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Killing the Pain with Pleasure: On the Queering Effect of the Neo-Burlesque

Abstract: Drawing on research into performance studies, queer affect studies, and queer historiography, this paper argues that neo-burlesque functions as a queer emotional theater, which, similar to the concept of *Theater of Cruelty* by the French writer and dramatist Antonin Artaud, emotionally jolts both the performers and the audience and thus can contribute to a playful, sometimes punkish-furious rewriting of both personal history and political-social realities. Using the example of neo-burlesque performances from New Orleans and Warsaw, I will examine whether and, if so, how neo-burlesque can solve a temporary affirmative detachment from one's own personal history but also from the *chrononormativity* of everyday life as per US-American queer scholars Elizabeth Freeman and Jack Halberstam regarding the system of stimulation into maximal productivity, capital accumulation, and towards heteronormative life strategies. Thereby I will discuss whether neo-burlesque can be seen as a playful-pleasurable or sometimes even an enraged way of resisting this chrononormativity and the weight and gravity of the wounds of daily life.

Keywords: Burlesque, queer, performance, emotion, affect, erotic, humor, masquerade, New Orleans, Warsaw

Emotions tell us a lot about time; emotions are the very 'flesh' of time.¹

Since the mid-1990s, the popularity of the erotic performance art of neo-burlesque has seen worldwide growth. From Dubai to Shanghai, New York to Buenos Aires, neo-burlesque is taking urban centers by storm, both in queer bars and in other, more established venues. The prefix *neo* refers to the revival of burlesque art, which was established in London in the 1860s and whose first performer was Lydia Thompson. Starting her theatrical career with pantomimes and extravaganzas of Victorian burlesque – parodies of a higher, “classical” art of plays, Greek myths, and literary works – Thompson, along with other female performers, took on male roles, appeared in men's clothing or skin-colored tights, engaging in a then shocking form of cross-dressing that lent the burlesque an erotic significance. Thompson and her tour brought burlesque to the United States, made it popular there, and ensured that burlesque would emerge as a theatrical game of seduction without explicit nudity, taking its place alongside vaudeville and circus as an important form of entertainment art, particularly for the working classes. The US burlesque reached its peak in the 1930s and found its way into the established thea-

1 Sara Ahmed: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York, NY 2014, 202.

ters but moved underground after the Catholic mayor of New York, Fiorello La Guardia, closed burlesque theaters out of concern for moral decay. Burlesque did not disappear, however, but was increasingly replaced by more explicit striptease and go-go dances. It was not until the 1990s, particularly in the US, that a revival of the art form as *neo-burlesque* took place; practiced by performers of all genders, it stands in contrast to the earlier wave of burlesque that lasted until the 1960s and was more of a female performance art.

It is not possible to speak of *the* neo-burlesque, however, given the complexity of the genre – which can be described, in short, as “a multi-disciplinary performance art that, throughout history, has built on different theatrical traditions including playing, singing, dancing, clowning, and, since the late 19th century, stripping.”² Attending a neo-burlesque show for the first time in 2016 in New Orleans, I experienced what can best be described as confusion. It was a *nerdlesque* show: a kind of neo-burlesque that takes its cues from pop culture scripts such as Hollywood blockbusters, popular series, Japanese anime, or comic books. On this occasion, it was a tribute to *STAR WARS* and *PULP FICTION*.³ Performers created a utopian world on stage and crossed boundaries – not only of gender binaries but also of the human and non-human, as well as of temporalities. A glittering world of erotic play was created where the erotic did not, in fact, play the central role but was accompanied by the humorous and the parodic. The performers embodied both human beings and, through their costume play, futuristic non-human beings of a world of fantasy, in a kind of *posthumanist drag* that recalls the concept of the cyborg by the US-American science studies scholar Donna Haraway, who, as a non-human and genderless figure, eludes any categories and thus has an emancipative and queer potential.⁴ Using their bodies, the performers enacted their own interpretations of figures which differed from the “original” pop-cultural scripts. They mixed the visible queer “non-normative”⁵ practices of camp, drag, and cross-dressing with the less-visible queering impact of, for example, tease, which seemed to correspond to normative heterosexual practices of desire. Hence the confusion – these different bodily forms of presentation were perplexing at first sight, but they also revealed the complexity of neo-burlesque performances, which cannot be accounted for through seduction and the visibility of queerness alone. As Canadian gender studies scholar Laura Brightwell notes, “queer anti-normativity” can overplay

2 Marie-Cécile Cervellon / Stephen Brown: All the Fun of the Fan: Consuming Burlesque in an Era of Retromania. *NA – Advances in Consumer Research* 42 (2014), 271.

3 For more about *nerdlesque*, see for example, Stevi Costa: Accio Burlesque! Performing Potter Fandom Through “Nerdlesque.” In: *Playing Harry Potter. Essays and Interviews on Fandom and Performance*, ed. by Lisa S Brenner. Jefferson, NC 2015, 108–113; Joanna Staśkiewicz: The New Burlesque as an Example of Double-Simulacrum. *Forum Socjologiczne* (2017), 111–122.

