

Cyberlesqued Re/Viewings: Political Challenges in the Neo-burlesque Spectacle

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ABSTRACT: Provided that the 1990s was characterized as an era of newness with the insertion of extreme technological advances, the rise of multiculturalism, new media expansion and the appearance of the World Wide Web, neo-burlesque appeared as an all-new form of entertainment which de/re/contextualized the act of viewing. Burlesque has been metamorphosed through the occurrence of neo-burlesque as an attempt to stress newness into the old; that is to re-generate a nationalized theatrical sub/genre to an inter/nationalized cyber/spectacle which re/acts against the sociopolitical distresses of the twenty-first century. Initiated with the *Yahoo Group* along with a plethora of online groups and blogs which have sprung till then, the Internet manages to weave a nexus among producers, performers and fans inter/nationally. It has also enabled neo-burlesque to cross over the national borders and break those barriers which were formerly narrowed to mainly the U.S theatrical reality. In this milieu, the rise of social media; namely, *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*, have facilitated both the performers' and the spectators' re/viewings since the former can re/represent and promote their neo-burlesque pieces as well as advertise their campaigns and products increasing in this way their popularity while the latter, in their turn, can be informed about the performers' recent activities, purchase goods or follow their accounts as evidence of support or even condemnation. Moreover, *YouTube* has revolutionized spectatorship since neo-burlesque performers of versatile performing styles, age, race and body sizes launch their work in order to gain popular appeal through the gathering of views claiming in this way an increase of paychecks and attendance to distinguished events and venues. As far as the spectators are concerned, they can re-experience a preferable performance for free and be offered inexhaustible views without being spatiotemporally localized. However, these innovations spark ambiguity. In other words, on the one hand, they become the means through which networks, burlesque communities, discussions and feedback are realized while on the other, they end up being the *locus* where stereotypes are perpetuated, misinterpretations are created and comments of hatred and misogyny are posted. Michelle L'amour's *Leatherette Debut* and Legs Malone's *Infested* consist examples of equivalent healing cases whereas on the contrary, Dita Von Teese's paradigm propagates e-commercialization. Taking everything into account, this paper seeks to explore how the cyberlesqued version of neo-burlesque acquires political dimensions challenging the way of seeing in an era of new media advance.

KEYWORDS: neo-burlesque performance; social media; spectatorship; political ideology; Michelle L'amour; Legs Malone; Roxi D'Lite; Dita Von Teese;

Introduction

Provided that the 1990s was characterized as an era of newness with the insertion of extreme technological advances, the rise of multiculturalism, new media expansion and the

presence of the World Wide Web, neo-burlesque appeared as a resurrected form of entertainment which was de/re/contextualized¹ affecting both performance and spectatorship. Burlesque has been metamorphosed through the occurrence of neo-burlesque as an attempt to stress newness into the old and promote theatrical continuity rather than disruption; that is to re-generate a nationalized theatrical sub/genre to an inter/nationalized cyber/spectacle which re/acts against the sociopolitical distresses of the twenty-first century. From the bawdy posters and the radio shows of the past to the most current social media upsurge, both burlesque and neo-burlesque along with their spectatorship have been altered according to the desiderata of their respected eras.

Since its initial performances in the U.S.A around the first half of the nineteenth century, burlesque was synonymous to its Victorian counterpart as presented in Great Britain and France.² The genre appeared as comic mockery and satirical travesty of traditional plays, which were difficult to be understood by the working-class audiences and thus, were reproduced as a pastiche in order to decry the sociopolitical agenda of the era. It was since then that participation at a burlesque spectacle would be achieved only through live attendance in theatrical venues especially designed to host minstrel, variety and vaudeville shows in which the genre occupied the limited space and time of a sideshow. Interestingly enough, the Americanization of burlesque coincided with its feminization.³ More specifically, burlesque acquired wider appeal for its sensual dancing routines and the representation of

¹ In this paper, the two terms are used in order to explain the past and present dimensions through which the spectacle was and is currently presented. More specifically, in terms of the video hosting platforms such as for instance, *YouTube* and *Vimeo*, the burlesque pieces are decontextualized; that is, they are isolated from their original representation on theatrical stages, festivals, competitions or a public events -during which they share their distinct position and meaning among other acts as a specific location- and are individually presented in cyberspace. Yet, owing to this fact, burlesque pieces are re/contextualized since they occupy the cyberspace and form a new way of spectatorship. Namely, distinct burlesque pieces from variant years, locations and events create a new cyber/locus hosting the spectacle; an amalgamation of burlesque and neo-burlesque acts that can be viewed and multiply reviewed.

² When there is reference to the Victorian style, I allude to the form of burlesque that satirized re-known classical pieces especially addressed to the upper and elite classes such as Chaucer's, Shakespeare's and the Greco-Roman classics' oeuvres.

