makeover.

The reality-based series *Ladette to Lady* was first broadcast in the UK on ITV1 in 2005 and was followed up by a second series in 2006, a third in 2008 and then, with Australian contestants, a fourth series in 2009. The producers, RDF Media, sold the franchise and further

series have been produced in Australia (where Channel Nine broadcast it as *Aussie Ladette to Lady*) and the USA (where it is broadcast as *Ladette to Lady USA* on MTV). In all three versions of the series, the format is identical with the same aims. The term 'ladette' is commonly thought to have been coined by the men's magazine *FHM* in 1994 to describe young women who adopt 'laddish' behaviour in terms of boisterous assertiveness, heavy drinking sessions and sexual promiscuity. In Britain, it is largely associated with young working-class women. The ladette can be seen as an unconventional form of femininity in her adoption of behaviour more usually associated with young men, but I will go on to argue that there is a resurgence of a form of traditional femininity in the middle-class 'lady' mould as seen in makeover shows which here seeks to make over the working-class women whose postfeminist performances as ladettes are open to unsanctioned scorn.

In contrast with some quality tv dramas which represent 'the oppression of upper-middle class suburban life' and its associated containment (Niall Richardson 2006: 158), reality tv shows almost exclusively offer such a lifestyle as being aspirational, where traditional femininity is seen as something positive rather than regressive. The equality argued for and, in some respects won, by second wave feminism has been diffused by an increasingly consumerist culture to produce a sense that, despite everything that has been gained, there is still something missing. This is found at the heart of the theme of 'change the way you look; change your life' that is clear in the proliferation of makeover programmes aimed primarily at female participants. In this chapter we will look at how discourses of postfeminism operate within a makeover show that explicitly aims to turn 'ladettes' into 'ladies', with the inherent lifestyles these labels embody. We will focus on the second series of *Ladette to Lady*, which was screened in the UK on ITV1 in autumn 2006, and a follow-up *End of Term Report* screened the following year, when contestants were invited back to the school for tea with the teachers.

'Postfeminism'

To begin with an overview of 'postfeminism', this is a concept which has emerged in popular culture since the early 1980s and operates against the wider social effects of second wave feminism. There is an assumption that the goals of second wave feminism have been achieved, at least in so far as to threaten traditional masculinity, or that it has failed. Sarah Projansky teases out the sometimes contradictory discourses which come under the umbrella term 'postfeminism'. These discourses are not sequential developments but instead tend to operate concurrently. As Projansky goes on to explain, postfeminism itself is often viewed negatively as representing the end of feminism because it constructs the goals of the (white and middle-class) second wave movement as having been achieved. More positively, the 'choices' in terms of work, family and dating that women have achieved are offered as a positive alternative to the definition of second wave feminism that is anti-sex (Sarah Projanksy 2001: 67), and as such this postfeminist discourse is resolutely heterosexual. Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon's (2009) discussion of postfeminism employs a more nuanced analysis, where 'postfeminism is not a "new feminism" in the sense that it represents something radically revolutionary and ground-breaking' that is both 'retro- and neo- in its outlook' and is therefore irretrievably post- (Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon 2009: 8). This will be illustrated by the subsequent argument in this chapter.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will be drawing on strands of postfeminism that include those relating to female empowering discourses which contain the often contradictory forms of unconventional, girl-power style feminism personified by the ladette, and traditional femininity. The freedoms won by second wave feminists have allowed Western women to live lives which, as Rebecca Mead points out, 'come at the price of instability' (Rebecca Mead 2007: 73), and thus traditional femininity offers stability based on established gendered behaviour and stereotypes. Such views offer a 'dialogue between the past and the present and are symptomatic of a real fear about a future where male hegemony might be more comprehensively and effectively attacked than

has so far been the case' (Rebecca Mead 2007: 73). In this way, as Elspeth Probyn (1997) argues, pre-feminist ideals are being seductively repackaged as postfeminist freedoms, and I would suggest this is more akin to 'lady power' (Angela Smith 2011). This return to traditional gender roles can be seen to be symptomatic of Susan Faludi's 'backlash' manifesto (1991) in which the 'having it all' single, career woman of the 1980s is returned to the patriarchal fold within the postfeminist discourse of 'traditional feminism' (Elspeth Probyn 1997; Sarah Projansky 2001). Reflecting the backlash view of postfeminism, Imelda Whelehan offers contextualisation in relation to wider issues which is typified by a 'nostalgia for a lost, uncomplicated past peopled by "real" women and humorous cheeky chappies' (Imelda Whelehan 2000: 11).

In the different categories of postfeminism, one can be seen to celebrate the equality and choice afforded by second wave feminism through girl power to act in a way that is unconventional in its celebratory appropriation of aspects of male behaviour such as drinking and promiscuity. The second, traditional femininity discourse which is relevant to this paper is that category which 'appeals to a nostalgia for a pre-feminist past as an ideal that feminism has supposedly destroyed' (Sarah Projansky 2001: 67) and which I suggest could be referred to as 'lady power'. Both of these discursive categories therefore can be seen to be embodied in the labels 'ladette' and 'lady' which form the title of the makeover show that is the subject of this study.

Celebrating Unconventional Femininity: Ladettes

In celebrating the equality and choice afforded by second wave feminism, the ladette is the personification of girl power in terms of postfeminist discourses. Underpinned by the (hetero)sex positive discourse of postfeminism (Sarah Projansky 2001), girl power emerged in the 1990s. As Whelehan states, the ladette:

> knows what she wants and how to get it; vulgarity and sexual objectification of men is supposed to pass for sexual self determination [...] the ladette offers the most shallow model of gender equality; suggests that women could or should adopt the most

> anti-social and pointless "male" behaviour as a sign of empowerment. The Wonderbra, unsurprisingly, remains the essential style statement for a wannabe ladette. (Imelda Whelehan 2000: 9)

In this way, there is an exhibitionist tendency which rejoices in the male gaze through an invitation to 'look at me'. As Projansky points out: 'their invitation of the gaze and their own fascination with an attention to the object of the gaze (their own bodies) not only intensifies heterosexuality within postfeminism as depicted in the popular press, but it also ensures a place for femininity in postfeminism' (Sarah Projansky 2001: 80). Thus as Willson (2008) has observed, the 'hair extensions, breast enlargements, Brazilian waxes, thongs and long, white-tipped nails' that are characteristic of many contemporary young women's appearances shows the influence of the American porn industry (Jacki Willson 2008: 102). The positive spin on this, according to Willson, is that the prostitute/porn star can be said to symbolise 'a combination of confident sexual allure, self-governance and financial independence' (Jacki Willson 2008: 103). This is demonstrated, superficially at least, by the breast enhancement surgery that was an eighteenth birthday present to one of the participants (Frances) on *Ladette to Lady*, whose playful ladette behaviour, as we shall see, is framed as being problematic in her 'exhibitionist' tendency to flash her breasts in public. Thus she can be seen to illustrate the point made by Robert Goldman et al. (1991) in which 'meanings of choice and individual freedom become wed to images of sexuality in which women apparently choose to be seen as sexual objects because it suits their liberated interests' (Robert Goldman et al. 1991: 338). In this way, the ladette is different from the longer-standing image of the 'tomboy' in that the tomboy seeks to be *one of* the boys, whilst the ladette seeks to be attractive *to* the boys. So, whilst appropriating aspects of 'laddish' male behaviour in terms of excessive drinking and sexual promiscuity, the ladettes remain resolutely heterosexual. In terms of social class, too, Frances's exhibitionism can be seen as symptomatic of the long-standing history of representing the working class through excess that appears to be a vital component of the ladette, here including the involvement of conspicuous consumption.

From the mid-1990s, the Spice Girls came to be inextricably linked with girl power (Sarah Gamble 1999). Geri Halliwell described girl power as being 'like feminism, but you don't have to burn your bra. And the message is "You can do what you want – look the way you want – as long as you believe in yourself"' (quoted in Jude Davies 1999: 163). Indeed, in their book, *Girl Power!,* the Spice Girls asserted that that their aim was to 'give feminism a kick up the arse' (The Spice Girls 1997: 67). So girl power promoted a boisterous, aggressive attitude towards gendered behaviour, offering a dynamic rebellion against second wave feminism's perceived constraints.

As Ariel Levy demonstrates, this form of female empowerment has a powerful media presence globally, with shows such as *Girls Gone Wild* appealing to young male viewers in the USA, along with the wider cultural impact of this through the rise of what she refers to as a 'raunch culture' (Ariel Levy 2005). For Kathleen Rowe, this has a longer-standing heritage of 'unruly women' in the media, particularly in her study of feminism and the carnivalesque (Kathleen Rowe 1995). This excessive sexuality can also be seen as a threat to the moral order of Western civilisation (Beverley Skeggs 2004: 100). In the British context, the sexualised appearance of working-class women is defined 'against the elegant, cultured, pretty, well-dressed, cultivated women' (Beverley Skeggs 2004: 100) of the middle classes. As we shall see, middle-class tastes are imposed on the visual appearances of the working-class ladettes in *Ladette to Lady* in a bid to offer a 'safer' brand of sexualisation through a traditionalising process.