4 Donna J. Haraway: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*. London 1991, 163. See also Paul Mountfort / Adam Geczy / Anne Peirson-Smith: *Planet Cosplay. Costume Play, Identity and Global Fandom*. Bristol 2019.

5 Annamarie Jagose: *Queer Theory. An introduction*. New York, NY 1997, 71.

visible differences on the bodily surface, leading to the danger of exclusion of non-visible or normative-coded queer appearances from the queer community.⁶ This paper therefore concerns itself less with the physical surface of bodies⁷ but focuses on emotions and stories and examines the effect of emotional exposure in neo-burlesque. I will examine whether neo-burlesque, through the liberation of affects, forms a queer, carnivalesque space in which emotions and humor offer a temporary liberation from everyday wounds. My thesis is that emotions and their embodiment in the performance of neo-burlesque offer a queer theatrical purgation, a temporary relief from everyday structures, and playful rewriting of these structures, both for performers and the audience.

In the first part of my paper, I will explore neo-burlesque as an emotional theater in the sense of Antonin Artaud, using approaches of performance and storytelling theories, queer affect research, and queer historiography. Then, using two performances from New Orleans as examples, I will analyze the political impact of emotions in neo-burlesque in more detail based on the concept of punkish-pleasurable strategy of irritation and emotional take-off. In the next part, the concept of *erotohistoriography*, as a sensual rewriting of history, will be presented in order to explore neo-burlesque as an act of processing past personal traumas as well as questioning the national Catholic politics of one's own country, using two performances from Warsaw as examples.

1 Transforming Emotions into Erotic Performances

An actor is like a physical athlete, with this astonishing corollary; his affective organism is similar to the athlete's, being parallel to it like a double, although they do not act on the same level. The actor is a heart athlete.⁸

In his book *The Theatre and Its Double*, the French writer and dramatist Antonin Artaud calls for an emotional upheaval on stage: The theater, he argues, should not be

6 Laura Brightwell: The Exclusionary Effects of Queer Anti-Normativity on Feminine-Identified Queers. *Feral Feminisms* 7 (2018). <https://feralfeminisms.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2-Laura-Brightwell.pdf> (last accessed 23 August 2022).

7 In previous essays, I have focused on a "corporeal surface" analysis of, for example, elements of drag, masquerade, and the so-called transgressive "bawdiness" of bodies, describing neo-burlesque as a kind of humorous, glittering, magic "queer circus," and showing how humor and a carnivalesque upside-down have a queering effect in which gender norms, ideals of beauty, and current social debates are grotesquely revealed: Joanna Staśkiewicz: Queering in der (neo-) Burlesque. *Navigationen: Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften* 18 (2018), 119–132; Joanna Staśkiewicz: The Queering Relief of the Humor in the New Burlesque. *Whatever. A Transdisciplinary Journal of Queer Theories and Studies* 4 (2021), 187–218, and Joanna Staśkiewicz: Gelsomina Transgressed: A Subversion of Fellini's World in the Clownish Neo-Burlesque. *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 9 (2021), 63–81.

8 Antonin Artaud: *The Theatre and Its Double* [1938], trans. by Victor Corti. London 1993, 88.

simply pretty or entertaining but emotionally exhausting, cruel, or even painful. The performer should become an “athlete of the heart” who takes the audience out of their comfort zone with a physical performance that is more visual than textual. Gestures, atmosphere, the breaking of the fourth wall, and the reduction of the stage set to what is necessary are intended to provide a stirring mess of emotions for performers and audience alike. The US-American writer and essayist Susan Sontag describes Artaud’s concept as a principle of “art as ordeal”⁹ and a connection of body and mind, a connection that Artaud desperately strove for in his personal life. As Sontag puts it, “Artaud imagines the theatre as the place where the body would be reborn in thought and thought would be reborn in the body.”¹⁰

Although neo-burlesque may not adhere to Artaud’s theater concept in every way, particularly given the roots of burlesque in the supposedly “low” arts of humor and entertainment, and that the costumes and props frowned upon by Artaud are central components of neo-burlesque, I would nevertheless like to argue that neo-burlesque can certainly embody an emotional churn. Here, I am following the circus researcher Helene Stoddard, who sees in the circus a place for a non-textual *Theatre of Cruelty*, where physical representations aspire to and are capable of triggering emotions. As Stoddard writes: “In the notion of the body as hieroglyphic [Artaud] offers us the suggestion that the performing body, stripped of verbal language, may harbour meanings for an audience and which may indeed exist as an element of their immediate effect rather than despite it.”¹¹ Neo-burlesque performance is, like the circus act, generally non-verbal: It involves an “act of undressing”¹² in which, rather than relying on the language of the performer, facial expressions, gestures, movement, costumes and props are set in motion to tell a story. As the British design theorist Barbara Brownie notes, burlesque performers fulfil the role of “storytellers”: “The striptease performance can be considered as an ‘altered image,’ in which the image – the costumed body of the performer – is altered by a series of similar actions, and thus steadily progresses toward a resolution.”¹³ Ranging from the biographical “ego entanglement”¹⁴ of the performers to the ostensibly apolitical act of “undressing” and the explicitly political manifesto, what connects these different forms of stories told with the body are emotions. If, indeed, as the British-Australian writer and queer, postcolonial, and critical race studies scholar Sara Ahmed has it, “[e]motions tell us a lot about time; emotions are the very ‘flesh’ of time,” then the body of the burlesque performer might equally be described as “the very flesh of time” – a kind of barome-

9 Susan Sontag: Introduction. In: Antonin Artaud: *Antonin Artaud. Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag, trans. by Helen Weaver. Berkeley 1988, xxxii.