³ The aforementioned feminization of burlesque occurred after the productions of *The Black Crook* which opened at Niblo's on September 12, 1866 and *Ixion* at Wood's theater on September 28, 1868 (Allen 110, 8). The spectacles were considered scandalous for the era since the extensive leg exposure challenged the national social morals and ethics.

the semi-naked female body mainly after the performances of Lydia Thompson and her troupe, the “British Blondes,”⁴ who set foot in the United States in 1868. The troupe challenged spectatorship through leg exposure and the cross-dressing performance scandalizing popular opinion while simultaneously achieving to bring the spectacle to the spotlight. Burlesque’s gradual transformation into an Americanized genre with a variety format, soon borrowed elements from the minstrel, the carnival, and mainly the vaudeville shows in which it had formerly been represented as a side spectacle. Supplemented with comic strips and sketches, acrobatics, circus, and carnivalesque pieces, burlesque was finally identified as an all-female extravagant and risqué performance which managed to excel as a distinct genre. According to what Rachel Shteir observes, “[burlesque was changing] quickly. In the nineteenth century, [it] [...], had both satirized the upper class and displayed women’s bodies for a working-class audience. By the turn of the century, though, burlesque had already begun its downward spiral into a venue focusing on raucous skits and the solo female performer” (54). Burlesque represented the binaries between high and low cultures, or mainstream and subculture and became a welcoming spectacle as its simple format rendered its spectatorship approachable. The need to forget one’s worries, satirize the sociopolitical phenomena and get mesmerized distinguished burlesque as one of the spectacles through which the distance between the spectator and the performer was diminished. Nevertheless, its feminization and representation of overt sexuality/sexiness problematized the producers, the performers and the society as a whole. As Andrea Friedman successfully observes, “In the 1930s, [...] anxiety about burlesque representation of and impact upon female sexuality was supplanted by consternation regarding its relationship to male sexuality; that is, burlesque opponents articulated concerns about its danger to women as an artifact of its effects upon men” (206). Even in this era though when the female body dominated the American stage, the focus lay once again on the male spectator whose morals were questioned by female sexiness/sexuality. It was hence the active female performer instigating the passive male spectator in contrast to the reversed schema of the former traditional theatrical forms. Contextually, not only did burlesque

⁴ In her *Burlesque Legendary Stars of the Stage*, Jane Briggeman notes that “The Blondes was comprised of a chorus line of beefy blondes. Lydia stimulated the crowd with an occasional bawdy song as part of her act. The hefty chorines, portraying goddesses, spiced up the act further by alternately displaying ruffled drawers. As the Blondes’ popularity grew, they altered their routines and toured all over the country. They were an attraction for almost twenty years” (14).

infiltrate the American popular culture by criticizing the dominant hegemonic ideologies of the upper classes through its parody, but also, by catering for its audience's lascivious tastes for the decades to come.

The Great Depression marked the beginning of burlesque's heyday and took off around the 1930s and 1940s. It was when the American women entered the public arena more forcefully by accomplishing a significant position in the workforce and higher education. Since men were away to fulfill their national obligation for the national safeguard, women had to assume command over the empty working positions. Owing to this fact, women were gradually becoming independent and emancipated while challenging male dominance as presented by the patriarchal stereotypes of the era. The appearance of women in formerly male-dominated jobs created national angst when men returned from the war because the latter were claiming back positions which were then occupied by the former. Subsequently, patriarchal perceptions on femininity and the role of "true womanhood" in the society ironically ostracized women to the pleasure they accessed from the convenience of their own homes. The distressing factor in this unjustified and unjust act was that women were supposed to be convinced that personal fulfillment sprang from their return to the home environment.

In this crucial moment of female backlash within the public sphere, burlesque continued to play an arena of ambiguities since many women managed to preserve theater management⁵ and act against the hegemonic tendencies of the era while others intentionally perpetuated the idea of female exploitation and fragility.⁶ Jacki Willson observes that the burlesque performers were among the first working women who were victimized during this period of American history as

Women who earned a living—the burlesque strippers, the working-class and some middle-class women (who were the first to lose their jobs in 1930s depression)—were blamed for the onset of the depression for taking men's jobs or for an overall

⁵ Gypsy Rose Lee, Sally Rand, and Georgia Sothern were among the few performers who owned and managed their theaters as noted by Shteir (255).

⁶ One striking example of this binary was Lily St. Cyr who sometimes teased her audience by saying "as she exited, 'That's all you get boys....' But that was as far as her humor went" and as Shteir further adds, "She performed mostly in the silence and in lavish numbers with pulp fiction titles such as 'Bedroom Fantasy' and 'Love Moods'" (256).

degeneracy in society whilst simultaneously being labelled money grabbers and the bane of man's economic existence by male burlesque comics. (82)

On the one hand, the burlesquers were represented as “unruly emancipated women”⁷ who fought against social instabilities and gender inequalities while on the other, as submissive personae constrained to their representation as glamorous silent ecdysiasts. Another “threat” imposed on the American society was that, “The ‘stars’ and ‘queens’ of burlesque were perhaps the first female performers to realize the influential power of the mass media as a tool for pulling in the crowds and promoting transgressive modes of ‘femininity’ that seduced and tantalized precisely because they broke existing moulds” (Willson 40-41). This ambivalence and the early mastery of publicity that the performers promoted though sparked immense audience reception despite the original inhibitions on the quality of the spectacle presented. By fabricating stories, spreading rumors about acquaintances with kings, artists, or writers, sending gifts and flowers to themselves and planting articles in the newspapers and radio programs, the burlesquers sparked public interest and cultivated their personal myths for consumption.