A more positively-received aspect of girl power, according to Joanne Hollows (2000: 181), was that it is heralding the arrival of new forms of female solidarity and a new, assertive feminine identity and popular feminism. It also seems to 'recognise the age-old strengths of women's friendships and community and is particularly positive towards mother-daughter relationships' (Imelda Whelehan 2000: 46). This is relevant to a discussion of *Ladette to Lady* as this is how the 'school' is set up, to forge female friendships (shared dormitories, non-competitiveness) whilst the teachers alternatively act as mentors and mother figures who can guide the participants to self improvement. However,

as we shall see, the classroom lessons taught at the school seem to undermine girl power through their nostalgic evocation of femininity that is embodied in the label 'lady'.

Traditionalising Girl Power: Striving to be 'Ladies'

Diane Negra argues that 'one of the key premises in current antifeminist postfeminist constructions of women's life choices (whether in the form of advice literature or film, print or broadcast fiction) is the need to abandon the overly-ambitious 1980s program of "having it all"' (Diane Negra 2004: 12). In this sense, the traditionalising discourse of female empowerment sees ladettes in particular as being misguided. The underlying sense of a lack of appropriate choices for young women is one which Ariel Levy discussed when interviewed by Kira Cochrane in *The Guardian* in June 2006. She commented that there are few alternatives for young women in the twenty-first century. The 'triumph' of second wave feminism, for Levy, has been that women can reclaim and embrace female sexuality after centuries in which women were not allowed to admit to any sexual feelings. However, she goes on to explain her thesis that such 'female chauvinist pigs' as have been produced by this cultural and social shift are trapped by consumerism. 'If you happen to be a person for whom this incredibly specific form of sexual expression (the ultra-consumerist porn-star ideal) is authentic, then this is your moment, and you should enjoy it. But if you're anyone else, then you may as well be back in the 1950s, because there's no other sexual model on offer to you' (Kira Cochrane 2006). An extension of this concept can be found in the rise of modern burlesque (see Claire Nally, this volume), where it has become more mainstream since the turn of the twenty-first century.

In the early postfeminist days of the 1990s, girl power was personified in Britain by icons such as tv presenter Zoe Ball, DJ Sara Cox, and internationally by the Spice Girls (Sarah Gamble 1999). The subsequent decline of positive images of girl power in the twenty-first century is possibly linked to most of these icons now being mothers, thus effectively shifting them closer to a traditional feminine role. Indeed, when the Spice Girls announced their reunion tour in June 2007, they

claimed it was largely for the benefit of their children. This marks a move towards a 'safer' femininity. Most recently, there has been a concentration on making over ladettes to be more traditionally feminine and respectable in conduct and appearance, reverting to traditional feminine stereotypes. There is a foregrounding of the performative nature of femininity, where the sense of identity that is evident elsewhere in postfeminism becomes naturalised and internalised by the young women featured. This is seen in a variety of makeover shows that have appeared on cable and satellite channels throughout the Western world in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

These texts all point less to the enhancement of individual participants than to the collective imperative of the antifeminist strand of traditional femininity – lady power – but such contemporary gender politics are often masked by postmodern irony. Such makeover shows feature participants who are in the 20–40 year-old female market, a group which Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Read (2002) suggest comprises 'a generation that has grown up taking for granted the feminist victories won by their mothers and thus for whom feminism exists at the level of popular commonsense rather than the level of theoretical abstraction [for whom] "having it all" means not giving things up (Rachel Moseley and Jacinda Reed 2002: 238). That the ladette is misguided in her appropriation of girl power is clear in the urge to reveal the 'real' self who will conform to pre-feminist ideals. However, as Whelehan laments, 'in so many instances in women's glossies, the "postfeminist" image amounts to a reclamation of a pre-feminist image. Any objections we might feel are set up as contradictory because we are supposed to "know" that this is ironic and therefore not exploitative' (Imelda Whelehan 2000: 147).

The proliferation of makeover shows in Western media promotes consumption practices in order to achieve a largely middle-class ideal of femininity. Participants in these shows are usually women who are shown how to liberate their inner pre-feminist femininity through the guidance of the 'experts'. Whelehan has observed that 'lifestyle politics leaves many victims in its wake – those who don't conform to its preferred images and those who are too poor to exercise "control" over their lives through the "liberation" of

consumerism' (Whelehan 2000: 178). Social class comes into play as the purchases made by the participants must conform to the tastes of the middle-class experts who guide the young women on such programmes towards a consumer femininity that includes 'classic' clothing and grooming rather than 'leisure wear' and hair extensions. As Angela McRobbie (2004) and Rosland Gill (2007) have suggested, makeover shows as a genre are profoundly middle class, where the schemes of thought and expression considered appropriate by the tastemaker are imposed over the habitus of a life and a family community. McRobbie in particular has demonstrated how hostile judgements are routinely made of (predominantly white) working-class women, amounting to a form of symbolic violence against these women on the basis of their working-classness. Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs (2004: 206) have argued that makeover shows produce 'new ethical selves' through notions of good taste and cultural capital, where 'better taste' is usually aligned to upper-middle-class ideas. Glossy magazines regularly show us images of celebrities' lives, their houses – in Britain at least – often designed to emulate those of the landed gentry. Such a hankering after traditional lifestyles is found in makeover shows, where classic designs are regularly updated yet remaining firmly anchored in the traditions of the past. In relation to personal appearance, the gendered performances are based on consumption patterns that seek to traditionalise femininity around a look and behaviour that is predominantly middle class, as we shall see shortly.

A Case Study of *Ladette to Lady*

This reality makeover show first aired on ITV1 in 2005. The series follows eight ladettes over the period of their five-week course in learning how to be ladies. Predominantly white and working class, the young women are described on the show's website as being 'loud, foul-mouthed, uncultured and unpleasant women, who like to drink to excess and are sexually promiscuous'. The negativity of this image is personified by the repeated images of pre-Egglestone participants

dancing provocatively in nightclubs, and indeed there is at least one participant who has worked as a lap-dancer in each series. Each week, one ladette is 'asked to leave' the show, having been judged by the teachers at the school to have failed to engage sufficiently with the traditionalising process (the choice of phrase underlining the middle-class refinement the show advocates). Various trials are introduced throughout the series to test the aptitude of the young women, including attending social events and assessment of their unchaperoned behaviour. At the end of the series, the remaining young women are exhibited, Eliza Doolittle-like, at a 'society ball', where the winner is announced as being the woman whose journey from ladette to lady has been the most remarkable.

The programme is staged in Egglestone Hall, a former finishing school in North Yorkshire, and emphasises this institutional format by providing the ladettes with a uniform (classic tweed suit, court shoes, pearl necklace). There is an implicit sense of upper-middle-class white Britishness as mentioned above, with an emphasis on domesticity based around heritage and glamour that is also found in a more playful way in celebrity magazines. As Skeggs has observed, the middle classes are usually associated with 'restraint, repression, reasonableness, modesty and denial' (Beverley Skeggs 2004: 99) in contrast with the excesses of working-class behaviour that is embodied in the ladette participants. As with Joanne Hollows' discussion on postfeminism and domesticity (Joanne Hollows 2006: 111), there is an emphasis on choice and lifestyle that is specifically middle-class. This notion of middle-classness is carried through in the lessons taught at Egglestone Hall, featuring subjects such as deportment, elocution, etiquette, and skills such as flower arranging, cookery and dressmaking. These lessons are conducted in a less playful way, with the participants being treated as schoolchildren who must respect and obey the teachers' instructions, seeking to control the infantilisation of 'girl power'. This forms an extreme version of the sort of governance that is found on other make-over shows, as discussed by Angela McRobbie (2004); here, however, the bullying and symbolic violence is legitimised by the 'pupil/teacher' dynamics that are enacted. The teachers are addressed by their formal

titles, e.g. Mrs Shrager, whilst the participants are expected to abide by rules such as lights-out and school uniform regulations that are more usually applied to much younger (i.e. school-age) people, most especially those at traditional boarding schools.

In line with the mother-daughter relationships and friendships that Imelda Whelehan (2000: 46) commented on above, we find that, cut off from their family and friends outside the school community, the participants soon form friendships. As viewers, we are invited to enter into a vicarious form of friendship with the participants through the use of 'video diaries', which offer us 'exclusive' access to their inner-most confidences through apparently private sections (they are often shown 'confessing' whilst tucked up in bed). This intimacy leads to a more sympathetic viewing, where the audience is invited to engage with the individual personalities of the participants, even the more rebellious ones such as Rebecca, who is 'expelled' after a drunken night out. The empathy/condemnation stance of the viewer is something that Helen Wood, Beverley Skeggs and Nancy Thumin (2009) noticed in their audience study of viewers of reality television programmes, including makeover shows. In face-to-face encounters with individual participants, the teachers are shown to be more maternal, offering advice and encouragement to any young woman who appears to be struggling. The apparent non-competitiveness of the show is emphasised through the fact that it is the teachers who decide which young woman leaves at the end of each week, not some viewer phone-in vote or weekly skills test. Instead, the teachers claim to look for aptitude and attitude towards becoming ladies, gathering this information through classroom and social observation in the way a mother would judge her daughter.

Weber makes the point that makeover shows are often a form of a modern *Pilgrim's Progress*, 'where worthy subjects must undergo humiliation and endure multiple tests in order to arrive at a better place' (Brenda Weber 2005: 19). 'Punishments' for failure to abide by these rules include the withdrawal of privileges, such as confining a participant to the school premises when the others are 'rewarded' with a night at the local pub.

