

My Friend, the Showgirl Alison J. Carr



Although the two words are rarely associated with each other, glamour and grammar are related. Glamour was originally a Scots word meaning ‘enchantment or magic’ or ‘a magic spell or charm’ – if someone cast the glamour over you, they enchanted or bewitched you – and was an altered form of grammar. Greek *gramma* ‘a letter of the alphabet, something written down’ was the source of grammar, which in medieval times had the sense ‘scholarship or learning’. Learning and the study of books was popularly associated with astrology and occult practices, hence the connection with magic. ‘Magical beauty’ became associated with glamour in the mid-19th century, and from the 1930s the word was particularly used of attractive women.¹

In this paper, I explore practices of viewing: identification, desire, objectification, all these are themes that emerge from my research on my practice-led PhD. I try to position various theories and give context to arguments but I leave a certain amount of the questions I raise open-ended. In effect, I leave as much unresolved as resolved.

Who is the showgirl? The female spectacle, heavily adorned with symbols of ‘glamour’, sheathed in sequins, trimmed with feathers, glued-on false eyelashes and make up adhered into place with a blast of hairspray; she exists only as long as the lights are trained on her. She sings, she dances, she performs for an audience. As the curtains close, she exits the stages, peels off her fishnets and the showgirl is extinguished, living only in the afterimages of the audience’s mind. She is a representation, on stage and screen; you cannot touch her for she is not within reach, always distant enough to remain perfectly complete.

So she exists as an idea in my mind, an emblem of an alternative version of myself. The me that is not. Perhaps through my exploration and description I can evoke the Showgirl moment temporarily and bring her presence into being.

What must one do to be the showgirl? She struts onto the stage so confidently in her outfit. She has turned herself into a glamorous moment, as Immodesty Blaize, the contemporary burlesque queen says in the film *Burlesque Undressed*:

I think that people are often surprised when I say it can take me a year or two to develop an act. They don’t realise you’re going from the concept to doing all your

research, you're designing your costumes, you're working with a sculptor on your props, your prototypes, or your fittings, your rehearsals with your girls, arranging new music with the band and everything that encompasses, to get that ten minute droplet of essence of glamour.²

Making explicit the unseen effort invested in producing effortless Immodesty also exposes the level of control and authorship a burlesque showgirl has over her act. While the burlesque performer goes it alone in developing and performing her act – a tradition that extends back into the historical examples of burlesque performers in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s – the Parisian and Las Vegas showgirls and the Hollywood Busby Berkeley girls take their positions in the chorus line. The grand vision of this type of spectacle is not the individual dancers but there are many examples of showgirls turned impresarios and choreographers, from Lydia Thompson to Bluebell, enough to suggest that the aesthetic vocabulary of the showgirl has been articulated and developed by both genders.

Why does the embodiment of glamour in the shiny surfaces of the showgirl hourglass appeal so much?² Let us consider briefly Freud's explanation of the fetish, the tale of the small boy, who upon seeing underneath his mother's skirt that she has no penis, quickly averts his gaze to deny what he has seen.³ The next thing he sees – her shoes, fur, even the shine on her nose – provides some relief.⁴ It becomes the memorial for the lost penis as well as a way to forget the nasty business of the lack. The penis-substitute resurfaces as a requirement for sexual gratification in the adult fetishist. The shoes or the shiny textures must be incorporated into sex. The showgirl incorporates into her costume, her act, even her persona, the textures and objects of the fetishist, producing a completeness, a whole, as though to signal that she lacks nothing, she has no lack.

In Lacan's theory of the Mirror Stage the child encounters its reflection in the mirror and misrecognises the representation as itself. The reflection provides an illusion of completeness and control, as the outline of the body against its background is perceived as a boundary. This pleases the child, who up to this point only experiences its own sense of lack of coordination and motor skill inabilities.⁵ Similarly observing the precision high-kicks, the synchronised movements, the pleasure in their own bodies the Showgirl performs, the audience imagines itself possessing these qualities. Oh! to effortlessly glide, erotically shimmy, extend one's leg above one's head and drip in Swarovski crystals. We imagine these tropes of the representation of spectacle applying to our lived experiences. We imagine our lives not in the real but in the constructed. A misrecognition.