Nowadays, social media folly has revolutionized most neo-burlesque performers' acts, productions, self-promotion, and social networking globally. It has also engendered new experiences on the way of viewing, the reciprocal performer/spectator relationship and their corresponding reactions. Neo-burlesque is inspired by the inter/national mythologies, her/stories and tales, lies in the traditional aesthetics of the former decades with the multi-layered costumes, returns to the comic sketches and satirical elements and steps on a variety of dancing styles and aesthetic approaches from the waltz or the ballet to the strip/tease, pole, aerial, or fire dances. However, neo-burlesque is still followed by various accusations such as that the female body remains a voyeuristic object which is merely unravelling before voracious eyes; regardless of their gender and sexual preferences. As Kay Siebler illustrates, “neo-burlesque performers replicate the patriarchal images of women, femininity, and female sexuality instead of challenging them; they position themselves as objects for the male gaze. The audience members—be they male or female—must adopt the

⁷ This term is inspired by Kathleen Rowe's book, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* as reference to women who have been voicing their opinions, artistry, humor, and agency in public and defied the social preconceptions on women's being reserved, *comme il faut*, and pious.

male gaze to enjoy the show, viewing the women as objects of sexual desire, posing, stripping, and performing for the audience's gratification, billed as sexual liberation for women" (6). This accusation is also followed with female performer's muteness. Contrariwise, in the past the female artist used to maintain, at least, a "semi-active"⁸ role by wittingly facilitating the bits and strips with comic lines and soundbites aligning with the first-row comedians. Nevertheless, neo-burlesque performers attempt to overturn the aforementioned reproaches by the use of their bodies as their empowering performative means for the expression of their artistic flair. As Joanna Mansbridge interestingly observes, "Burlesque derives its most powerful performative effect from the relationship between sexuality and humour and the dialectical tension in the performer as both a speaking subject and a visual object" (470). In neo-burlesque, the female body is neither passive nor muted. It is a political entity that strives to fight against the inequalities of the era—more or less successfully—depending on the performer's mentality and artistry. The neo-burlesque performers' "voicelessness" is replaced by counter-hegemonic gestures, facial expressions, extravagant garments, and costumes and the way of stripping off socio-cultural biases interlinked with the body. What is more, the performers are responsible for their own productions, aesthetic variations, and financial deals since a plethora of festivals and shows are run by female producers or former performers while their online promotion is achieved through their social media accounts. Aesthetically, both burlesque and neo-burlesque always drew from the theater as there has always been a ticket purchased at the box office despite the cliché conflation with the strip club shows in which flying dollars have been landing in the performers' G-strings.

In this milieu, this paper seeks to explore how this popular culture trend challenges the sociopolitical agenda of the twenty-first century by fashioning the neo-burlesque make-up, the performers' representations, their spectators' manifold re/viewings and their inter/relationship transnationally. To achieve this quest, social media and video platforms

⁸ Additionally, most burlesque performers were not headliners but "ornamented" stage and responded to the leading actors' comments while taking sensual poses. It is further explained that, "A woman who worked in the scenes was referred to as the 'Talking Lady' or the 'Talking Woman'" despite her limited role (qtd. in Davis 64).

along with live or online neo-burlesque acts such as Michelle L'amour's *Leatherette Debut* and Legs Malone's *Infested* will be brought under cyber/lesque attention.

Social Media

Initiated with the limited 1990s *Yahoo Groups*, a deluge of online groups, blogs and official web pages have strung till then. The Internet has managed to weave a nexus among neo-burlesque producers, performers and spectators and has constructed a new spatiotemporal *locus* in terms of approaching, producing, promoting, spectating, and actually staging the spectacle. As Debra Ferreday successfully observes, "If new burlesque is partly a reclaiming of traditionally normative sites of identity production, spaces on the Web can be seen as an extension of the performance space" (48). The rise of social media and video sharing platforms; such as *Facebook* or *YouTube*, have facilitated both performers' and spectators' re/viewings across cultures. As Michelle Baldwin underlines, "Soon the performers realized that the new technology was a cheap and easy way to promote their endeavors when all their money was going into glitter, fabric, music, and other start-up costs—and they created their own web pages" (37). More specifically, the former are enabled to promote their neo-burlesque pieces and advertise their upcoming shows or product campaigns increasing in this way their popular appeal by adding more and more friends, followers, supporters or patrons. The latter, in their turn, can be informed about these activities, follow the performers' accounts as evidence of support (or even condemnation) and feel as members of a larger neo-burlesque community.