The very traditional setting, in a Georgian country house set in a timeless rural landscape, underscores the traditional femininity that the participants are meant to conform with in wider society. The behavioural classes are interesting in their performances of gender, with the participants being instructed in grooming and performance that echo the middle-class pretensions of their uniforms: walking with books on their heads to learn correct posture; elocution classes to adopt an RP accent (the success of which is something we will return to shortly); conversation skills to equip them for dinner party settings, and the assertion that sexual etiquette is of primary importance if ladylike behaviour is to be achieved.

The Lady of the House

Traditionally-female skills of domesticity are promoted in the lessons. The more subservient aspects of domesticity, such as preparing and serving food, are elevated to skills that are highly esteemed in this traditionalising process, whereby domesticity in itself becomes an opportunity for exhibitionism but in a circumscribed, unthreatening way. In wider society, the rise of the 'domestic goddess' of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century is personified by the working mother who can produce home-made brioche for breakfast before taking the kids to school then going on to her own high-powered job. In Britain, Nigella Lawson is the best-known icon of this strand of postfeminism (Joanne Hollows 2006), embodying the ladylike proficiencies that are advocated to the young women in *Ladette to Lady*.

As part of their training in domesticity in the series of *Ladette to Lady* under discussion here, the social class elements of lady power are emphasised through the inclusion in episode three of a trip to an Alpine ski resort. In keeping with the tradition of upper middle-class young women being employed as 'chalet girls' (that is, young women paid to be housekeeper and cook for a group of holidaymakers at an exclusive ski resort), the young women at Egglestone Hall are 'interviewed' by Cleonine Stenhouse, the head of an agency supplying such

staff. This is framed as being less to do with domestic service than with upper class privilege in the voiceover:

VO – voiceover (Lucy Briers)
JH – Jill Harboard, head teacher of Egglestone Hall

VO	In addition to feeding her guests, a chalet girl must ensure the lodgings are impeccably clean and comfortable. Jill Harboard is teaching the girls how to prepare a chalet for the arrival of the guests. In the past a host of catering jobs were available to finishing school graduates through companies like Lumley's and being a chalet girl was a rite of passage.	Shots of JH supervising participants in cleaning toilets and bathrooms. Shots of participants larking around when JH's back is turned.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
JH	Lumley's used to come here in the summer term and talk to all our girls and they would find them some wonderful jobs in Scotland for stalking, shooting, fishing and then of course chaleting for months of winter and then perhaps they would go on to a hotter climate so you could in fact be travelling all through the year to the most wonderful destinations and have enormous fun.		12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

In this extract, we can see the use of euphemisms to describe domestic servitude: 'preparing a chalet' (line 5) and 'a rite of passage' (lines 14–15). This is played out over visual images of the young women in this programme showing contempt for such a 'treat' in their refusal to take it seriously. Their implicit lack of respect for the authoritarian head teacher is also apparent in their actions, but all is done with a sense of fun and mischief that is characteristic of girl power.

In a to-camera shot, Jill Harboard reinforces the message that this domestic drudgery is something positive, describing the jobs as 'wonderful' (line 14) and emphasising the travel opportunities that such work would afford, without going into detail about the menial tasks that that work would involve (lines 19–21). The whole experience is described as being 'enormous fun'.

In the next scene, the young women are shown to be taking the opportunity-for-travel message very much to heart, describing their excitement at the prospect of being offered the chance to go to Switzerland. When the three participants who have 'passed' the interview process are revealed, we are treated to a contextualising reminder of the ladette behaviour of one of them, Vicky.

Vic – Vicky Jenkins, participant

Vic	Oh I don't know what to think about this chalet thing what is some volcano (laughing). I know it's Switzerland but what if something goes wrong if we have a right big storm or sommat like that and we all get killed.	Vicky to camera, seated on bed.	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
VO	Victoria Jenkins has only been away from home once before. It was on a drinking holiday to Ayia Napa and binge drinking is the reason she's come to finishing school. Lacking in natural aptitude, she has struggled with every subject on the curriculum and even Victoria herself doubts she'll ever make a decent chalet girl.	Shots of pre-Egglestone Vicky drinking with friends and getting very drunk. Vicky arriving at finishing school and showing reluctance to get out of the car. Vicky learning to dance, struggling at elocution class and making mess in kitchen.	8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17
Vic	What if we go and cock somebody's holiday up for 'em and do it all wrong and then they've had a crap holiday I'd feel bad proper bad.		18 19 20 21

Vicky's working-class life experiences are downplayed in place of her self-confessed lack of understanding about the middle-class institution of the chalet girl, referring to it as 'this chalet thing' (line 2), her lack of knowledge is further exhibited by her reference to a volcano. Although her laughter at this point could be seen as self-depreciating and intended for us to laugh with her as a marker of solidarity (Brown and Levinson 1987), we can see that this links into a exaggerated sense of danger borne from her ignorance, and thus we are encouraged to laugh at her. The voiceover and accompanying images that immediately follow this would suggest that the latter option is the one we are supposed to follow. The extent of her foreign travel is revealed to have been a 'drinking holiday' to a well-known down-market Cypriot resort popular with young people for parties and drinking. This is contrasted implicitly with the up-market Swiss Alps of the chalet holidays Vicky has been chosen to work on. If this unfavourable contrast between ladette behaviour in terms of uncontrolled drinking and lack of traditional culture is not enough, we are also

Figure 3. Vicky (left) in her pre-Egglestone Hall days, drinking with friends.

reminded that Vicky's personal characteristics include using a marked regional dialect of English despite intensive elocution lessons (shown in line 5 by her use of 'sommat' instead of 'something', and later on in lines 18–19 with the colloquial phrase 'I'd feel proper bad' meaning 'ashamed'), difficulties learning to dance gracefully, and making a mess in the kitchen during cookery class. The inability to succeed in these classes is glossed as her 'lacking natural aptitude', although as these would be taught social skills and habits, there is nothing 'natural' about them. They are instead internalised in the traditionalisation process of lady power under discussion in this article.

Vicky is, in fact, being set up to fail in this episode. Her own words are being used to condemn her. From her professed ignorance of geography in this extract to her attempts to display concern for the holidaymakers (lines 20–21) who will be under her care, as viewers we are being pointed towards the problematisation of Vicky. This is followed through as we see Vicky set off for the Swiss ski resort of Verbier with two other participants, Fran and Clara. They are given charge of a chalet with six upper-middle-class English guests. On their first night, they manage to prepare a meal for the guests after a series of false starts, and receive praise from the senior guest. They are delighted to find out that they are free to go out and enjoy the resort's clubs, with no further commitment to their employers until they are expected to provide breakfast the following morning.

VO	A nightcap at the Farm Club, Verbier's	Shots of Vicky drinking	1
	world famous discotheque, but it's	heavily, Clara and Fran	2
	not long before they succumb to their	dancing provocatively.	3
	usual temptations. Tomorrow the		4
	chalet girls will have to get breakfast	More drinking and	5
	on the table by eight thirty. It's three	dancing.	6
	in the morning but the ladettes show	Jumping off the bar.	7
	no signs of wanting to retire.		8
	Early morning and Cleonine Stenhouse	Serene Alpine landscape.	9
	is on her way to the chalet but she's	Rosemary and Cleonine	10
	not alone. Cookery teacher Rosemary	striding through the	11

	Shrager has come to Verbier to see how the girls are managing but the ladettes are having trouble getting started.	snow into the chalet. Shot of feet sticking out of bed.	12 13 14 15
Fran	Vicky you've got to get up.		16 17
Vic	I'll meet you's up there.	'V' sign from beneath her duvet.	18 19
VO	Fran and Clara set off for work. They have no idea who's waiting for them at the chalet.	Rosemary and Cleonine appear in the kitchen behind Fran and Clara.	20 21 22 23
Ros	Where is Vicky? Where is Vicky?		24 25
Clara	Victoria she's er she's not here at the moment er she says she'd be here she said she would be on her way.		26 27 28 29
Ros	What time is breakfast?	Shot of clock at 8.20am.	30 31
C&F	It's half it's eight thirty.	Vicky stumbling out of bed to backing track of	32 33
Ros	Well get some urgency on	'Call Me Irresponsible'	34 35
Vic	I don't want to be no chalet girl		36

The voiceover again frames the actions of the participants as constrained and refined, referring to public drinking in a bar as being 'a night cap' (line 1), before the visual images on screen belie the exhibitionist tendencies of the ladette to public drinking in excess. This is naturalised as a habit of the ladette (lines 3–4 refer to 'their usual temptations'), and is accompanied by images of heavy drinking and sexually provocative dancing. The visual image again acts as a background to the voiceover that employs the historic present tense

to forewarn of potential trouble (breakfast must be 'on the table for eight thirty' is accompanied by shots of more drinking and dancing (line 6). This is underlined, again using the upper-class register of lexicalizing 'going to bed' as 'retiring' (line 8), which is accompanied visually by the energetic behaviour of jumping off a bar, the irresponsible nature of this behaviour being framed by reference to the time (line 6-7).