The Fetish and the Mirror Stage may be elementary psychoanalysis, but I am interested in employing these ideas to think through the pleasures of glamour in a range of contexts, rather than routing my understanding through psychoanalytic approaches that use exclusively voyeurism and scopophilia as their tools, which were developed to consider cinema-viewing practices.⁶ This requires more consideration of the gap between professional and amateur performances, parody, the relation between performer and audience, and the technical developments that allow contemporary audiences to develop a more active relation to glamour texts. Certainly there is completeness to the Showgirl that, as I see it, inspires viewers. I use psychoanalysis to think about how 'misrecognition' might allow us to turn away from the potentially, paralysing qualities that other methods can create through their technical positioning of male and female gazes.

One is always and never the showgirl. She cannot exist in the plane of reality, only in representation; there is always a distance, she is always just beyond our touch. The showgirl's perfect technique and skill make the moment one of fantasy. Hours of practice and training are erased by the fluidity and ease with which she moves, smiles, and acknowledges the audience. The beautiful object cannot be created from an amateur effort. As Roland Barthes notes in his short essay 'Striptease', amateur performers fail to turn themselves into an object through their lack of technique and inability to correctly handle their props.⁷ The performer must invest effort (practice, time, tuition, purchase of costumes and props) into turning herself into an object; it is an act of self-objectification, prior to the gaze of an audience. The audience's scrutiny is internalised while she prepares; it is for the pleasure of the audience that she chooses to sacrifice herself. The effectiveness of her investment is evidence in her performance as object.

The buffoon, the showgirl's antonym, can help us to broaden our understanding of glamour. Philippe Gaulier, the theatre teacher, has revived the tradition of the buffoon; a French tradition

rooted in village outcasts, shunned because of their physical and mental defects, cast out into the swamps and only invited back to entertain. They parody the comforts of privilege in the hope that those they parody recognise the meaninglessness of their lives. With their smeared makeup, blacked-out teeth, tatty clothes, sloppy posture, and association with society's underdogs the buffoon embodies the abject. He disgusts us precisely because his being resonates with our own experience of lack of control over our bodily functions. Extending this, we can see representations of glamour are used to avert our anxieties of our abject bodies, enable us to forget the lack of control we have over our real body. The use of the abject in representation is employed to puncture pomposity and over-investment with appearance and surface concerns. The two are held in opposition to one another, simultaneously repressing and needing the other. In our vernacular culture we can see representations of buffoonery and the abject in the characters of Sacha Baron Cohen, the television series *Rab C Nesbitt*, *The Royle Family*, *Shameless* and *Skins* and the film *Trainspotting*.⁸ The recent film *Precious*, directed by Lee Daniels, could also fit here, although the tragic rather than satiric is emphasised in this example.⁹ Notably in *Precious* we see the internal fantasy of the eponymous character on stage in a large theatre in glamorous outfit, all the lights trained on her, affirming what I suggest about the relation between the abject and glamour.

If the abject brings us back to our body, the escapism of glamour takes us aspirationally beyond ourselves. The complete figure of the showgirl represents an ideal, yet this ideal is expanded in burlesque. The burlesque showgirl embodies the space of fantasy although she may not have anything like a perfect body. Instead, she parodies perfection, turning herself into the object of desire through her self-confidence and performance of pleasure, and knowingly winks to the audience, which is usually evenly divided between both genders, if not with women in the majority. She therefore acknowledges to the audience that her performance of fantasy and pleasure is a gesture for it, an act of generosity in offering herself up as object.

To see the Showgirl live, the audience must dress up. It must bridge the gap between the dress-up of the performer and its own stepping out of everyday routine to enter fantasy. The *Moulin Rouge* suggests that 'Formal attire. Jacket and tie will be appreciated. No shorts', while burlesque audiences wear feathers, corsets, and other playful accessories.¹⁰ Each member of the audience becomes her/his own glamorous persona before leaving the house.

