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The queering relief of the humor in the new burlesque

Abstract: According to Peter L. Berger, in turn inspired by Eugène Ionesco, the most significant moment of the comic lies in the "magical transformation of reality" (Berger 1997: 182). Also for Jacques Rancière (2004), humor is the "art of distance," and, especially in the "aesthetic distance" (2010), he sees the condition of the effectiveness of the art and its political impact. Particularly in times of political right-wing backlash is such a transformation of reality and distance through humor a possibility to create a safe space, where social heteronormativity and the gravity of national-religious scripts can be relieved, for the time being, through a queer carnivalesque spectacle in the art of new burlesque. This article thus follows the plea of Jack Halberstam (2011), who calls for research into the "silly archives," supposedly the banal, and foolish of the *queer art of failure*, which can reveal social power structures, myths, and "truths," and analyzes the humorous effectiveness and the myth-shredding power of the new burlesque using selected shows in Warsaw and New Orleans as examples.

Keywords: burlesque, humor, gender, queer, performance and theatre studies

For Michael Martin, in memoriam

> What is comical is the unusual in its pure state; nothing seems more surprising to me than that which is banal; the surreal is here, within grasp of our hands, in our everyday conversation.
>
> Eugène Ionesco (quoted in Esslin 2004: 144)

When I started writing this article, the 2020 Polish presidential elections were just taking place, which were won by the incumbent Andrzej Duda. One of the inglorious moments of the election campaign was Duda's attacks against the LGBTQ community and his claim that being LGBTQ is an ideology, which he used to deny LGBTQ people subjecthood and human rights (Walker 2020). These words fueled the already strong state propaganda of the right-wing-conservative government against LGBTQ people, supported by some local governments that declared themselves "LGBTQ-free communities" and encouraged attacks. This reminded me of

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my research stays and burlesque observations in Warsaw and New Orleans in 2018, which gave me insight into the fascinating world of queer, magical, almost utopian places in which humor, playful deconstruction of local and national myths, and a solidarity of the creative scenes of burlesque, the LGBTQ community, and alternative theaters enabled a catharsis to prevail in times of conservative backlash.

Following the theories of queer utopian or heterotopian spaces and "queer time," where everyday life and the matrix of social roles can be at least temporarily abandoned, I will analyze whether the new burlesque can create such a space as humorous queer, erotic-comedic performance. In doing so, I want to avoid the big question of social subversion through such shows, pursuing the theories that emphasize that every performance and every pop-culture phenomenon has subversive and affirmative elements (Fischer-Lichte & Wulf 2004; Kleiner 2013). Rather, this article is about a kind of catharsis, a solidarity of a gathering of people who are looking for a space where they can escape the narrowness of everyday political and social life. I will show this by using the selected burlesque performances in Warsaw and New Orleans as examples.

1. Pleasurable queer spaces

> Utopia is a place outside all places, but it is a place where I will have body without body, a body that will be beautiful, limpid, transparent, luminous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite in its duration. Untethered, invisible, protected – always transfigured. (Foucault 2006: 229)

In his essay *Utopian body*, Michel Foucault (2006: 229) writes about a utopian space where one could be "a body without a body," and finally escape the prison of one's own corporeality, of this "pitiless place," which only reminds one of aging, imperfection, fragility, and transience, "the same presence, same wounds." A utopia, according to Foucault, always tries to transcend the physical, while, for him, "to be a utopia, it is enough that I be a body" (2006: 231). Even if utopias try to make the body disappear, it is the body that is the origin of utopias. According to Foucault, however, there are moments in which the body is not utopian: When looking at the body in the mirror, in the state of the corpse, and while making love. Angela Jones ties in with Foucault's other concept – his heterotopias – the real

places in contrast to utopia, "which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986: 24). For Jones, queer heterotopias are possibilities for everyday withdrawal from restrictions and humiliations:

> a radical post-human vision where nothing is fixed and there are no boundaries, and no hierarchies. 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. (Jones 2009: 15)

Such queer heterotopias are not bound to any special 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 the concept of queerness, which, according to her, cannot be limited to the question of sexual orientation or gender subversion, emphasizing the processional status of queerness and the aspect of rebelling against narrow, essentialist social norms and binaries. As she points out, "Queerness 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" (Jones 2013: 14). She also remarks that queerness requires failure, which recalls the concept of the "queer art of failure," from Jack (Judith) Halberstam, who views the foolish, faulty, so-called "silly archives" as a key to liberation from the predominance of heteronormativity:

> To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die; rather than searching for ways around death and disappointment, the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd, the silly, and hopelessly goofy. Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures. (Halberstam 2011: 186-187)