A morning shot of Lumley's Cleonine Stenhouse and Egglestone cookery teacher, Rosemary Shrager, walking towards the chalet reinforces the sense of immanent disaster as they are announced by the voiceover as arriving 'early morning'. The potential for drama is heightened by reference to the implied optimism of Shrager who has come to see '*how* the girls are managing', rather than *if* they are managing (line 12). At this point, we might be expected to believe that the irresponsible behaviour of the participants has meant that they are still in bed, and indeed it is accompanied by the presumed hangovers being glossed as 'having trouble getting started' (line 14), with shots of unidentified feet sticking out of a bed. The already-problematised Vicky is seen to be too tired and hungover to get out of bed, resorting to obscene gestures in response to Fran's urging of her to get up (line 16), and it appears her portentous reference to spoiling someone's holiday through her own ineptness might be coming true. We see her stumbling around trying to get dressed after Fran and Clara have left to prepare breakfast, lamenting the job of chalet girl which requires an early start to the day, whilst a backing track of Bobby Darin singing 'Call Me Irresponsible' underlines how we are meant to regard the ladettes' behaviour. In fact, we see the participants serving breakfast to equally hungover holidaymakers; their behaviour is not commented on as it does not fit with disapproval of the public exhibitionism of these women that is part of ladette behaviour.

Whilst domestic exhibitionism in the form of the display of culinary skills and elegant dress are increasingly assimilated by the participants who remain in the competition, their occasional public exhibitionism is highlighted at length. If we return to Fran, we can see this in more detail.

Decorum and Elegance

As mentioned earlier, Fran was introduced to us in the first episode as a young woman whose parents had paid for her to have breast enhancement surgery for her eighteenth birthday. The accompanying visual images, which were repeated throughout this series whenever Fran's behaviour was under discussion, showed her dancing provocatively in the night club, lifting her top to reveal her breasts to her male companions. In an accompanying clip, Fran appears on camera explaining this: 'If you've got it, flaunt it. And I've definitely got 'em!', at which point she holds her breasts in her hands and bounces them for the camera. This act became symbolic of Fran's dwindling playful rebelliousness in this series, although only in the company of her fellow participants rather than provocatively towards the 'teachers'. Throughout the series, the participants were 'rewarded' for the successful completion of a task by being allowed out of the school to go to a local pub. As we saw with the trip to Verbier, this combination of freedom from the regimen of the

Figure 4. Clara, Vicky and Fran in their ball gowns waiting to hear who has won.

school, alcohol and a public audience inevitably led to less decorous behaviour, within the terms of the programme's promotion of lady power. In the penultimate episode of this series, the remaining participants were allowed to go to a bar, unsupervised by their teachers. Whilst otherwise decorous (and undoubtedly subdued after four weeks of containment and rigorous instruction in ladylike skills and behaviour), there is also an end-of-term feeling to their conversation as they look forward to seeing their families and friends again at the following week's 'debutante ball'. Fran's frustration at the containment they have been subjected to is articulated through playful banter with her fellow participants which becomes increasingly physical to the point where she starts dancing around in her seat and finally lifts up her top briefly to reveal her breasts. In the context of the group of young women, this is regarded as amusing, if a little daring. The amused shock of many of the participants at this stage goes some way towards showing just how far they have assimilated the values of lady power from the pre-series shots of Fran being goaded by her companions to lift her top.

Occurring in the penultimate episode, this minor event does not come without consequences. The following day, in cookery class, Rosemary Shrager calls Fran to one side to explain her behaviour of the previous night. How Shrager had got to know of this is not explained, but Fran's tearful admission of guilt reveals her psychological rejection of public exhibitionist tendencies that fall outside the role of lady. She reveals a fragile personality beneath her brash exterior; her breast enhancement surgery was as a consequence of low self esteem, linking this with heterosexual femininity in her failure to have 'a proper boyfriend'.

In the *End of Term Report* episode, which caught up with many of the participants a year on from the end of the series, Fran's public exhibitionism is revisited. Foregrounding the visual images of Fran's development from ladette (symbolised by shots of drunken behaviour and exposed breasts) to lady (a montage of shots of Fran concentrating in cookery class then entering the society ball to gasps of approval at her 'ladylike' appearance), we hear Fran's own testimony of the long-term benefits of her participation. Viewers are reminded

of the positive effect of the finishing school's ethos, underlined by Fran's testimony that her confession to Rosemary Shrager became a 'turning point' when she was allowed to remain at the school after her last boob-flashing episode. This is immediately followed by visual images of the debutante's ball, where Fran's appearance in a full-length ball gown, with pinned-up hair and subtle make-up is commented on favourably by the aristocratic and upper-middle-class spectators.

Fran – Francesca Rowe, participant
Jill – Jill Harboard, head teacher
Liz – Liz Brewer, etiquette teacher

Fran (VO)	When she give me a second chance that's when I really felt like I'm not a waste of time, she can really see the potential in me and em i- it made me feel a lot different about myself it was a real big turning point. [shots of Fran at debutante's ball][. . .]	1 2 3 4 5
		6
Liz	(Teachers at judgement meeting) May I just remind you that less than a week ago she brought her boobs out in public now to me that writes her right off immediately. [verbal nods of agreement from other judges]	7 8 9 10
		11
VO	Despite this damning assessment this former hairdresser has turned her life around.	12 13
		14
Fran	I'm a recruitment consultant and I absolutely love it to look forward to going to work. If it wasn't for Eggleston Hall I'd have gone down the wrong path and I'd have thought I was nothing better than getting my boobs out and I'd have probably would have turned to stripping and something like that and would have thought it was fine.	15 16 17 18 19 20
		21
VO	Her professionalism has impressed her boss.	22
		23

Boss	Frances is one of the best. She is so very good at sales	24
	that she's brought an awful lot of business for this com-	25
	pany. (shots of Fran driving Merc)	26
		27
VO	And she's managed to buy herself a smart new car.	28
		29
Liz	Did you think	30
Fran	(no way)	31
Liz	a year ago you would be	32
Fran	(no way)	33
Liz	where you are today?	34
		35
Fran	I didn't at all. Now I want to buy my own flat next	36
	year as well.	37
		38
Liz to	Wow. I couldn't believe it. We were all expecting her to	39
camera	come in exposing her breasts et cetera but she has really	40
	changed. It's almost like a different person. (champagne	41
	glasses being filled)	42

However, Fran's assimilation of the teachings of the school was not enough to win her the competition: Jill Harboard is shown at the teachers' final judgement meeting referring to Fran's recent exhibitionist behaviour, and using this to discount her for the running. However, this is followed immediately by shots of high-heeled shoes walking confidently down a cobbled street. The camera then pulls back and we see it is a smartly-dressed Fran, who walks into a modern office and takes up a place behind a desk. Fran, it seems, is no longer the brash hairdresser she was at the beginning of the series. In the voiceover, we are informed that Fran 'has turned her life around' (line 13). A proud Fran is then shown sitting behind her office desk, talking to camera, explaining her 'responsible' new job and accrediting Egglestone

Hall (and, by extension, the taught characteristics of lady power) with this change (lines 16–20). Interestingly, she then goes on to say that the alternative was to pursue a career in female public exhibitionism in the manner that Levy and Walter described above. An additional testimony comes from Fran's new boss (lines 24–26), and then visually we see Fran has chosen to spend her money on a different type of conspicuous consumption: the acquisition of an expensive, but not ostentatious car. Back at Egglestone Hall, in conversation with Liz Brewster, she reiterates this 'responsible' attitude to life by expressing the desire to buy a flat (lines 36–37), her assertion overlapping Liz's comments in an emphatic display of pride in her transformation. Liz, in contrast, expresses to camera (and so apparently as an aside to the audience rather than to Fran herself) amazement at the transformation in Fran, somewhat bitchily articulating a lack of faith in Fran that sits oddly with Fran's own testimony that it was the faith of the teachers in her ability to comply with traditional gender performances that encouraged her to change her ways.

Elsewhere in *End of Term Report*, we are reacquainted with one participant, Louise, whose drunken behaviour had seen her expelled before the end of the series. This participant, we learn, has become an actor in soft porn films, something she defends half-heartedly to Jill Harboard. In her case, the media exposure afforded by her appearance in the series had led to her acting role, rather than any of the skills or behaviours learnt at the school. However, her assimilation of at least some of the series' ethos is apparent in her embarrassment at Jill having a copy of a 'lads' mag' featuring topless pictures of Louise. Her demonstration of the empowering and wage-earning capacity of ladette behaviour is thus problematised. In fact, whilst the retraditionalising process seemed to have failed in Louise's case, we find she reappears in the following series when a spate of expulsions led to the number of participants dwindling to an unsustainable level, and Louise was called to take part again. In that series, Louise showed sufficient desire to assimilate the characteristics of lady power further that she was awarded the runner-up place at the end of it and thus in the wider narrative arc across several series, lady power is seen to be successful.

Conclusions

As we have seen in the case of Frances Rowe, lady power can indeed be empowering. She demonstrates a new-found self confidence and self-respect that has enabled her to pursue a career in business. Fran is thus held up as a 'success' for the traditionalising characteristics espoused by the series through her assimilation of these characteristics, where a very different sort of female exhibitionism is advocated. This success is measured by her rejection of public exhibitionist tendencies that were characterised by breast flashing and excessive drunkenness. Her reward has been in the form of a responsible job, a 'smart new car', and positive testimonies from her employer. However, the more problematic aspects of this series are glossed over, with little mention of the humiliation and subservience that was part of the 'training', and the overwhelming rejection of many of the public exhibitionist tendencies of girl power – despite the empowerment that such behaviour can offer (as we saw briefly in Louise's career as a soft porn actor). The type of exhibitionism that is approved of in this strand of feminism is clearly articulated in Fran's reformed self: the feminine clothing; the subtle consumption practices; the quietly controlled public performances. Thus we can see that female exhibitionism is still part of this gendered performance, but this is one that does not threaten patriarchy whilst appearing to offer a 'choice' for the young women that is actually a very limited choice.