Nevertheless, these platforms are often accompanied with multifarious accusations in terms of the amount of protection offered to their users. Much controversy has been expressed on whether supervised or unsupervised safety policies are offered in relation to the nature of the comments posted and the regulations undertaken. On the one hand, when initiatives of protection and supervision take place, a performer's public image is protected from degrading posts and DMs.⁹ On the other hand though, it deprives freedom of speech in the sense that critical thinking about a show or a post might be filtered, banned, or even

⁹ DM stands for Direct Message

deleted. Roxi D'Lite's¹⁰ most current *Facebook* post is an example of equivalent case, in which she seeks for advice on how to react against receiving distasteful messages on social media. Drawing a short excerpt from this post, the performer mentions that:

I'm bombarded with hundreds of messages from strangers daily who send me messages that clog my inbox with stickers, memes, inappropriate comments, time-wasting messages asking to "know more about me" or what's worse, dick pics! [...]. I have lost so many booking inquiries, opportunities and actual genuine messages from fans who have insightful things to say or questions in a sea of gross messages like these. (2019)

Many performers' exasperation on equivalent cases is voiced through Roxi D'Lite's post which received around 800 comments—including mine—, 459 likes, and 8 shares till the moment this paper was composed. Owing to the perpetuation of degrading or disrespectful comments attributed to neo-burlesquers and albeit the struggle to disentangle female performers from biased perceptions, many express their inquietude on whether they should reveal their second occupation to their social and family environments; mostly expressing disquietude about their children's reactions. This phenomenon occurs due to the fact that they are often conflated with strippers or prostitutes since their semi-naked posts attract social media users who indecently address them in a manner that the performers do not approve of. "Many performers [still] don't reveal their real names even to the burlesque community" for fear of receiving misogynistic posts (Baldwin 101). Indicatively, a performer's comment—the anonymity of whom will be preserved in terms of ethics and confidentiality—refers to that, "I'm curious how many of you are open about your burlesque career with your families. Mine is rather conservative but not rigidly so, and I'd love to figure out how to broach/treat the subject without making it into the big deal it doesn't have to be" (*Facebook* 2019). Fortunately, a plethora of neo-burlesquers have responded to this rhetoric. Indexing Lola the Vamp's¹¹ and La Dandizette's¹² case studies, they are both burlesquers who also serve the working positions of a lecturer and a lawyer respectively.

¹⁰ Roxi D'Lite is a French Canadian of Metis descent neo-burlesque artist who has been trained as an acrobat and an aerial performer. She is the first Canadian performer to be awarded with the title of the Miss Exotic World 2010 with her *Smoking Cigar* signature act.

¹¹ Lola the Vamp is the first neo-burlesque artist who is a PhD holder with a research conducted on burlesque.

Yet, commoditization of the spectacle is another concern that springs from the use of social media platforms. Apart from their informative character, social media enhance female objectification and e-commercialization because the performers or their influencers promote shows and products, conduct draws or offer discounts to attract more followers and potential spectators or consumers. Big-star burlesque divas such as Dita Von Teese, who share thousands of views for posts related to both their artistry and products, tend to perpetuate this accusation. As Alexis Butler critically comments, “Von Teese’s brand of burlesque has created a highly lucrative, mass-market commodity contingent upon mainstream notions of tasteful sexuality” (47). Von Teese was among the pioneers of performance who understood the meaning of e-commerce promoting her make-up products, books, lingerie lines, or perfumes to sharing hacks and tips online while receiving over millions of views for every video. Due to Von Teese’s high artistry, the genre acquired gradual media appeal while the spectators were lured by the re/entrance of a nostalgic art form. Originally, it is believed that, “The ‘payoff’ in new burlesque is the mutually constitutive pleasure of performer and audience” (Ferreday 59). Nevertheless, this is not always the case when money and fame come into way. These factors alter the performers’ personal and artistic creations as they give in to commercialization and become products of consumption. Put simply, for the neo-burlesque sub/genre, social media transform into a powerful means of endorsement with the limited cost since the more the followers added, the wider the public appeal achieved.

Despite the accusations on social media platforms, they provide access to a plethora of pages related to burlesque shows and/or burlesque performers and facilitate communication among performers, academics, researchers, burlesque-lovers, burlesque newbies, and spectators who are interested in or share their concern about the genre from a multidimensional prism.¹³ Burlesque as a genre is an inclusive form of spectacle which is

¹² La Dandizette is a burlesque performer of Greek descent and a lawyer having worked for the UN and currently pursuing a burlesque career at European stages.

¹³ From a personal standpoint, the author found the utility of the two media remarkable since sources and information about the performers and online communication with both academics and performers have been offered.

accentuated through social media platforms. For instance, there are *Facebook* pages¹⁴ such as *Burlesque: Passion, Pride and Pasties* and the *Burlesque Magazine* which input performers' profiles, interviews, acts, and upcoming events taking place. Still, there are pages such as the *Burlesque Research Network*, which is a closed group, consisting of academics and researchers who share the same passion for burlesque and have the potential to exchange ideas, papers, research concerns, and offer collaboration. Moreover, pages of national interest such as the *Muse Follies* Burlesque Workshops*¹⁵ refer to all those Greek-based spectators who have a flair for burlesque and are interested in participating in various workshops and activities.