10 Sontag: Introduction, xxxvi.

11 Helen Stoddard: *Rings of Desire. Circus History and Representation*. Manchester 2000, 83.

12 Barbara Brownie: *Acts of Undressing. Politics, Eroticism, and Discarded Clothing*. London 2017, 3.

13 Brownie: *Acts of Undressing*, 30.

14 Nina Tecklenburg: *Performing Stories. Erzählen in Theater und Performance*. Bielefeld 2014, 185.

ter of the current sociopolitical situation visualized through the body of the performer. Herein lies another similarity to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, which supposedly possesses what Artaud refers to as a "mysterious aspect," where ancient myths are transferred through physical representation and "incarnated in moves, expressions and gestures, before gushing out in words."¹⁵

The cathartic effect of emotion in neo-burlesque, however, is not limited to the performers since acts of individual liberation through physical performance are also acts of social unification and solidarity. As Ahmed describes it, emotions "involve different orientations to others"¹⁶ and thus create a space of "sociality."¹⁷ In this sense, storytelling in neo-burlesque is itself performative and is not restricted to the visual representation of bodies. Here, I follow the German theater scholar Nina Tecklenburg, who sees storytelling as a cultural practice of performance, where realities are produced dynamically and through process: Alongside the formation of the narrator, the theater stage becomes a playful, experimental field of contingencies. In an earlier essay, I described this field within the burlesque as a "queer safe space" and, following the US-American sociologist Angela Jones, a *queer heterotopia*. Jones, building on Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, sees in the notion of a queer heterotopia the possibility of an everyday withdrawal from restrictions and humiliations: "These are spaces with no ordered categories that qualify and rank bodies. This will require the radical transformation of bodies, subversive performances, and transforming our minds, our souls, and our thoughts."¹⁸ Such queer heterotopias are not bound to any particular forms or practices; their main characteristic is the subversion of hegemonic power relations, especially with regard to sex, gender, and sexuality. In a later text, Jones broadens her understanding of queerness, seeing it as not limited to sexual orientation or gender subversion, and emphasizing its status both as process and as a rebellion against narrow, essentialist social norms and binaries. For Jones, "[q]ueerness is always being made, remade, being done, being redone, and being undone. It is a quotidian refusal to play by the rules, if those rules stifle the spirit of queers who, like caged birds, cannot sing."¹⁹

Such a process-based understanding of queerness, together with its refusal to operate within the heteronormative matrix, is also developed by the US-American queer studies scholar Jack Halberstam in *In a Queer Time and Place*. Halberstam forwards a concept of a queer time that is distinct from the hegemonic, heteronormative, social-economic-productive social time of reproduction and family life, describing queerness

¹⁵ Artaud: *The Theatre and Its Double*, 82.

¹⁶ Ahmed: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 202.

¹⁷ Ahmed: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 8.

¹⁸ Angela Jones: Queer Heterotopias. Homonormativity and the Future of Queerness. *Interalia: A Journal of Queer Studies* (2009), 15.

¹⁹ Angela Jones: Introduction. Queer Utopias, Queer Futurity, and Potentiality in Quotidian Practice. In: *A Critical Inquiry into Queer Utopias*, ed. by. Angela Jones. New York, NY 2013, 14.

as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices.”²⁰ A similar approach is taken by the US-American literature and queer studies scholar Elizabeth Freeman with her concept of chrononormativity, the time in which people are stimulated into maximal productivity and capital accumulation, and towards heteronormative life strategies.²¹ As an escape from chrononormativity, Freeman proposes a strategy of erotohistoriography: “a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counters the logic of development.”²² According to Freeman, erotohistoriography is a pleasurable means of forgetting both the narrowness and even traumata of everyday life and the heteronormative hegemony of chrononormativity: “Against pain and loss, erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfilments from elsewhere, other times.”²³

Particularly in times of political backlash, queer utopian spaces appear as spaces of longing, where an “everyday life of queer trauma”²⁴ and a desolate “here and now”²⁵ can be momentarily forgotten and “filled with affirmative meaning that makes life liveable and society meaningful.”²⁶ These spaces honor’s conceptualization of carnival by the Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, as a temporal suspension of official norms and hierarchies, a popular culture of laughter, and an affirmation of “silliness” in the form of the grotesque and parody. Carnival, for Bakhtin, was a “feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalised and complete.”²⁷ It is precisely this hostility to the “immortalised and complete” as well as its suspension of hierarchies that make carnival a queering practice, recalling what the German queer studies scholar Antke Engel described as the “queer strategy of equivocation or undisambiguation as a means of disrupting heteronormativity in particular and regimes of normalcy in general.”²⁸ In the following section, I will use selected neo-burlesque performances in New Orleans and Warsaw to discuss the extent to which emotions can, in this type of performance, be queered and queering, and where narratives emerge in the process.