Within the series *Ladette to Lady*, the editing process serves to frame girl power as irresponsible and often reckless. This is contrasted with a positive framing of lady power as mature and attractive. Most frequently, this is done through montages of visual images, but the participants are also heard through testimonies to be condemning their own behaviour and conforming to the ethos of lady power. The narrative arc of the series also shows us that those who do not assimilate the retraditionalising process are cast out, even in the case of Louise, whose return in *End of Term Report* is balanced by her redemption in a subsequent series. In this way, the media is participating in a retraditionalising process that seeks to return women to unthreatening roles in society.

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CHAPTER 7

BINGO WINGS AND MUFFIN TOPS: NEGOTIATING THE EXHIBITION OF 'IMPERFECT' BODIES IN *HOW TO LOOK GOOD NAKED*

Linda McLoughlin

Introduction

In contemporary society, body image has become increasingly important as a means of expressing one's identity and values. The notion that we can create a body which speaks for the self puts tremendous pressure on individuals to present themselves in the best possible light. Advertisers bombard us with images of the idealised body which must be youthful, healthy, slim and toned if it is to exude success. In this consumer driven society, lifestyle is indexed by clothing, accessories, hair and make-up and a plethora of media messages promote the idea that the way one dresses and grooms oneself is an essential ingredient for a successful modern life. Furthermore, in relation to women, there is a marked sexualisation of the body which, according to Rosalind Gill,

> . . . is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance,

> discipline and re-modelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness. (Rosalind Gill 2007: 149)

The emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline has given rise to a proliferation of makeover shows which, as Angela Smith (this volume) states, 'promote consumption practices in order to achieve a largely middle-class ideal of femininity. Participants in these shows are usually women who are shown how to liberate their inner pre-feminist femininity through the guidance of the "experts".' Doubtless due to the media's intense scrutiny of women's bodies, research confirms that eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia have significantly increased in recent years, with statistics showing teenagers to be the most affected – one fifteen-year-old girl in every 150[1] suffers from anorexia nervosa. Inevitably, a moral panic is generated amongst anxious parents; as a consequence, a great deal of pressure is exerted to explore the role of the media as a causal factor (Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter 2006).

Also of concern, but rarely questioned, is the way body image and lifestyle is axiomatically linked to inner traits such as confidence, personality and wellbeing. According to Daniel Machin and Theo Van Leeuwen:

> Lifestyles [. . .] rest on the rule of the role model and the expert – including, perhaps, the fashion expert who defines this season's *meanings* and *values* [emphasis mine]. (Daniel Machin and Theo Van Leeuwen 2005: 594)

This chapter will focus on the linguistic style of 'fashion guru' Gok Wan in his mediations of appropriate body images for women through the television programme he presents, *How to Look Good Naked*, and his book of the same title (Gok Wan 2007). It will also draw on material from associated websites and magazine features. A key tenet of Wan appears to be that the way women present themselves is important to their self esteem. By training the programme's willing victims[2] into new habits of self presentation, the final test of their courage is to nakedly exhibit themselves in public. From an intertextual perspective,

his approach purports to be radical since unlike other, more strident, presenters of television makeover programmes, he does not advocate cosmetic surgery as a means of improving the body. Whilst he acknowledges that such surgery is pervasive in contemporary society, he is not one of its promoters:

> [. . .] I love the idea of reinvention – I think it's such a beautiful thing that any human being can do it. But let's say No to the knife. I really believe women should not be forced to think that plastic surgery is the only option for improving their looks. (Gok Wan 2007: 8)

One might question then why, despite this view, the website for *How to Look Good Naked* includes advertisements for, and links to, cosmetic surgery sites (at least, this is the case at time of writing). Clearly, the importance of advertising revenue to programmes such as this cannot be underestimated. As Mike Featherstone has pointed out:

> Advertising {has} helped to create a world in which individuals are made to become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural. (Mike Featherstone 1991: 175)

Although the programme's 'mission' is to show women 'how to look hot with what they[you]'ve got', it is not entirely altruistic. Rather, it acts as a platform to advertise every type of beauty product from the 'best' concealer to the latest fashions with, of course, details of stockists and prices provided. Indeed, padded and elasticated underwear, designed to produce a desirable figure, features in every show which has led to retailers such as Fig Leaves becoming well known.

One posting on Verge Magazine's website (2006) suggests that *How To Look Good Naked* is Channel 4's 'act of desperate defence' in response to 'a terrestrial tidal wave of audience backlash' over other programmes the channel broadcasts, such as *10 Years Younger*, which started in the UK on the channel in 2004. *10 Years Younger* produces remarkable transformations but this is achieved by radical

means involving extensive cosmetic surgery. Angela McRobbie refers to the 'cruelty of viciousness' of Trinny Woodhall and Susannah Constantine as the original presenters of the BBC programme *What Not to Wear* (Angela McRobbie 2004: 106). She further suggests that this is 'reminiscent of 1950s boarding school stories where the nasty snobbish girls ridicule the poor scholarship girl for her appearance, manners, upbringing, accent and shabbily dressed parents'. Gok Wan, on the surface, may appear more tolerant of bodily imperfections than other presenters; nevertheless, throughout the programme he advocates 'girding and make-up' as he strives to help women achieve idealised bodies, albeit by less contentious methods. It is interesting that the more abrasive presenter of *10 Years Younger*, Nicki Hambleton-Jones, was replaced by Wan's more supportive co-presenter Mylene Klass, and the show's format is now a side-by-side comparison between cosmetic surgery makeover and non-invasive makeover. This is perhaps reflective of research into studies into reality television such as Helen Wood, Beverley Skeggs and Nancy Thumin's work (2009: 139) which substantiated previous findings where reviewers require reality television presenters and participants to 'stay real' and not 'act for the cameras'. In this way, the pantomime villains such as Hambleton-Jones and Trinny and Susannah on *What Not to Wear* are unacceptably inauthentic. As they found in their own research, viewers required a level of authenticity to allow them to engage with moments of ontological integrity, although conversely I would suggest that this results in an increased voyeurism on the part of the viewers. Wan's 'best friend' persona will then be the focus of this study, as we will see how he persuades the participants to 'get naked' but also implicitly permits relatively guilt-free voyeurism on the part of the viewers.

Aims and Method

This chapter will examine the key characteristics of expert style and how this combines with Wan's synthesised 'best friend' persona in order to mediate discussions of an emotive topic for his low self esteem subjects, namely their bodily imperfections. Thus, following

Daniel Machin and Theo Van Leeuwen (2005), the study of language is integrated with another symbolic practice, the social construction of appropriate body image(s) for women. Furthermore, it attempts to answer the following questions: What are the key features of Wan's linguistic style? Is his approach deliberately designed for commercial purposes or is his motivation genuinely 'to teach people the secrets of how to feel good about themselves'? (Gok Wan 2007: 7). In addition, is his approach radical and does it offer women empowerment or emancipation? It is certainly the case that Wan persuades women into the act of naked exhibitionism by framing it as liberating and empowering; whether this is the case or not is another matter.

In order to conduct a small-scale, informal survey of viewers' opinions of this programme to inform my discussion here, three series of the tv programme were viewed before three episodes were selected from the third (Series 4, 2007/08). It was decided to focus on participants Sonia, Ally and Angela since, despite having achieved success in their careers (ballet teacher, midwife and university lecturer respectively), each expressed unhappiness with her body. Conversations between the researcher and friends and colleagues about the research confirmed the programme's popular appeal. With regularity, these informants claimed to be reduced to tears by the transformations witnessed. As a consequence, any criticism of Wan's confidence-boosting tips is likely to be in contention with the perspectives of regular viewers of the programme.

Theoretical Underpinning

The significance of the body as an object of negotiation and representation is captured in the following questions posed by Elizabeth Bronfen (2000: 112–113): does our knowledge of the body depend on the highly diverse and differentiated images of it that come to be constructed in accordance with particular social contexts? Do diverse cultural discourses in fact produce the body in the course of describing it, constructing it so as to endow their specific intellectual project with authority and legitimation? Bronfen points to the difficulties inherent in answering these questions. Therefore, the current argument takes

her lead by exploring instead the various positions the body has come to assume in our image repertoire and to consider why this matters.

The approach used is informed by poststructuralist views regarding the role of language in constructing subjectivity, particularly Butler's ideas in relation to the body and its powers of agency constructed through discourses. However, as Butler's critics are keen to point out, there are flaws in her arguments: for example, authority is multidimensional – power does not solely come through language (Ian Burkitt 1999: 76). To relate this to the present study, Wan's authority comes from his position as 'expert' on the programme. Not only has he worked in the fashion industry for a number of years, as a gay male he appears to benefit from the cultural stereotype that gay men have a heightened sense of style. Additionally, due to the fact that he is a gay male who has resisted normative materialisation, his authority is enhanced. His body, which is gangly and puny, goes against the muscular ideal for men. Wan admits to having been obese in childhood and during his teenage years and unhappy with his body image: 'seriously: they used to call me Hubba Blubba' (Gok Wan 2007: 6). This in part explains his empathetic approach but it does raise the question, why is it women he targets and not young men? Perhaps this might be to do with a male fear of homosexuality (Niall Richardson 2009, Richard Dyer 1993) which does not really exist as a threat in the same way with women. The gay male stereotype leads to the 'Gay Best Friend' (GBF) phenomenon of the early part of this century, embodied by Wan in the range of programmes he presents for Channel 4. The title of the programme is about *looking* good, not *feeling* good; therefore, the focus on outward appearance is less threatening if the male who is gazing does so in a non-sexualised way. In this way, Wan's openly homosexual performance defuses any potential sexualisation a straight male in this role would probably generate, and thus the viewer's voyeurism is ameliorated.