Patreon

Patreon is another Web platform through which the performers seek admirers' support and are mostly allocated funding. As it is described in the official page, "The promise of *Patreon* [...] has always been simple: If your fans like your work, they will pay you for it" (2019). For many performers, *Patreon* functions as a way to add to their income which can actually be assistive since the performers might not always be in the position to participate in live shows. Even when this is the case, neo-burlesquers do not make sufficient profit by their pieces because live shows are usually limited and/or predominantly staged in metropolitan cities. Furthermore, neo-burlesque *per se* is not as widely exposed as music is for example, and hence, *Patreon* functions as an online database which can cater both to the performers' financial and promotional support and to the spectators' access to entertainment videos. As Arielle Pardes notes, "*Patreon* has slowly introduced new ways for creators to milk the most out of these fan relationships. They can give subscribers (called 'patrons') a peek into their lives behind-the-scenes" (qtd. in *Patreon*). On behalf of the spectators, those who are transnationally located might seek ways to provide support to performers whom they find inspiring by becoming their patrons. In these terms, this relationship amalgamates raw transactional character; namely, the performers trade in their often overrated artistry while the patrons are not always aware of the outcome of their purchase since the videos are

¹⁴ Some pages of burlesque interest are: *Burlesque: Passion, Pride and Pasties*, *Burlesque Research Network* (closed group), *Burlesque and Cabaret Research Network*, *Burlesque Big Sister/ Brother Project*, *Burlesque Magazine* and *Muse Follies* Burlesque Workshops* (secret group).

¹⁵ The *Muse Follies* Burlesque Workshops* is edited by La Dandizette.

partially secreted from public viewing or just merely revealing a hint of the complete video. In Martin Randy's words, "The performance is the spatial and temporal terrain upon which the conceiver and consumer meet. As mediating agent, it embodies rather than represents the parties concerned, providing a basis of interaction without equilibrating or quantifying their value" (83). By virtue of their limited public exposure, the purchased video is sometimes inferior to the patrons' original expectations. Subsequently, not only do these pages unite people of similar interests who can get in touch and support or be supported by an extended community but, have also degradingly commoditized both the performer's identity and the quality of the spectacle promoted.

Video Sharing Platforms: *YouTube* and *Vimeo*

Moving on, video sharing platforms such as *YouTube* and *Vimeo* have become powerful and influential media through which millions of people are entertained, informed and instructed for free. These media have managed to transfer the burlesque stage to cyberspace creating a new form of spectacle; a mobile cyberlesque extravaganza. Through these new applications—which can be downloaded in any smart device—multiple cyber/stages are screened rendering spectatorship a privilege for wider audiences in any space desired. Due to their gradual and amounting acclaim, many performers (voluntarily or not) watch videos of them being posted literally but anyone who desires to expose their pieces online. These videos can be viewed and multiply re/viewed by spectators inter/nationally. On the downside though, online videos and posts endorse scopophilia—often intentionally promoted by neo-burlesquers who apart from their shows share their most intimate moments—raising a question on the equilibrium or disequilibrium of artistic expression, creation of social voyeurism and manipulation of public desire. In contrast though to Laura Mulvey's insightful approach related to the active/male, passive/female cinematic representation, neo-burlesque enhances an alternative active/performer, active/spectator schema; regardless of gender representations or the spectator's gaze. Neo-burlesquers direct and produce their shows, use their bodies with awareness, choose for their online releases and motivate their spectators' reactions. In their turn, both the stage and the online spectators react to these neo-burlesque performers' pieces by applauding, cheering and whistling during the shows or by subscribing, commenting, sharing and liking their videos.

David Owen argues that “Neo-burlesque performances are highly interactive. The performer is continually in communication with the audience through eye contact, performer-initiated physical contact, [...] [and] invited audible response” which is now also promoted via the cyberspace (36). However, the performers are knowledgeable of being recorded and miss out on the spontaneity of the past eras as they construct prefabricated palatable images. Thus, these performers succumb to backlashes producing stereotypical banal shows that attract more spectators instead of employing the use of comedy, shock or subversion contrary to such biases. As Sherril Dodds has successfully put it, “the less the performance disturbs, the wider the audience it attracts” (113). Via *YouTube*, the performers receive international acclaim which assists in the promotion of bookings for future performances since the wider the recognition through the views, the more the bookings and income claimed.

Additionally, these platforms function as online databases for the conservation of neo-burlesque shows which would otherwise be lost or poorly maintained as had actually happened in the past. Since documentation and proper maintenance used to be difficult processes, the preservation of the American popular culture legacy for forms of entertainment such as the vaudeville, burlesque and minstrel shows was restricted to oral tradition, pictures and personal narrations. In order to safeguard the memory and heritage of equivalent traditions, people and researchers had to mainly rely on oral narrations¹⁶ the objective element of which is questioned. When neo-burlesque performers and researchers were initiated to the genre, they had to seek for burlesque legends willing and capable to share their experiences¹⁷. Equivalent examples have been those of Dixie Evans and Jennie Lee whose vision on preserving burlesque history was realized with the creation of the Burlesque Hall of Fame; the first burlesque museum in history, in Las Vegas, Nevada. Nevertheless, there are instances of performers who denied their former preoccupation with the spectacle due to the fear of the stigma of prostitution entangled on female performers who starred in burlesque shows; unfortunately, still haunting neo-burlesque

¹⁶ Andrew Davis' book *Baggy Pants Comedy: Burlesque and the Oral Tradition* focuses on burlesque oral tradition.

