

Smoke and mirrors: Stripping with a retro flavour is still just stripping

Eliza Milliken thinks the rise in popularity of Burlesque is forgetting its roots as satire and social commentary and instead looks a lot like plain old striptease. Neo-burlesque takes the stage.

In the 18th century Burlesque was a word that described an art form based on parody and pastiche. Championed by famous performers such as Gypsy Rose Lee it was often used to mock the petit bourgeois. A certain element of sexual frisson, including nudity and innuendo, was included in the shows. Now, a couple of centuries later, burlesque is experiencing resurgence.

What started with counter culture fetish models like Dita von Teese and Catherine D'Lish has been co-opted into more mainstream elements from the Pussycat Dolls pop group through to the Charlies Angels remakes. Perhaps not un-coincidentally the rise of neo-burlesque is occurring congruently with the rise and rise of what has been termed as 'raunch culture' as characterised by such valuable cultural additions as Paris Hilton, strip-aerobics classes and ripping all your pubic hair out at the root with hot resin.

Back in the good old days political and social satire may have been given a sexy edge with pasties and French nickers to keep the more inebriated punters happy. But what characterises a modern burlesque show? Take for example the Pussycat Dolls who started in popular L.A hotspot the Viper Room in 1993 and are now an international pop act. The sexual element is not only increased - it is the sole focus of the show. What began as successful fetish porn has simply evolved into another product: a strip show masquerading as art to make more money for people in the male dominated entertainment industry.

Let it not be thought that I'm suggesting burlesque itself, (or even pornography in certain circumstances) is morally bankrupt. Instead it would seem that we are elevating to art form something that is nothing more than a highly stylised part of the sex industry at worst and at best a format in

which women including Cameron Diaz, Scarlett Johansson and Christina Aguilera (amongst many others) can use to show off their bodies and incredible looks without the boring tedium of a fashion show or having to act.

Purveyors of raunch culture often use women such as Dita von Teese as examples of female empowerment. Seen as a highly sexual personality, her striking and perfectly made up face, often catches my eye when flipping through the pages of Vogue. Since her marriage to goth rock impresario Marilyn Manson, her career, which started at humble glamour model beginnings, has been catapulted into the stratosphere. Von Teese may be a self made woman, however the connotations of her actions from a feminist viewpoint become murkier when you consider her contribution to the rise of raunch culture, and the implications for women feeling the pressure to be highly sexualised. By popularising a new form of stripping she has paved the way for women with less autonomy to be exploited by those keen to make a buck out of zeitgeist.

Beyonce and Cameron Diaz have both copied her famous 'Champagne Bath' performance on film. But what is von Teese's political standing? What does she hope to achieve for women with her floorshows? It would seem nothing. It's true there is at least one central difference. Dita is making money out of her body and her interests, unlike Beyonce, who admitted that she was on a liquid diet for two weeks to drop ten kilos at her record labels bidding. Her body is used to make money for Sony, L'Oreal, Tommy Hilfifer, and a whole host of other invisible people, working in the patriarchal system of Corporate America.

The Pussycat Dolls and the Suicide Girls are even more sinister when it comes to the exploitation

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of women's bodies for profit. The Dolls website states that "The Pussycat Dolls' stage act has always followed the classic tradition of burlesque, a sexual performance that focuses on tease, humor and innuendo instead of raunchy sex and bare flesh". An attitude which not only ignores burlesque's early history of social satire, political comment and pastiche but is also difficult to reconcile with the image of a group with lyrics such as "don't ya wish your girlfriend was hot like me?" Are such sentiments nothing if not overt? Is it just me or does there seem to be quite an inappropriate level of bare flesh present in the Pussycat Dolls for girls with "real big brains who don't give a bleep if you're looking at their bleep".

The much famed SuicideGirls website also took advantage of the popularity of neo-burlesque in an effort to increase their profits. One of the main attractions of the SuicideGirls community was that subscribers are able to communicate with models. To take this a step further management initiated an international travelling Burlesque tour. The tour featured singing, dancing, even recreations of movie scenes such as everyone's favourite from Reservoir Dogs (yes I do mean the one with the ear). However mostly by their own admission, it usually ends with all the girls getting naked and kissing in front of a crowd of young men who would be at home in any of the Cross' strip bars.

Everyone who identifies with feminist issues is probably already aware of the infamous mass walkout of SG models a couple of years ago. SuicideGirls claims to be a female owned and operated soft-core website featuring alternative girls. A subscription fee must be paid before you can view all the (heavily retouched) photos of thousands of girls. However the initial façade of the site as being made by women for women to be represented the way they want was broken when it became known that there was a pretty strong male element running through the site.

Of the two original founders one is male. Suicide-

Girls often reports that 43% of their payroll being female is demonstrable of their new-wave feminism. I was no big success at high school maths, but it would seem these statistics indicate that the majority of people profiting from SuicideGirls are male. SuicideGirls has links with the well-known feminist doyenne 'Playboy Magazine', which regularly runs features on members of the SuicideGirls community. Even Dita von Teese herself has featured in Playboy and other mainstream porn mags.

The stylisation and couture elements of burlesque and fetish modelling are tricking these girls into thinking that this type of modelling and performance is different to the traditional blonde and pneumatic image of stripping. Just because it's represented in a different way to more mainstream male fantasies, doesn't mean it is not those same men whose fantasies are being pandered to by websites like SuicideGirls. In fact SuicideGirls was recently caught selling archived photographs to hard-core porn sites. Including punkrockgirlfriend.com. A site that features penetration shots and captions such as "she likes it from behind".

Dita von Teese may be front row at Marc Jacobs and gracing the cover of fashion magazines, but her less well-known occasional performance partner Catherine D'Lish includes titles such as "Miss Nude U.S.A". Although burlesque may be an alternative, it still relies on the patriarchal system of evaluating women solely on their looks and bodies. A woman can never have true power when all her power is siphoned from the male gaze and the readiness with which men will pay to see her naked. It leaves the individual woman solely at the mercy of men. Burlesque's increasing popularity cannot be denied. Love it or hate it don't be fooled, a rose by any other name would smell as sweet (or rank for that matter). Burlesque is the old sex for money formula. How you feel about that however, is your own decision. ■