Research relating to body image indeed confirms that women are more concerned than men about physical attractiveness (Elizabeth M. Collins 1991, Dave Waddington et al. 1991, cited in Maggie Wykes and Barrie Gunter 2006: 138). The reason, it would seem, is that they

have more to lose by failing to meet societal standards (Daniel Bar-Tel and Leonard Saxe 1976: 140). Moira Gatens (1996: 101) refers to body politics and the importance of the 'imaginary body', which is understood as the model of the human body to which we aspire. As men's bodies have less socio-cultural importance, they are less likely to make upward comparisons with males who model 'the imaginary body'. However, people with low self esteem (seemingly, most often women) are more likely to compare themselves unfavourably with others (Mary Martin and Patricia Kennedy 1993: 152). On such a point, part of the programme's format is to get the participants to see that they are, in fact, overestimating their size in relation to others. Ian Burkitt (1999: 102) refers to nineteenth-century notions of the human body which compared it to a machine. Such comparison has endured – Mike Featherstone believes the term 'body maintenance' indicates the popularity of the machine metaphor for the body: 'Like cars and other consumer goods, bodies require servicing, regular care and attention to preserve maximum efficiency (Mike Featherstone 1991: 182). Burkitt's primary interest is in medical processes which fragmented women's bodies, making them seem separate from the whole woman as a person, who then becomes the target of medical intervention and subjected to authority and control. Historically, images of women's bodies, particularly through advertising, have been subjected to fragmentation leading to objectification (see, for example, Ian Burkitt, 2002). To relate this to the present study, at the beginning of the programme, the participants, stripped down to their underwear, are asked which part(s) of their body they hate the most. Wan's framing of the question presupposes that there is such a part – another cultural stereotype that all women have a specific part(s) of their body with which they are unhappy. Invariably, a part of the participant's body is then focused on, for example, upper arms, bust, stomach, thighs, etc., and they are asked to place themselves where they think they belong in a line up of similarly-built women ranging from larger to smaller in descending order. From the numerous programmes observed, without exception, the participant overestimates and Wan reveals the happy news that she is thinner, less flabby, etc., than she perceives herself to be.

From a feminist perspective, the body can be used as a site to contest patriarchal power; for example, women could dare to go against the invocation to be thin. In such light, the programme does offer the scope for empowerment. However, this chapter will show that it does not fulfil this potential. For, despite the surface celebration of diverse body types, ultimately, women are schooled in the art of creating an illusion of thinness – therefore the programme presents an anomie.

Data Analysis

The framework devised by Machin and Van Leeuwen (2005) in their investigation of language style and lifestyle in the global women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* is adapted and integrated with a critical discourse analysis of the language used to mediate bodily imperfections.

Expert Style

In relation to expert style, Machin and Van Leeuwen found a key characteristic is more formal vocabulary, with the use of terms from psychotherapy, medicine and beauty therapy. In *How to Look Good Naked*, Wan employs phrases such as 'a crisis of confidence' and 'body hating ways' which occur in addition to terms relating to fashion and beauty. According to Justine Coupland and Richard Gwyn:

> With the evolution of an increasingly omnipresent visual culture and an abundance of film and television documentaries concerned with issues of the body, illness and human decrement, we are all, to an extent, invited to be witnesses, to share in the clinical gaze as participant observers in a mass-mediated ethnographic exercise. (Justine Coupland and Richard Gwyn 2003: 3–4)

Participants are encouraged to confront their 'issues' and to be reflexive, which Deborah Lupton and John Tulloch (1998) believe 'allows them to tackle anxieties and uncertainties, of the changing beliefs, value systems and their own shifting identities as seen and experienced through their bodies' (cited in Adam Jaworski 2003). During Sonia's

'mirror moment', in an effort to put her at ease, Wan says 'in your own time . . .' and when she has bared her soul, as well as her body, she receives the appraisal 'well done'. She is told that she'll never be a ballerina but for a thirty-three-year-old with a child she has a beautiful body. To alleviate Sonia's distress, Wan promises '[w]hilst we are doing this, I'll be the person that guides you, that holds your hand and you're absolutely allowed, while you're with me, to be Sonia.' Ironically, Sonia at the end of the programme is someone whom her own family did not instantly recognise.

Although Wan has referred to himself as 'Dr. Gok' there is no suggestion that he is masquerading as a medical practitioner: on the contrary, this is merely a persona which complements the pseudo-therapeutic discourse and thus further desexualises not only Wan's role in the programme but also the viewer's position as voyeur.

Synthetic personalisation, advertising and conversational style

As do many mass media text producers, Wan makes use of direct address, not just to the participants but also to viewers in an attempt to strike a chord with women generally:

> Our naked testers discover whether chemical peels lift *your* skin or just the money from *your* purse. (Series 3 episode 1: 14 November 2007)

The aim is to synthesise a relationship 'for ideological and practical reasons' (Machin and Van Leeuwen 2005: 589). Critical Discourse Analysis is a valuable tool in explicating the relationship between language, power and ideology. The systematic analysis of texts can reveal the ways in which many of our beliefs and representations are naturalised and in such a way hidden from the 'ordinary' language user (Linda McLoughlin 2008). The pseudo-therapeutic discourse could be seen to sit uncomfortably with the empathetic relationship Wan constructs with the participants. For example, he frequently offers them comfort and support in the form of hugs and kisses which would be ethically questionable if he was a doctor and the participants were patients – or even if he was a straight man. At such points, he is extremely tactile

with the participants but not in a clinical fashion – he touches various parts of the body, usually the breasts, to show how they can be lifted to create a 'clean' silhouette. Presumably, because he is openly gay, the women participants do not seem to perceive his touches in a sexualised way. In a similar vein, they are compliant in stripping off to their underwear for what is referred to as the 'mirror moment', when the participant (and the viewers) gets to see her body from the perspective of angled mirrors. In *What Not To Wear* when presented by Trinny and Susannah, as McRobbie points out, this is a moment of humiliation and ridicule. However, in Wan's use of this device, the tearful participants are consoled with hugs and expressions of concern by the presenter. In both cases, however, Featherstone's point holds true that within consumer culture individuals are asked to become role players and self-consciously monitor their own performance (Mike Featherstone1991: 189). He cites Christopher Lasch:

> All of us, actors and spectators alike, live surrounded by mirrors. In them, we seek reassurance of our capacity to captivate or impress others, anxiously searching out blemishes that might detract from the appearance we intend to project. The advertising industry deliberately encourages the pre-occupation with appearances. (Christopher Lasch 1979a: 92)

Possibly again due to Wan's sexual orientation, participants do not appear to perceive themselves as being subjected to 'the male gaze'. Clearly his empathetic relationship with participants is instrumental in bringing about such cooperation. However, the empathetic discourse works alongside a more commanding discourse peppered with imperatives, e.g., 'listen to me' and 'take off those hideous, nasty shoes'. It is interesting to observe how he staves off potential non-compliance, for example when a participant, Nicki, becomes distressed at the requirement for her to appear on a catwalk finale in her underwear, and then to remove the underwear before exiting the runway. Nicki clearly feels indebted to Wan for effecting a transformation she appears to be happy with and is worried about letting him down. Wan replies, '[y]ou can't let me down, it's impossible to let me down'.

Linguistically, this is ambiguous: is he inferring that she has made such good progress that any lack of progress at that stage would not upset him or is he issuing an imperative for her not to let him down? In any event, he gets the desired outcome: she complies. It should be mentioned that the catwalk is actually set up in a shopping centre and there is an invited audience at the front. However, hundreds of complete strangers elsewhere are watching the show (to say nothing of the viewers at home watching the final edit). Thus the exhibitionism is very public indeed.

As already stated, there are many references to Wan's sexuality, some of which are paradoxical. For example, when he shows appreciation of one of the participant's transformation he says 'ding dong, I think I've turned!' Although this is a playful reference, implying the transformation is so startling it could cause a gay male to become heterosexual, strangely, it has the opposite effect and acts to reaffirm his homosexuality. When appearing as the guest host on Channel 4's *Friday Night Project,* Wan was asked why he likes 'bangers' (breasts) – according to the programme's regular presenter Alan Carr, who is also openly gay, 'it's not natural!' –Wan's response was that he had always empathised with women as he had spent a lot of time in his youth with aunts having tea. As stated, the main interest of this chapter relates to this empathetic relationship with his subjects which his own explanation hardly sheds light on.