¹⁷ Many performers concealed their identity even later on in life while others were old enough or extremely sick to be able to cooperate, as noted in Jane Briggeman's *Burlesque: Legendary Stars of the Stage*.

performers today. They, thus, were reluctant to admit of their former “hoochie coochie” past by burning their pictures or giving their dresses and headpieces away destroying in this way a living piece of popular culture tradition. This fact complicated potential research and hushed the spectacle. Contrary to that unfortunate event though, video sharing platforms currently function as online e-libraries and databases for neo-burlesque and popular culture documentation. Even so, many videos are often withdrawn for personal or legal reasons rendering the spectators’ possibility to re/view them ephemeral. An equivalent case was Lola the Vamp’s *Enter the Dragon*; later renamed as *Dragon Lover*. The specific neo-burlesque piece, had been watched on *YouTube* before the author’s PhD proposal submission. However, when research on the performer was about to be conducted, the video had already been withdrawn restricting hence its spectatorship.¹⁸ But for the performer’s kind offer to unlock the video for further research, an instant of popular culture would have vanished.

Additionally, another advantage added to these video platforms’ functionality is that the spectators do not have to relocate especially when they are based on *topoi* where burlesque has not been an established tradition yet. Thanks to them, the spectators are in the position to watch the spectacle from the multiple inter/national cyber/stages offered and obtain in a sense the participatory mood. Nevertheless, live shows are not in any case substituted by their counterpart online offerings as they lack liveliness and vibration drawn from the spectators’ physical participation and present an overview of the whole extravaganza. Adding to that, the cyber/viewers are isolated within their own domestic spaces and do not experience this “communal ecstasy—or ecstasy experienced within a communal setting” (Liepe-Levinson 69) as Katherine Liepe-Levinson has put it when found among other spectators in order to be able to sense their reactions and feel the participatory live atmosphere.

Burlesque videos can positively affect their online spectators as they can reproduce resourceful social meanings and life lessons related to health, age, race, gender, and the body along with personal and public fears while others might promote the commercialized

¹⁸ Luckily, the performer was aware about the author’s research and explained the reasons why she had retrieved the video. Lola the Vamp dreaded the idea that the content of the video would promote cultural appropriation even if being of Chinese descent herself.

ab/use of the spectacle. When approached properly, these platforms flower into fruitful online databases, record a plethora of pieces as a testimony for future preservation and foster social networking. In order to present neo-burlesque videos of sociopolitical her/stories, Michelle L'amour's *Leatherette Debut* and Legs Malone's *Infested* will be analyzed further.

***Leatherette Debut* by Michelle L'amour**

Michelle L'amour's *Leatherette Debut* is a debatable act both for the performer and the spectator since it is her first piece after the public revelation on her suffering from alopecia.¹⁹ On January 2018, the performer presents a video entitled as "The Big Reveal." In the specific video, counting 20,275 views today, the performer reveals her health issue to her spectators in tears noting that "as you can imagine, this is devastating as a woman. It's very painful. As a burlesque star, it's been crippling but I have decided to own it" (L'amour 2018). In her video, she maintains that people should get inspired and accept their most naked self. Having this awareness, she mentions that people frequently believe that "the problems they possess are a personal matter that no one else has ever faced and that the mediatized successful cases that are daily presented are not always cases of success story but of a potentially concealed fear that people are not ready or brave enough to share" (L'amour 2018). This video presents the performer's fear of public rejection for not meeting traditional beauty standards as she originally addresses her spectators in an apologetic tone. Yet, as she mentions, she wants to own the problem and reveals the condition of her real hair transforming this video into a powerful message while receiving numerous supportive comments on social media.

¹⁹ Alopecia is a skin disease that is caused when "for unknown reasons, the body's own immune system attacks the hair follicles and disrupts normal hair formation" as Gary W. Cole notes (Medicine Net). Autumn Rivers and Jacquelyn Cafasso note that "Alopecia areata is a disease that causes hair to fall out in small patches, which can remain unnoticeable. These patches may eventually connect and then become noticeable [...]. This disease develops when the immune system attacks the hair follicles, resulting in hair loss. [...] The condition can result in total hair loss, called alopecia universalis, and it can prevent hair from growing back. When hair does grow back, it's possible for the hair to fall out again. The extent of hair loss and regrowth varies from person to person. There's currently no cure for alopecia areata" (Healthline).