20 Jack Halberstam: *In a Queer Time and Place. Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York, NY / London 2005, 1.

21 Elizabeth Freeman: *Time Binds. Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham, NC 2010, 3.

22 Freeman: *Time Binds*, 59.

23 Freeman: *Time Binds*, 59.

24 Ann Cvetkovich: *An Archive of Feelings. Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC 2003, 15.

25 José Esteban Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York, NY 2009, 1.

26 Alice Koubová et al.: *Play and Democracy. Philosophical Perspectives*. London 2021, 46.

27 Mikhail Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World* [1965], trans. by Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge 1968, 109.

28 Antke Engel: Queer Reading as Power Play. Methodological Considerations for Discourse Analysis of Visual Material. *Qualitative Inquiry* 25 (2018), 10.

2 From Pleasurable Punkish “Piss-Take” to Manifesto-Undressing in the Neo-Burlesque: Two Examples from New Orleans

In her analysis of contemporary feminist performances, Jacki Willson, the British performance and gender studies scholar, discusses the tongue-in-cheek humor of the female burlesque performance as a “piss-take” in which carnivalesque laughter subverts norms and makes both “nonsense of the normal” and the “normal appear ridiculous.”²⁹ Achieving a political impact through its use of juxtaposition and the grotesque, such humor reveals the absurdity and ridiculousness of norms in a manner that recalls the anarchistic and destabilizing role of the clown: “Playing the fool destabilizes clichés by juxtaposing the ‘deviant’ or the ‘spoiled’ in relation to the ‘ideal’ or the ‘norm’, thus exposing the way in which particular cultures and [their] people impose foolish rules.”³⁰ A similar strategy is “bawdy unruliness,” a concept used by Willson to describe a kinky “porn-panto” protest of sex-workers and activists in London 2014;³¹ here, the bawdy is understood as political, capable of disrupting notorious heterosexual binaries such as whore and virgin, or dirtiness and purity. Subversive bawdiness has also been theorized extensively by the British media and communications scholar Gemma Commene, who describes how the so-called “dirty bodies” of performers challenge the patriarchal heterosexual matrix in relation to female sexuality. The terms “Bad Women” and “Dirty Bodies” are used by Commene to indicate “direct links to dangerous forms of femininity, such as the slut, the woman who is far too kinky, the bisexual and the woman who expresses her self-identity in disapproving ways (i.e. too honest, too confrontational, too gay, etc.)”³² – a “too-muchness” that is denigrated as “bad” since it does not conform to the scripts of current beauty ideals or mainstream sexuality.

These conceptualizations of humorous and sexually pleasurable feminist performance are reminiscent of the “negative strategy”³³ and “embodied jouissance”³⁴ of queer-feminist punk rock theorized by the Austrian queer and American studies scholar Maria Katharina Wiedlack. Following Elizabeth Povinelli, Tavia Nyong’o, and José Muñoz, anti-social queering becomes, for Wiedlack, a pleasurable strategy of an

29 Jacki Willson: “Piss-Takes,” Tongue-in-Cheek Humor and Contemporary Feminist Performance Art. Ursula Martinez, Oriana Fox and Sarah Maple. *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* 36 (2015), 5.

30 Willson: “Piss-Takes,” 10.

31 Jacki Willson: Porn, pantomime and protest. The politics of bawdiness as feminine style. *Porn Studies* 5 (2018), 426–439.

32 Gemma Commene: *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies. Sex, performance and safe femininity*. Bloomsbury 2020, 4.

33 Maria Katharina Wiedlack: *Queer-Feminist Punk. An anti-social history*. Vienna 2015, 145.

34 Wiedlack: *Queer-Feminist Punk*, 92.

“irritation of normativity.”³⁵ Expressing anger and resistance against hegemony, it is a “pleasurable embrace of negativity, aimed to entertain and possibly educate as an additional benefit,”³⁶ a strategy, moreover, that leads to solidarity and transforms anger into a “liveable activism.”³⁷ It was precisely such an “embodied jouissance” and joyful resistance against normativity that I recognized in the burlesque-punk performance I witnessed in June 2018 in New Orleans as part of the event Stripped Into Submission: Where Burlesque Meets BDSM, organized by the burlesque group Society of Sin. The show, described by its organizers as being comprised of sex-positive, “fetish-influenced burlesque and variety acts,”³⁸ took place in the alternative queer-friendly bar Hi-Ho Lounge in the Marigny district, away from the touristy French Quarter. Visitors to the bar are mostly young and local, although the events are increasingly attended by tourists. Like the AllWays Lounge and Siberia Lounge next door, the bar offers to the local burlesque-, cabaret-, clown-, and sideshow scene, as well as the queer community, a stage and a kind of “safe space.”