Machin and Van Leeuwen (2005) refer to 'the style of the street' in their investigation of *Cosmopolitan*. It was expected that some of these features may appear in the synthesised 'best friend' persona of Wan. For example, there is a sprinkling of the latest slang expressions such as 'fierce' in 'fierce girlfriend' to give a youthful feel and to complement the 'upbeat' nature of the programme. In relation to Wan's individual style, a key characteristic is his predilection to play on words, especially his own name. For example, he refers to the female participants in the programme as 'Gokettes' (usually pre-modified by the possessive pronoun 'my'). He frequently uses 'Gok' as a modifier, 'It's time for a Gok shock', and a nonce formation, 'abso-Gok-inglutely'. Also he refers to himself as the 'fairy-Gokmother' and pays homage to a popular tv series with

the phrase 'Gok [Sex] and the City'. Particular themes of the programme can also provide a creative outlet for puns on his name. For example, when the venue is a seaside resort (14 November 2007), he uses the exclamative 'Gok [ship] ahoy' and the nautical theme is frequently used to reaffirm his homosexuality, e.g., 'Hello sailor!' On the surface, such language usage might be regarded as egocentric but in the context of the programme it acts as a pastiche of television presenters, referred to in more detail shortly.

Format of *How to Look Good Naked*

The current article has already mentioned the intention to consider image repertoires and the prominent position the body has assumed in contemporary society. In common with similar television programmes and a range of 'gossip' magazines, *How to Look Good Naked* draws on a community of women stars/celebrities as icons to illustrate particular body types. For example, Kylie Minogue who although small is, in the presenter's estimation, 'perfectly formed'. Similar examples include Nicole Kidman (tall), Kate Winslet (curvy), Madonna (toned – frequent reference is made to her arms), Helen Mirren (old but still considered attractive), and Dita von Teese (sexy), Jennifer Lopez (voluptuous bottom). Even the cartoon character Jessica Rabbit is included as an icon for curves. This format allows for quite diverse body types; indeed, Wan is quite scathing about celebrities such as Victoria Beckham and Jennifer Aniston who the media denounce as being too thin – he refers to them as 'stick insects' or 'lollypop heads'. However, although some of the icons listed above are 'generously proportioned', there is some rigidity within types; they are not allowed to move too far away from the stereotypical ideal. Wan talks about how clothes cut in a particular way or different colours can elongate, pull in, etc., so we are back to the conventional idea of an appropriate body image for women. All the celebrities included are outwardly successful, accomplished, modern, liberated women though it is highly debatable whether burlesquer Dita Von Teese could be described as liberated (see Nally, this volume). In contrast, the participants, as stated, have low self esteem despite being successful in their careers.

Due to their negative perception of their bodies, they are unhappy in their personal lives. The challenge for Wan, in relation to Angela (5 December 2007) is to get her back on the dating scene. In relation to Sonia and Ally, the goal is to get their sex lives 'back on track' as they did not like to be seen naked with the lights on. According to Adam Jaworski:

> [...] the normative body is a sexually functioning one and the aestheticisation of the body is constructed primarily as a concern for interpersonal attractiveness and sexual gratification of self and/or (significant) other. (Adam Jaworski 2003: 173)

As with many tv programmes, *How to Look Good Naked* is formulaic so that viewers become familiar with the format and know what to expect. In series one to three, the format includes the participant being embarrassed by strategies including an enlarged photograph of her in underwear exhibited in public places (such as on advertising hoardings, prominent buildings, the front page of a newspaper, etc.). Prior to this, Wan will have criticised her underwear as being 'unsexy', unfashionable, ill-fitting and, in some instances, 'dingy'. The participant is then schooled in the art of concealment, i.e., wearing underwear which can 'suck in', 'push up' and help achieve a 'clean' silhouette, though such devices will not be effective when she is nakedly exhibited. Wan goes on to inspect the participant's favourite items of clothing and is highly critical of garments in which she feels comfortable, for example, her partner's generously-sized jumper. Again, one cannot help but detect an element of commodity consumption. As Featherstone expands:

> [...] consumer culture demands from its recipients a wide-awake, energetic, calculating, maximising approach to life – it has no place for the settled, the habitual or the humdrum. (Mike Featherstone 1991: 174)

Clearly there is no room for comfort or familiarity. Indeed, the 'wide-awake, energetic, calculating, maximising approach to life' is echoed

in the upbeat presentation of the programme, particularly the commanding music and voiceovers. Having found nothing of merit in the participant's wardrobe, the next stage is for Wan to take her on a shopping spree to find clothes that effectively disguise a range of body shapes which can be classified in the following ways.

Mediations of bodily imperfections

Table 1 shows the classification of women's body parts. Fruit metaphors 'pear' and 'apple' are used for the whole body – 'pears' have narrow upper bodies with larger hips, apples are 'rotund' shapes. Other

Table 1. References to women's body parts

Breasts	Bottoms	Stomach/ Waist	Thighs	Legs	Arms
breasticles	sweet cheeks	rotund tums	saddle bags	little pins	bingo wings
bangers	big butt beautiful	jubbly (big)	thunder thighs	fabulous pins	two fat ladies
racks		muffin top			
boob		love handles		dinner lady-like (calves)	
hooters		midriff mission			
tits		tummy trauma			
jollies					
top heavy [girls, tottie]					
set of guns [smoulder those] boulders					
not packing much up top					
cleavage [diva]					
bad boys					
jugs					

Miscellaneous – 'lank locks' (hair), 'lady lines' (stretch marks)

terms focus on particular parts such as the bottom, 'sweet cheeks' for a pert bottom and a play on words for large bottoms, 'big *butt* beautiful'. Stomachs can be 'yummy tummies' if appropriately sized or 'jubbly' if large. Illustrating Wan's claim to be obsessed by them, the column with the most entries is breasts – these can be playful references such as 'smoulder those boulders', neologisms, e.g., 'breasticles' or weapons, 'set of guns'. The connotation of 'bad boys' suggests that the breasts can act of their own volition, rather like the cultural stereotype of the penis as somehow independent of the male body. Interestingly, the independent behaviour is transgressive and male. As can be seen from the classifications, Wan is extremely careful to protect the participants' face needs by not mentioning fat. The term 'face' (originally formulated by Erving Goffman) is used to refer to the attribute that all people have relating to their social standing, i.e., that individuals wish to be liked and approved of and are willing to undertake the imposition of others. These aspects of face are referred to as positive and negative face respectively (Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson 1987). Even when the participants themselves make pejorative comments about their own body, such as 'these flabby things here', Angela's description of excess underarm fat, he changes this to 'bingo wings'. It should perhaps be explained as to what the terms in the title refer as they are culturally specific. 'Bingo wings' refers to a British stereotype of bingo players, that is, middle-to pensionable-aged women with flabby upper arms, the excess skin of which is compared to a bird's wing. 'Muffin top' is when excess fat around the midriff overhangs clothing, rather like a muffin top rising from its casing. Table 1 shows the linguistic creativity involved in masking perceived 'problem' areas of the body. Stretch marks become 'lady lines' presumably to focus on the experiences which have caused them, for example, pregnancy – rather like referring to wrinkles as 'laughter lines'. Less complimentary, 'saddlebags' is a playful reference, instead of mentioning fat thighs these are compared to the pannier-style bags which fit over a saddle. The linguistic inventiveness is not confined to lexis; stylistic devices such as chiasmus and rhyming are employed, e.g., 'transforming her from a boob hater to a banger rater!' The words are reversed in the parallel phrases 'hater'

(negative) becomes 'rater' (positive) to provide non-accidental rhyming. Other stylistic features such as alliteration, e.g., 'midriff mission' and 'tummy trauma', and assonance, e.g., 'sweet cheeks', although low brow, add to the entertainment value. According to Machin and Van Leeuwen:

> This breaking of rules is always tongue-in-cheek, so that we can at once enjoy the transgression and dismiss it as 'not serious', 'only a joke', 'ironic'. The message is at once received and denied. Many lifestyle sociologists and cultural analysts see irony and self-parodying as a key feature of modern lifestyle identities, characteristics of postmodernity. (Machin and Van Leeuwen 2005: 592)

A vital component of synthetic personalisation (Norman Fairclough 1995) referred to earlier is the mimicry of the speech patterns of the intended audience. Presumably, Wan's use of terms like 'bingo wings' is intended to simulate the participants' own ways of describing their bodies. It is interesting, therefore, to note that the participants do not use such terms themselves. For example, Sonia refers to her 'bulgy bits' and she claims that her legs are 'stubby'.

Wan's assessment of the participants' dress preferences invariably is that the clothes are not flattering for their body shape, they give a box shape or act as tent. From the following endorsement it is clear to see that the desired body shape is the hourglass: 'Lucky you, sweetie! You've got curves to die for. Was there ever a more classic symbol of sexy gorgeousness than the hourglass silhouette?' Yet, despite 'symmetry and perfect proportions', curvy women still need 'a lesson in dressing'. Furthermore, 'hourglass' shaped women are implored to 'boost boobs, tone tummy, skim hips and work that tiny waist' (Gok Wan 2007: 84). (For an interesting contrast to the positive view of the voluptuous female body, see Martin Shingler's discussion of Bette Davis in this volume.)