A month after this video release, Michelle L'amour produces and performs her *Leatherette Debut* staged on a boxing ring as an encore to the aforementioned video. Before stepping on stage, she shares her excitement and anxiety with her video spectators as she is about to perform in her real hair for the first time. She appears in front of the audience wearing a rather complex all-leather mermaid-like garment and a red fur. When the fur is set aside, her full-costume is revealed showing off her derriere tied in a corseted manner while leaving the rest of her body uncovered. Following up, her moves become vivid and her striptease act culminates in a C-string and a leather bolero. Michelle L'amour retrieves the red boa while a chain is employed as a whip and interchangeably uses the two props to accentuate her spectators' anticipation. Towards the culmination of the act, the spectators go wild and applaud enthusiastically to her performance as it is shown in the video. In this act, "the neo-burlesque vent facilitates a performer-audience interaction that generates an intense and mutual validation and affirmation of the erotic in performance, and which can offer opportunities for personal transformation" (Dodds 134). During an after-show comment, the performer heads for the backstage from where she addresses her online friends by noting that "I felt me. It was me. Finally. I missed me" (L'amour 2018) and receives 42,620 views and over a thousand of subscribes.

The performer's fetishistic desires and her self-satisfaction as derived by the need to engage with the actual self are narrated in *Leatherette Debut*. The setting matches Michelle L'amour's emotional state as it is symbolically staged in front of a real boxing ring. The performer does not have an opponent to fight against though, except for her own self. At this point, she reinvents herself. Her act symbolizes the struggle she has been through in order to accept her health issue first, to combat against it and then, to summon the courage to present her "naked" self in front of a wide audience without feeling deprived from her performance skills due to the lack of long hair. Apart from the fact that hair loss causes physical pain, it is of those components adding to a woman's sexuality and it is closely related to femininity. Women are often victimized for their short haircut by being presented as sick, butch, alternative, less feminine or sentimentally unstable. Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore pinpoint on beauty and performance that,

those performances that foreground non-normative bodies and sexualities more readily invoke the generative ambivalence at the heart of neo-burlesque, to suggest

that conventional “beauty” undermines a critical feminist stance is too simplistic. Body type is undoubtedly a significant aspect of performance; however, as we have seen, more important is the set of aesthetic strategies the artist deploys to explore and expose their personal, professional and social failure. (34)

This is also Michelle L’amour’s unjustified fear because as it is shown in the video, the spectators’ enthusiastic reactions do not respond to her doubts and the performer recognizes that her hair has not marginalized her from stage. This instance reveals that burlesque is an inclusive healing spectacle for those who desire to be part of a community and can perform against their own and public fears. Erin Hill suggests that, “Neo-burlesque performance engages the audience in both a personal and collective experience; for catharsis to exist the striptease dancer needs the spectators as the spectators need the dancer” (104). Any person with a love in performance arts, and especially in neo-burlesque, who lacks fear or shame of public exposure and who has come up with a comic, witty, sexy/sensual or spiritual routine can actually perform without any social or personal constraints. Burlesque is an inclusive spectacle for those who desire to feel as part of a wider community, and those who can perform against their own and public boundaries.

***Infested* by Rev. Legs Malone**

In neo-burlesque, the satirical space is often infringed upon pieces that mainly promote sexuality/sexiness, sensuality, sexual pleasure, entertainment, voyeurism or fetishism. In Legs Malone’s *Infested* though, the female burlesque performance repositions itself in comedy and the grotesque and “enters a critical space wherein women explore an autonomous female eroticism through comedic representation” (Dodds 126). Following this rhetoric, *Infested* is an act that shocks, provokes, nauseates but simultaneously intrigues and entertains both the live and video spectators in an amalgam of horror, striptease parody and self-sarcasm.

*Infested*²⁰ is a neo-burlesque act which subverts the accusations on banality and repetitiveness that the genre is often besieged by. Being among the very few neo-burlesque acts performed with bugs, it playfully touches upon the politics of fear. In this act, Legs

²⁰ *Infested* was performed at New York’s Sugar Shack Burlesque in 2007 and at Minx Arcana’s The Brood at the Parkside Lounge in NYC on 27 August 2013.

Malone enters the stage wearing a black midi-dress, blue or black satin gloves,²¹ a raven wig and a blue matching flower pinned on her wig. Despite the gloves which point to bygone eras, the performer's appearance is a mostly current one. When entering the stage, the spectators' warm responses welcome the performer to the extravaganza who starts swaying to the music vibe. Suddenly, Legs Malone seems to be annoyed by something caught in her hair and attempts to identify the unknown object. The performer instantly takes it off and reassures her spectators with gestures and facial expressions that everything will be settled and that they should not be worried about this hypothetically incidental fact. As the act proceeds, the performer tries to compose herself and her act up but another bug falls from her wig and alarms the burlesquer. She then, courteously tries to hide her pretentious fear and disgust by enacting graceful and ludic poses. But in her attempt to detach her first glove, she is found in the position to realize that another bug is hidden in it and tries to discard it. At this point, her facial expressions change into inquiring rather dreadful grimaces. Unfortunately, her fear is confirmed since various bugs are also hidden in the second glove. Moving on, her moves become convulsive and her face disgusted in her attempt to be saved from their attack. Her allegation on more bugs present is reassured when she caresses her breasts. In spite of her denial to uncover her dress and discover what might be hidden underneath, she finds the courage to do so and in a totally frantic and panicky way realizes that two gigantic orange bugs have replaced her pasties clinging to her nipples. Till that moment the performer seems agitated but able to handle the situation and the spectators' laughter, whistling and oohs can be vividly heard through the video. A hint of the grotesque burlesque subgenre is accentuated in her attempt to yank the buggy pasties off as "blood" runs from her nipples. In this turn, the spectators' reactions seem to deem awhile as they alter to less responsive clapping and exclamations of disgust. As Karl Toepfel urges, "Nudity isn't obscene unless [it] transgresses some threshold of shock, but shock is possible only when performance uncovers the power of *desire* to violate bodies and expose the spectator's capacity for pleasure in bodily disgust" (86). The performer squirms from fear, exhibits signs of exhaustion and despair—all narrated through her picturesque expressions. Towards the culmination of the act, Legs Malone lowers the rest of her dress so that her scorpion-covered vagina pops up. When the performer comes across this problem, she