One of the performers of Stripped Into Submission was Dick Jones Burly, who has been shaping the New Orleans scene with her burlesque work for several years, offering, for example, burlesque evenings parodying the “Emokids,” a US-American emotive, punkish youth culture of the 1990s and 2000s. Dick Jones, who describes herself as “[t]he hick with the balls to call herself Dick,”³⁹ began her performance in an outfit that seemed like a promise of a representation of a vamp, femme-fatale femininity, her dark pageboy wig and leather jacket bringing an element of rebelliousness to her look. At first, with its performer moving sensually-seductively to the sounds of The Stripper by David Rose, the show appeared calm, serene, and enjoyable. Later, however, as she transformed into a punk rebel on stage, the atmosphere changed and the performance became more emotional. To the sounds of Joy Division’s *She’s Lost Control*, Dick Jones removed her wig to reveal her short shaved hair, beginning a frantic stage performance that culminated in a hilarious scene of rolling around on the floor in a celebration of rebellious “femininity.” As in Commancé’s concept of the “Bad Girl,” binaries were challenged: good and bad girl, seductive diva and rebellious punk. Such a joyful and dynamic performance of rolling around on stage blended joy and punk rebellion, recalling Sara Ahmed’s understanding of the effect of pleasure, which allows bodies to take on more space.⁴⁰

As the negativity of a heteronormative submission to the seductive script of a *femme fatale* faded into the background, the performance of joy in one’s own physi-

35 Wiedlack: *Queer-Feminist Punk*, 145.

36 Wiedlack: *Queer-Feminist Punk*, 123.

37 Wiedlack: *Queer-Feminist Punk*, 4.

38 See: The Society of Sin, *Webpage*. <https://www.thesocietyofsin.com> (last accessed 30 April 2022).

39 See: The Society of Sin, *Webpage*. <https://www.thesocietyofsin.com/society-members> (last accessed 30 April 2022).

40 Ahmed: *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 164.

cality came to the fore. Rolling around with pleasure on the floor in a display of “loss of control,” Dick Jones was, by the end of the show, performing her liberation from the control of the script of seduction. Her performance recalls the distinction made by Jack Halberstam between different interpretations of the song *She’s Lost Control*, first in the original by Joy Division, and then in a cover version by Grace Jones.⁴¹ While in the original, vocalist Ian Curtis sings in a form of reported speech about a woman who tells him that she has lost control, in her version, Grace Jones tells us in the first person that she herself has lost control. This, for Halberstam, represents a queering of the context, since the Grace Jones cover ends with screams, reminiscent of female hysteria but no longer at the service of the “spastic masculinity”⁴² of the male punk singer. Like a “laugh of Medusa” in the manner of the French feminist writer Hélène Cixous, who in her manifesto calls women to *écriture féminine*,⁴³ a hysterical expression, in the sense of a liberating and creative one, Dick Jones’ burlesque act also became “hysterical” – with a laugh that was rushing, physical, erotic, and liberating.

While Dick Jones’ punkishly emotional depiction of “losing control” represents an act of liberation, the act of undressing in burlesque can also have a politically oppressive effect, as I will show using the following performance by burlesque performer, art model, and studied theater professional Lefty Lucy, who has been living in New Orleans since 2015. This particular burlesque show took place in September 2018 at the AllWays Lounge in New Orleans at the weekly Bingo Burlesque. At that time, hearings were being held for the conservative judge Brett Kavanaugh – who had been accused of sexual harassment – as nominee for the Supreme Court. Lefty Lucy presented an impromptu show that evening, prepared spontaneously following her words introducing the show. She began her performance by arriving on stage in a white dress similar to that of Marilyn Monroe in the film *THE SEVEN YEAR ITCH*, white high-heels, and a blonde, Marilyn-esque wig. The first part of her performance brought to mind a “revivalist burlesque,” which Gemma Commene describes as a tease “used to cheekily suggest sexual naughtiness in a coquettishly assertive manner.”⁴⁴ The seductiveness of Lefty’s clothing, however, soon began to recede, and the act of undressing no longer appeared playful; indeed, as each layer of clothes was removed, a sense of vulnerability, almost of shame began to appear. After removing her dress and blonde wig, her white underwear was revealed, her panties smeared with blood-like red paint. Lefty ended the show with her breasts completely uncovered – without the nipple pasties that are customary in the burlesque. This combination of a white, innocent-looking dress, the imitation blood on her panties, and her nakedness at the end evoked a feeling of helplessness and objectification; it was a powerful manifesto that could be felt in the silence of the touched audi-

41 I refer here to the lecture *Trans*Feminism and Performance* given by Halberstam on 9 December 2019 in Berlin at Sophiensäle.

42 Halberstam: *Trans*Feminism*.

43 Hélène Cixous: *The Laugh of the Medusa*. *Signs*, 1/4 (1976), 875–893.

44 Commene: *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies*, 166.

ence that lasted a few seconds before applause broke out. As Barbara Brownie points out, “[u]ndressing is a gesture – an active and purposeful event – whereas nakedness is a passive state of being. As an active gesture undressing can involve more agency than nakedness.”⁴⁵ Lefty Lucy, however, was able to bring both together: a passive “nakedness” and an “act of undressing”; it was, then, perhaps this connection of vulnerability and revelation that made her act such a strong protest. Hers was a silenced rage represented by an almost naked body – yet her nakedness was not silent, it was an act of “expressing the unspoken.”⁴⁶