In *Stargazing* Jackie Stacey uses the collection of empirical material to broaden our understanding of cinematic audiences in the 1940s and 1950s.¹¹ She collected the research by placing adverts in magazines such as *Woman's Realm* and *Woman's Own* to reach a particular demographic, movie-goers in her specified time period. She positions her findings in three chapters. The first addresses the cinema as escapism of from the hardships of life during the war:

I didn't want to see anybody being ordinary at the cinema. The cinema was the focal point of our lives at that time, and we all wanted the female stars to be something 'unattainable' and we put them on a pedestal.¹²

The next chapter considers the way in which the stars on the screen were understood through personal identification to themselves, for example, in style and looks:

My favourite star was Dorothy Lamour (I don't want to be bigheaded, but my mother thought I looked like her) [...] The stars in the 1940s and 1950s were really beautiful and at that time I suppose we felt we were the characters we were watching.¹³

Finally she examines how consumption by women was developed through messages from Hollywood in films and magazines. In interweaving quotations from the responses she received and theoretical ideas from a range of film scholars and critical thinkers, her authorial voice becomes intermingled with other voices, and a number of experiences emerge and strengthen the argument, as though a chorus of opinion has a collective agency.

As I read film and burlesque theory, I watch Youtube clips on my laptop, from film excerpts to video recordings of live performances. This locates my experience as a viewer in a new framework; not only I can pause, rewind, replay, but also I can appropriate, comment, enter into dialogue with other commentators, add clips to my own archive of favourites and even post a response clip

either of other appropriated material, live shows or my own talking head. Performers can post their own material, shows can advertise, old hard-to-find-films resurface and people at home can video themselves dancing in their domestic space. Youtube is becoming its own rhizomatic archive with new associations created between these different materials. The idea of passivity of spectatorship becomes even less tenable; viewing is an active practice. Being viewed is also active.

In concluding, I will make the claim the showgirl is my friend, guiding me through my research. And so she leaves us, the spotlight is extinguished, and the house lights come up.

NOTES

1. 'Glamour' found in Julia Cresswell, *Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*, Oxford Reference Online, <<http://www.oxfordreference.com.lcproxy.shu.ac.uk/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t292.e2271>> [accessed 16 October 2010].
2. *Immodesty Blaize Presents: Burlesque Undressed*, dir. by Alison Grist (Night Falls, 2010).
3. Sigmund Freud (1927), 'Fetishism', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and tr. by James Strachey et al., 24 vols, London: The Hogarth Press Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74, vol. 21, pp. 152-157.
4. In 'Fetishism' Freud writes of a patient that had turned the "shine on the nose" into a fetishistic precondition', Freud's explanation of this was that the young man had spent his early years in England before he moved to Germany, where he lost his English mother-tongue. Thus, the English 'shine on the nose' was translated into German 'Glanz auf der Nase' that he concludes 'was in reality a "glance at the nose". The nose was thus the fetish, which 'he endowed at will with the luminous shine which was not perceptible to others'. p. 152.
5. Jacques Lacan (1938), 'Les complexes familiaux dans la formation de l'individu', *l'Encyclopédie Française*, vol. 8, Paris: Larousse, 1938. Unpublished translation by Peter Wollen, 1993.
6. The most notable example is Laura Mulvey (1973), 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, Autumn 1975, pp. 6-18.
7. Roland Barthes (1973), 'Striptease', in *Mythologies*, tr. by Annette Lavers, Vintage: London, 1993.
8. Sacha Baron Cohen's alter egos can be seen in the films *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, dir. by Larry Charles (20th Century Fox, 2007), *Brüno*, dir. by Sacha Baron Cohen (Universal, 2009) and *Ali G Indahouse*, dir. by Mark Mylod (Universal Pictures, 2002). *Rab C Nesbitt* [TV series] Colin Gilbert et al., Series 1 (BBC 1990). *The Royale Family* [TV series] Series 1 Caroline Ahearne et al. (BBC 1998). *Shameless* [TV series] Paul Abbott et al., Series 1 (Channel 4 2004). *Skins* [TV series] Bryan Elsley et al. Series 1 (E4 2007). *Trainspotting* [film] dir. by Danny Boyle (Universal Pictures UK 1996).
9. *Precious* [film] dir. by Lee Daniels (Icon Home Entertainment 2009).
10. *Moulin Rouge* publicity leaflet for their production *Féerie*, Summer 2010.
11. Jackie Stacey, *Stargazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, London: Routledge, 1993.
12. Stacey, *Stargazing*, p. 110, quoting the words of respondent Mary Wilson.
13. Stacey, *Stargazing*, p. 148, quoting the words of respondent Mrs P. Malcolmson.