²¹ The two alternatives refer to the two distinct shows where *Infested* has been performed.

desperately exits the stage. The spectators now farewell Legs Malone in a vibrant way as she has also created this space of “communal ecstasy” as aforementioned in *Leatherette Debut*. Even though in other forms of entertainment, the spectators’ reactions of disgust, exclamation remarks and howling might seem offending or inappropriate, in neo-burlesque, the spectators are active parts of the spectacle. To this extend, the performer has achieved her goal to provoke them and the fact that she abandons the stage hastily stirs their sentiments leaving them astounded. She also, subverts the traditional neo-burlesque final scenes where the performers’ skin and sexuality tend to be fully appraised by their spectators’ with a genuinely satirical piece.

By using parody, satire, humor and striptease acts, Legs Malone portrays a social reality in which the subject is highly preoccupied with the self, the personal fears and the fear of the unknown. In a society of fearsome future conditions and terrorist attacks, the representation of the bug-attack symbolizes the need to disentangle from racial, gender, social and personal assaults. In some cases these attacks might be of minor significance, but they quietly lurk till their most hasty and unexpected comeback is achieved. A single attack of the body and the society as a whole might lead to spreading fear as bugs do in Legs Malone’s body. In the beginning of the act, she seems to defy the single attack but towards the finale of the act, the generalized bug spread results in the performer’s ostracism from her previously dominant stage presence and her neo-burlesque community. The spectators’ applause though restores this outcome as a farewell response; which might not be subverted in a realist social context. Lynn Sally pinpoints that “neo-burlesque is always already monster/beauty” (7). Moreover, in *Infested*, female agency, empowerment and subversion of misogynist beliefs on female unjustified fears are grotesquely and humorously depicted. Jerry Palmer notes that, “humour also operates as a form of prestige or social power and is frequently positioned as a masculine trait” while in Dodds words, “the less that neo-burlesque artists are driven by commercially imperatives, the greater the opportunity to dramatically negotiate and re-imagine the female striptease body” (qtd. in Dodds 126, 117). Thus, this piece is indicative of the fact that those female burlesque performers with sociopolitical awareness and personal disquietude about the content of their acts dare to battle against banal narratives on female sexual stripping, self-promotion, attractive incentives or social appeal policies.

Even if this act indexes multiple personal narratives that operate across the performer's personal potential narration to a global message of fear as a whole, it has not received augmented public attention. Legs Malone's *Infested* has merely received 6,408 and 288 views for the two videos respectively and 63 subscribes for her channel overall even if it has presented such sociopolitical issues with a flair of comedy, drama and exaggeration. This might be indicative of the fact that a neo-burlesque's witty promotion defines its marketability and popularity often regardless of the aesthetic outcome.

Conclusion

Extrapolating from the aforementioned, the politics of spectatorship and the performer's empowerment have re-designed the map of neo-burlesque performance and have created new spaces in terms of how the venues, performers' aesthetics, and audience attendance—both in the national and the inter/national actual or cyber stages—have been transformed. Through the social media, the neo-burlesque extravaganza has generated multilayered spatial narratives; literal and metaphorical, for the performers, the spectators and their reciprocal relationship in terms on how aesthetics, spectatorship, private and public spaces, and objectification of the body are currently presented. These innovations spark ambiguity. In other words, on the one hand, they become the means through which networks, burlesque communities, discussions and feedback are realized while on the other, they end up being the *locus* where stereotypes are perpetuated, misinterpretations are created and comments of hatred and misogyny are posted. Likewise, research, information, documentation, oral and visual tradition, memory and female networking are preserved. But, the female body, aesthetics, pure satire and empowerment are often sacrificed on the altar of social media since public appeal and commercialization are nowadays determined by a simple click. Richard Schechner's synopsis is indicative of the social media chimera, commenting that,

[a] person sees the event: he sees himself seeing the event; he sees himself the event, he sees himself seeing others who are seeing the event and who, maybe see themselves seeing the event. Thus there is performance, the performers, the spectators; and the spectators of spectators; and self-seeing-self that can be performer or spectator or spectator of spectators. (qtd. in Liepe-Levinson 164-65)

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