3 Burlesque as a “Battlefield” and Erotohistoriographic Strategy

As has been outlined above, the neo-burlesque can be aligned with Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, particularly in the sense that its performers incorporate their emotions into the show, and that neo-burlesque is essentially a visual and non-verbal art form. Neo-burlesque is not silent, however, for it uses different forms of linguistic communication, whether by means of a song whose lyrics describe the story of the performance, or through the use of lip synchronization by performers to emphasize their identification with the lyrics. Indeed, performers can even speak directly, whereupon their oral statements become a form of activism. Burlesque performance thus operates on several levels, and, as Maria Katharina Wiedlack explains in reference to the activism and queer, feminist-punkish “production of meanings and knowledge,” this production must take place in textual, oral, performative, and emotional realms.⁴⁷

In Poland in particular, I have witnessed several shows where performers have addressed the audience directly, one of which took place in February 2018 at the Warsaw club Madame Q. At that time, demonstrations against the tightening of the abortion law were taking place across the country. In early January 2018, the Polish parliament rejected a proposal to liberalize abortion put forward by the Ratusz Kobiet 2017 (Save Women 2017) civic committee but approved a bid by Stop Aborcji (Stop Abortion) to further tighten regulations and eliminate the possibility of legal termination of pregnancy due to severe defects in the fetus. This situation triggered protests by women’s organizations and demonstrations.⁴⁸ Disputes over the abortion law in Poland, which is considered one of the most restrictive in Europe, have been going on

⁴⁵ Brownie: *Acts of Undressing*, 3.

⁴⁶ Joanna Townsend-Robinson: Expressing the Unspoken. Hysterical Performance as Radical Theatre. *Women’s Studies* 32 (2003), 533.

⁴⁷ Wiedlack: *Queer-Feminist Punk*, 24.

⁴⁸ See, for example: Michael Zok: “To Maintain the Biological Substance of the Polish Nation”: Reproductive Rights as an Area of Conflict in Poland. *Hungarian Historical Review* 10/2 (2021), 357–381 and

for several years; since 2020, abortion has been prohibited even in the case of genetic defects. Particularly large protests in 2016 became known as the Black March of Polish Women.

The performer Lola Noir directly referred to these protests during her act in February 2018 at Madame Q, using the unofficial anthem of the protest Pole Walki (Battlefield) as musical background to a performance in which she sang about bodily self-determination. A well-known patriotic Polish saying used during the Partitions of Poland, “*Nic o mnie beze mnie*” (“Nothing about me without me”) is repeated several times during the chorus. Lola Noir began her performance by dancing to the song in accordance with its folk rhythms. Her clothing was also reminiscent of Polish regional costumes, consisting of a white shirt, red corsage, and a long red skirt. The link to the red and white national colors of Poland was even more evident in the white and red flowers that decorated her hair. Over the course of the performance, Lola Noir stripped off layers of clothing until she was left only with black panties and nipples covered crosswise with black tape, together with the red and white flowers in her hair. As with Lefty Lucy, the conclusion of this performance was not sexualized; rather, in a pose reminiscent of a protest, Lola Noir was left standing with her body partially exposed, a black inscription on her chest and belly spelling out the aforementioned quote: “Nothing about me without me.” She shouted these same words out at the end of the performance, her clenched fist raised in the air, and her gaze expressing a rage directed at the audience, self-determined and loud.

Although reminiscent of Dick Jones’ punkishness, this was a performance stripped of any element of joy. Her “act of undressing” seemed like a statement rather than an erotic display (as was the case in the performance by Lefty Lucy) – a statement of partial nudity heightened by an angry facial expression that equated partial nakedness with the “letting-be-seen”⁴⁹ of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, where it was not the nakedness that made the display powerful but the face itself. Moreover, the scream at the end of the performance recalled the scream of Artaud in the Theatre of Cruelty, which, in Jay Murphy’s reading,⁵⁰ represents an ecstatic practice of suspension that allows for a rupture of the limitations of body, temporality, and space, providing a space for new meaning, or perhaps only a suspension of anger. Lola Noir’s scream cannot, however, be separated from her body, for on it is inscribed the same quote; thus, in “embodying the female voice,” it inverts the famous plea by the US-American art historian and film theorist Kaja Silverman for a “disembodying [of] the female voice.”⁵¹ While Silverman’s disembodiment of the female voice was intended as an act of libera-

Julia Hussein / Jane Cottingham / Wanda Nowicka / Eszter Kismodi: Abortion in Poland. Politics, Progression and Regression. *Reproductive Health Matters* 26 (2018), 11–14.

49 Giorgio Agamben: *Nudities* [2009], trans. by David Kishik / Stefan Pedatella. Stanford 2011, 89.

50 Jay Murphy: Artaud’s Scream. *Deleuze Studies* 10/2 (2016), 140–161.

51 Kaja Silverman: *The Acoustic Mirror. The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington 1988, 141.

tion from the confinement of corporeality, Lola Noir's embodiment of the voice is a manifesto for a corporeal self-determination and a reappropriation of the body over which politics dares to dispose. This explicitly written and expressed rage concerning bodily heteronomy and the question of reproductive rights renders the performance of Lola Noir a manifestly political act, where subversive joy becomes eclipsed by subversive rage.