After persuading the participant to appear in a naked photo shoot, the culmination is her appearance on the runway of a fashion show; both acts are a celebration of her newfound confidence. As mentioned,

a new twist to the catwalk finale is for the participant to nakedly exhibit herself, on exit, by discarding her clothing. Jon Stratton refers to an increasing preoccupation among men with viewing the naked female body. He explains the historical transformation of the *tableau vivant* into the striptease:

> The body as spectacularising surveilled fetish – is an inflection of the idea of the painter's tableau, the posed scene [. . .] This, in turn, provided one historical context for the development of striptease – the most obvious connection is that form of striptease where the performer acts a part. (Jon Strattan 1996: 98)

The rationale for the disrobing is purported to show how far the participant has gained in confidence but it is difficult to see how this can be perceived as anything other than erotically meaningful (for a feminist critique of provocative sexual display see Claire Nally, this volume). In series four, the format is slightly changed in that the participant foregoes the photo shoot; instead, she is nakedly exhibited in a department store window as part of the display. A crowd of onlookers is invited to comment on the participant's naked body. Comments range from 'she's got a nice arse' (male voyeur) to 'you look gorgeous' (female voyeur). As these comments are solicited, it would be inappropriate to refer to them as constituting street harassment in the sense documented by Carol Brooks Gardner (1980: 334). Indeed, the participants interpret them as innocuous and flattering, which is the traditional response according to Brooks Gardner, as: 'they are the rewards due to the woman who fulfils her female role requirements [. . .]'. This aspect relates to 'positive politeness strategies' developed from the concept of 'face' mentioned earlier (Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson 1987). For example, to mitigate against threats to face and possible unpleasant verbal interaction, women are socialised (stereotypically) to receive compliments in the manner outlined above.

Ultimately, although the onlookers include women, the participants, nevertheless, are subjected to the 'male gaze' in the sense introduced by John Berger (1972) in connection with nude images of

women in art, and Laura Mulvey (1975) in relation to screen images of women. Women's voyeurism of other women is non-sexualised. They are invited to identify with the naked female, and in the case of advertisements, they are encouraged to aspire to the lifestyles offered by the product, and the same processes presumably apply in their response to the 'sumptuously dressed shop window' of the tv programme. However, in the case of male voyeurs, the unequal power relations still operating in society today posit that men are the spectators of women and not the other way round. Thus the participant being displayed, essentially in the role of a mannequin, becomes problematic due to the cultural fetishism towards such manufactured versions of women. According to Stratton, '[i]n this role they stand in for the female body, which, as we know stands in for the phallus' (Jon Stratton 1996: 208). Margaret Plant's comments on the mannequin also validate the concerns of this chapter: '[. . .] Hourglass of figure and glamorous, she is a ready made plaything: the female tamed, acquiescent and silent; the *poupée* made over to the male' (Margaret Plant 1996: 96).

The celebration of the participant's new-found confidence, it is contended, acts only to encourage women to conform to the hegemonic norms constructed for the benefit of male interests, as the shop window scene links both cultural fetishism and spectacularising surveillance to commodity consumption. In relation to objectification, Rosalind Gill argues that there is a shift in the way power operates:

> from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze. It can be argued that this represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime . . . power is not imposed from above or the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. (Rosalind Gill 2007: 151)

As utterances do not take place in a vacuum, it was necessary to contextualise the presenter's use of language within the context

Table 2. References to female participants

Diminutive	Food	Animal	Desirability	Terms of address	Personal attributes	Career	Provenance
my little [Ally]	gorgeous little sausage roll	proper vixen	hotties	ladies	shy young girl	high flying academic	Brighton babe
my girl [Emma]		real fox	gorgeous girls	naked ladies	confident woman	frumpy fat fighter	Yorkshire lasses
my darling			you siren	missus	good girl		my Bedfordshire babe
girlfriend			bootylicious babes	princess	fallen angel		
gokettes			hot-to-trot		35 year-old singleton		
fierce girlfriend			naked beauties		angel cakes		
			hourglass honey		real life Bridget Jones		
			sexy feminine woman				
			my brunette bombshell				
			bellisimo babes				

of the programme's format. As demonstrated, the style of *How to Look Good Naked* raises many concerns from a feminist perspective, but specifically the mediations of the presenter as he coaxes participants towards the programme's sanitised form of naked exhibitionism could be seen as problematic. This 'language of coercion' is legitimised by both Wan's persona as the 'best friend' and by the programme's format, whereby the moment of revelation is the public performance of nakedness on the catwalk; a moment that is presented by both Wan and the participants as being liberating and empowering. If we look in more detail at the specific linguistic

strategies Wan employs, we will gain a clearer understanding of just how this coercion operates.

References to female participants

An examination of reference terms offers an insight into how women can be categorised and what this says about their status in society. Table 2 shows that the participants are classified in a number of ways.

Affixes, diminutives and terms of endearment

Wan instantly constructs a synthesised relationship with the participant through the use of diminutives and terms of endearment, referring to them as 'my little Ally', etc. Such terms can have a dual purpose: they can act as markers of solidarity but also power. It is contended that the practice is not reciprocated because the relationship is asymmetrical due to the power differential. In the usual course of events, one would have to have known a person for some time before using such terms, but the usage is unmarked because of Wan's expert status and his efforts in effecting empathy. In a similar vein, the use of the suffix 'ette', as in 'Gokettes,' diminishes the value of the women's role. 'Gokettes' are women who take part in line ups (for body comparisons), test products and, although they take a background role, they play a vital part in facilitating the programme. In accordance with the widespread practice, Wan frequently refers to participants as 'girls' in contexts where the symmetrical term for male referents would not be applied. For example, he refers to beauty expert Emma Gunavardhana as 'my girl Emma'.

Metonymy and metaphors

The noun phrase 'hourglass honey' is interesting as 'honey' is a term of endearment which is pre-modified by a metonymic reference, i.e., the hourglass shape stands in for the whole woman in a similar way to Wan's references to fruits, which stand in for various body shapes, e.g., the 'apple' and the 'pear'.

Participants are referred to by food ('gorgeous little sausage roll') and animal ('proper vixen') metaphors. As conceptual metaphors involve understanding one domain of experience in terms of another, the reference to women as food items implies they can be consumed – of course not literally eaten, we are to imagine, but sexually. 'Fox' and 'vixen' suggest the qualities associated with predatory felines, i.e., guileful and knowing. Such terms complement other references to the participants' newly acquired sexual attractiveness and desirability – 'hotties' and 'sirens'.

Terms of address and personal attributes

The formal 'polite' term 'ladies' is used but, far from elevating the participants' status, in the programme's context it is quite condescending. The less formal, colloquial 'missus' for individual participants serves as a reminder of their marital status and portrays them as an appendage of the male. Conversely, 'real life Bridget Jones' and 'singleton' foreground the participant's lack of marital status (Series 3, Episode 4: 5 December 2007).

The modifiers attached to Wan's references to participants are both positive ('good girl') or negative ('fallen angel') but there is something jarring about adult females being appraised in this way. In common with many mass media texts, the female participants are described in terms of their physical attributes, 'my brunette bombshell', age reference '33 year old…', and domesticity 'a busy mum'. The presenter's linguistic strategies go a long way in effecting synthetic personalisation which includes direct address, imperatives and other features of conversational style referred to above.

Conclusion

How to Look Good Naked cannot be dismissed as purely entertainment, something not to be taken seriously. As the informants for this study have testified, it is designed to boost women's self confidence by helping them to achieve the illusion of the ideal body. In the programme's portrayal, it seems women simply cannot win in the body stakes for they are critically appraised if they have small breasts, 'not packing

much up top', and referred to as 'top heavy' if they are large breasted. They are encouraged to adopt strategies such as wearing slimming body shapers (if they are perceived as carrying excess fat) and padded bras and pants (if they are perceived as carrying insufficient fat) to combat bodily imperfections. The programme presents an ideal body image which, even if it is achieved, would be difficult to maintain. The reward for this aesthetic body work is not just increased self confidence, but the assurance of an improved sex life. However, the presenter's mediations facilitate the exhibition of the naked body, leaving the participants vulnerable as a spectacle for the internalised male gaze, despite the superficial attempts to produce a less voyeuristic spectacle through the linguistic strategies Wan employs. As the programme is underpinned by advertising, there is a gap between the promise of the product (whether slimming body shaper or padded body enhancer) and its realisation, since when the clothes come off, the body is essentially the same as it was prior to Wan's intervention. As one commentator put it:

> No matter what size we are, anyone would look good airbrushed and pictured in the correct light, make-up etc. Do these women honestly think they'll wake up the next morning and look any different than prior to having a few pics [sic] taken?[4]

On *The Friday Night Project*, mentioned earlier, Wan stated that his empathetic relationship with women 'comes from the heart'. With regard to a critical understanding of the tenuous position in which the vulnerable participants are placed, there appears to have been a bypass. The only real winners from programmes such as *How to Look Good Naked* are the beauty, diet and fashion industries who are assured of growth and profits, which of course accords with the ideals of the dominant discourse of a capitalist, patriarchal, white Western society.

Notes

1. In addition, one fifteen-year-old boy in every 1,000 suffers from anorexia nervosa. The statistics are taken from the website of The Royal College of Psychiatrists. NHS. Anorexia nervosa. NHS

conditions. Ed: NHS, 2009: 1. Available at: http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/PDF/Eade%5B1%5D.pdf. Accessed: 16 May 2009.

2. Given the reluctance of some participants, and also that some are 'set up' by friends/relatives, willing is perhaps a misnomer.
3. Cameron, D., unpublished seminar paper '"Adam once ejaculated in his own eye": teaching about talking about sex'. Liverpool Hope University BAAL SIG Seminar, 15 September 2006
4. Reader Alison Johnson's emailed comment on *How to Look Good Naked* taken from *The Daily Mail's* website 25 June 2007. It should be mentioned that most comments relating to the programme are complimentary.

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