Finally, focusing on a performance entitled *Celibacy* by Warsaw burlesque performer and LGBTQ activist Gąsiu, I would like to show how burlesque can become an act of joyful-campy resistance against rigid religious laws. Gąsiu, who describes himself as a “queer rebel,” has spoken in several interviews of his Catholic upbringing in a Catholic lyceum, repeatedly drawing on Catholic and national myths in his performances and appropriating national poems in a queer performance.⁵² In *Celibacy* he burlesques the question of forbidden desire within the Catholic Church, first appearing on stage in a golden costume with transparent fabric parts, together with an elongated black lace veil over his face. Appearing genderless, his well-defined body is both male- and female-connoted, with long platinum-blond hair and high heels, and without any typical mask-like drag makeup. Gąsiu describes his variety of drag as a “genderfuck” that defies categorization and acts as a “satire of female impersonation through expressive makeup or heeled shoes.”⁵³ His art brings to mind the notion of masquerade proposed by British fashion scholar Efrat Tseëlon as a pleasurable, carnivalesque caricature that challenges categorizations and questions dualisms: “Masquerade unsettles and disrupts the fantasy of coherent, unitary, stable, mutually exclusive divisions. It replaces clarity with ambiguity, certainty with reflexivity, and phantasmic constructions of containment and closure with constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect.”⁵⁴ Tseëlon's definition, similar to Judith Butler's concept of performativity,⁵⁵ underlines the queer effect of the masquerade, which destabilizes gender boundaries per se and thus differs, for example, from the classical approach of femininity as masquerade by British psychoanalyst Joan Rivière,⁵⁶ which is based on the categories of femininity and masculinity. However, it might also be argued, following German theater scholar Lea-Sophie Schiel, that Gąsiu's performance style is not caricature as parody but rather a pastiche of

52 In one of his burlesque drag performances, for example, he appropriated the Polish national epic *Dziady* by Adam Mickiewicz in his own new iteration, campily distancing himself from the religious-national weight of its original meaning. See: Staśkiewicz: *The Queering Relief of the Humor in the New Burlesque*.

53 Ewa Paluszkiewicz: *Rebel Queer*, 202. <https://www.yumpu.com/xx/document/read/65731217/rebelqueer-zine/10> (last accessed 30 April 2022).

54 Efrat Tseëlon: Introduction. *Masquerade and Identities. Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Marginality*, ed. by Efrat Tseëlon. London 2001, 3.

55 Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY 1990.

56 Joan Rivière: Womanliness as a Masquerade. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929), 303–313.

gender roles, an imitation that is without an original.⁵⁷ Following remarks by the US-American queer studies scholar Judith Butler on gender parody and parody in general as “parody [. . .] of the very notion of an original,”⁵⁸ Schiel emphasizes that although pastiche is also an imitation, it is above all the “comic” without requiring an original, it is only a parody: “The pastiche is a norm-less, empty, sheer parody.”⁵⁹ If parodic exaggeration is no longer possible in the absence of any original, then perhaps pastiche is a better term to describe the indefinability of Gąsiu’s drag.

Celibacy is partly a spoken show: Gąsiu begins his performance by slowly moving towards the center of the stage, declaiming the prayer Ave Maria Gratia Plena through a megaphone in the style of a priest leading a Catholic procession. After a few lines of prayer, the performance changes – Gąsiu puts the megaphone aside and begins to vogue to the musical sounds of Madonna’s song *Erotica*. The queering effect of Gąsiu’s drag pastiche is heightened in his performance through this vogueing, which is a type of dance movement that the German dance scholar Jutta Krauß describes as having the potential to stage gender, to explore gender boundaries, and to demonstrate a “pleasure in the body.”⁶⁰ Moreover, vogueing represents an “embodied gender knowledge,”⁶¹ a practice that transcends fluid gender constructions.⁶²

At the end of his performance, Gąsiu stands on stage with gold-colored panties and black lace stockings, with a veil still over his face. His final poses are reminiscent of the figure of Jesus, particularly the image of the Merciful Jesus painted after a vision experienced by the Polish nun Faustyna Kowalska emphasizing divine mercy. In the image, Jesus holds his hand over his heart and two bright rays of light can be seen emanating from within it. Adopting a similar pose, Gąsiu holds one hand over his heart with the other extended in a gesture of blessing. One of his hands is bound in a sort of handcuff with straps; on the other, a black latex glove, holding the megaphone. The resemblance to Jesus is further strengthened by a black crown that Gąsiu places on his head at the end of the show, reminiscent of Jesus’ crown of thorns. In 2019, Gąsiu described his performance as an act “which is the result of one sexual encoun-

57 Lea-Sophie Schiel: *Sex als Performance. Theaterwissenschaftliche Perspektiven auf die Inszenierung des Obszönen*. Bielefeld 2020, 143–147.

58 Butler: *Gender Trouble*, 138.

59 Schiel: *Sex als Performance*, 144.

60 The origins of the dance art of vogue can be found in the homosexual and transsexual Latino and African-American Ballroom scene of the 1960s in New York’s Harlem district. Since the 1990s, vogue has enjoyed increasing popularity, especially within the LGBTQ community; having become mainstream, it is now popular as a campy dance style among a young urban population. See: Constantine Chatzipapathodoridis: *Strike a Pose, Forever. The Legacy of Vogue and Its Re-Contextualization in Contemporary Camp Performances*. *European Journal of American Studies* 11 (2017), and Jutta Krauß: *Vogueing on Stage – Kulturelle Übersetzungen, vestimentäre Performances und Gender-Inszenierungen in Theater und Tanz*. Bielefeld 2020.

61 Krauß: *Vogueing on Stage*, 193.

62 Krauß: *Vogueing on Stage*, 236.

ter that resulted in a string of thoughts on the difference (or lack thereof) between religious fanaticism and unbridled desire.”⁶³ His performance, however, does not come across as an expression of anger but rather as a pleasurable performance in which cultural or religious scripts are rewritten with relish and “the unspoken” can be expressed through the body. Themes such as the play of sexual desire, inner turmoil, and simultaneous self-punishment are expressed through the gesticulating play of the hands, with the one hand in a pointed handcuff performing together with the other in rubber latex a kind of danced dialectical disagreement. By the end, Gąsiu stands on stage like a queer Jesus, full of self-doubt, distributing his blessings with one hand and taking them back with the other. He leaves the stage declaiming the prayer Ave Maria Gratia Plena through the megaphone, as he did at the beginning.

Gąsiu’s performance writes itself into the strategy of the group Glitter Confusion, a trashy-campy artist collective of which he is a member that strives for a kind of queer heterotopia. As Gąsiu describes it, the activities of the collective are designed to playfully undermine the dominance of heteronormative norms: “Our actions are about building another space-time continuum worth getting lost in.”⁶⁴ Like the aforementioned erotohistoriography, emotions and a distancing from chrononormativity are deployed by the group in a pleasurable sexualized manner. As Freemann points out, “erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfilments from elsewhere, other times.”⁶⁵ However, this concept or resolution does not lead to a wholesale forgetting of pain or anger, or a rewriting as pleasurable performance, it becomes rather a way of “shaking” the anger. This pleasurable-liberating act discharge offers a kind of playful resistance, reminiscent of the “sexualising affect” that Marie-Luise Angerer describes as “a symptom, as a node that resists something at the same time as allowing it to be enjoyed.”⁶⁶ It should, however, not be forgotten that the effect of the “sexualised affect” in the neo-burlesque – the Bakhtinian carnival par excellence – signifies only a temporary liberation. For such queer heterotopic exceptions unhinge the heteronormative hegemony only momentarily; after leaving these queer spheres, “the supremacy of the official playing space” is entered into once again.⁶⁷

63 Gąsiu: *Już dziś we Wrocławiu!* Facebook, November 30, 2019: www.facebook.com/gasiu.official/photos/10158456123456789 (last accessed 30 April 2022).

64 Paluszkiewicz: *Rebel Queer*, 28.

65 Freeman: *Time Binds*, 59.

66 Marie-Luise Angerer: *Vom Begehren nach dem Affekt*. Zurich 2007, 108.

67 Hayley Malouin: Queer Hatchings. Carnival Time and the Grotesque in Circus Amok. *Performance Matters* 4/1–2 (2018), 173.

4 Conclusion

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the confusion I felt on my first visit to a burlesque event, whereupon it became clear to me that a complex art of representation was on display, one that cannot be reduced to a fusion of eroticism and comedy nor to seduction or the question of empowerment through physical representation. The effect of burlesque is comparable to what Jack Halberstam has argued regarding the “silly archives”⁶⁸ – that a banal pop-cultural text can say more about social structures than a serious scientific text. Moreover, as Maria Katharina Wiedlack has pointed out in relation to queer-punk performance, it is “a negative strategy insofar as it refuses fixation. This political strategy aims at the irritation of normativity. Irritation is also what makes jouissance political.”⁶⁹ My own initial “irritation” therefore represented nothing more than a recognition of the queer and political effect of neo-burlesque that had not been obvious at the very beginning. It was also the effect that Artaud had demanded of the theater, where simple gestures have a deep intellectual effect, namely that it “aims to exalt, to benumb, to bewitch, to arrest our sensibility.”⁷⁰ As I have demonstrated, neo-burlesque performance acts like a “re-examination,”⁷¹ not only of the motives of the external world but also of the internal world of performers and audiences alike. This queers both personal stories but also national or religious narratives. Neo-burlesque is therefore far more than an erotic performance, it is a queer political practice that can shake things up. Hence, perhaps we can talk not only about neo-burlesque as erotohistoriography but rephrasing the latter term as *emotiohistoriography*: Neo-burlesque offers not only a temporary theatrical liberation from the social, political, and local conditions, but also enables the liberating transformation of the old emotions of both the performers and the spectators through a queer emotional spectacle wrapped in sparkling glitter.

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⁶⁸ Jack Halberstam: *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham 2011, 20.

⁶⁹ Wiedlack: *Queer-Feminist Punk*, 149.

⁷⁰ Artaud: *The Theatre and Its Double*, 70.

⁷¹ Artaud: *The Theatre and Its Double*, 71.

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