Halberstam opposes the social imperative of success, conformity, and formative mastery and pleads for the liberating effect of ignorance. Of course, in times in which ignorance and self-confident unknowingness can meanwhile become a successful tool for a political career climb up to the office of president, Halberstam's plea acquires a bitter aftertaste. For Halberstam,

however, and in reference to Foucault, ignorance instead means ignoring the hegemonic production of knowledge, and implies the sovereignty of subversive intellectuality, which eludes academic and non-academic measures of disciplinarity. To this end, he additionally recommends opposing mastery by considering failure and stupidity as "counterintuitive modes of knowing" (Halberstam 2011: 12). Failure thereby means the critical argument and dissociation from the capitalist principle of success and stupidity, not a lack of knowledge but a withdrawal from the restrictions and structures of hegemonic knowledge production. In a cheeky way, Halberstam also suggests a preference for the naive and non-sensical as an opportunity to acquire other knowledge practices and other pedagogy. In reference to Jacques Rancière's work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Halberstam (2011: 13) emphasizes that learning is a "two-way street" and requires a dialogue between teacher and student. An "ignorant schoolmaster," according to Halberstam and Rancière, should not guide the learners through the paths they have learned, but rather should allow them to lose themselves in order to find their own ways of thinking and intellectual emancipation. Halberstam also proposes escaping the circle of remembering, especially traumas, in the sense of forgetting, because memory is subject to discursive practices. Forgetting means "a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure that to inscription" (Halberstam 2011: 13). Halberstam's "queer art of failure" offers a refreshing approach to exploring particularly the "lower arts," in which Halberstam sees a reserve of knowledge about social power structures and circumstances, and the so-called "silly archives" on the same level as established academic knowledge.

Already in his earlier book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam developed a concept of queerness as a time concept that is distinct from hegemonic, social-economic-productive social (everyday) time and describes queerness "as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices" (2005: 1). By queer time, Halberstam refers not only to the LGBTQ community, but to all those who evade the heteronormative time matrix of reproduction and family life. A similar approach is taken by Elizabeth Freeman in her concept of *chrononormativity*, meaning, the time in which people are stimulated to maximal productivity and capital accumulation, and to heteronormative life strategies

(Freeman 2010: 3). As a mode of countering *chrononormativity*, of escaping this temporality, Freeman proposes the strategy of *erotohistoriography*, meant as "a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counters the logic of development" (2010: 59). Freeman offers a concept to escape the narrowness and trauma of the heteronormative hegemony and the time of *chrononormativity* in a pleasurable way. She explains, "Against pain and loss, erotohistoriography posits the value of surprise, of pleasurable interruptions and momentary fulfillments from elsewhere, other times" (Freeman 2010: 59).

In a special queer issue of the *Polish Theatrical Journal* from 2019, in the midst of the right-wing conservative backlash in Poland, the theater scholar Agata Adamiecka-Sitek wrote a similarly affirmative statement that could help to resist the current backlash and rising homophobia. According to the approach of reparative practices by Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky, and Michel Foucault's notion of self-care, Adamiecka-Sitek asks for a strategy for finding hope and going through these times in queer solidarity. This solidarity is possible with self-care, pleasure, and sensitivity to oneself, which, in turn, enables one to empathize with another. She concludes:

> The subtlety of queer strategies and the gentleness of reparative practices are obscured by the tumultuousness of the political process, which makes each queer statement sound like a manifesto. Our response to this must be solidarity and an unwavering practice of pleasure and joy. In the face of politics that strive to manage our fear, this is the most effective resistance strategy. (Adamiecka-Sitek 2019: 4)

Adamiecka-Sitek also refers to Vaclav Havel's words about hope, which, for Havel, is not the joy of striving for something that leads to success, but for something that is "good" and does not necessarily promise success. Adamiecka-Sitek sees solidarity and queer commitment as the hopeful way – *A New Landscape with a Rainbow*, as she names her essay – to deal with the backward-looking, queer politics of the right-wing conservative government in alliance with the conservative Catholic Church in Poland.

In times of political backlash, queer utopian spaces appear as spaces of longing, spaces where "the everyday life of queer trauma" (Cvetkovich 2003: 15) and the desolate "here and now" (Muñoz, 2009: 1) could be forgotten for a while. A temporary distancing from the wounds of political

and social life is enabled not only by hope and belief in the rightness of the commitment, but also, as Jacques Rancière describes it in his book *The Philosopher and His Poor* – by humor, which is, for him, "the art of distance that is learned at a distance" (Rancière 2004: 122). Adam J. Greteman refers to Rancière's approach of humor and discusses it in the context of queer education as a "queer practice of dissent" (2014: 428). Humor in education allows for queer theory to dissent from and resist conservative and reactionary approaches. Sometimes it can fail as jokes can fail, but humor in connection with Halberstam's queer art of failure, according to Greteman (2014: 428), allows one "to continue to dissent in all its anxiety-provoking, fear-inducing beauty."

Dissenting with humor is also what Peter L. Berger (1997) writes about, inspired by Eugène Ionesco and the *Theater of the Absurd*. Ionesco emphasized the liberating effect of laughing at the world, in recognition of its absurdity and ridiculousness.[1] The recognition of this absurdity already leads to distance, to *depaysement*, a transgression of everyday reality. Following that approach, Berger concludes that the most significant moment of the comic lies in the "magical transformation of reality" (1997: 182). In the book *Art and Laughter*, Sheir Klein also writes about the importance and cathartic effect of humor and the postmodern concept of banalities as freeing, pleasurable concepts the artist can use to integrate humor into their art and forget the stigma of funny art not being serious art: "Humour may also be defined as an attitude that makes jokes and comedy possible through understanding reality, but refusing to be constrained by it" (Klein 2007: 9). The artist as a clown is, according to Klein, like a rebel against the painful sides of reality, like a clown balancing the world tragedy with comedy and transforming the world of sorrows into a kind of circus.

Referring to the aforementioned concepts of queer heterotopias and time, as well as spaces of dissent described above, an idea already emerges about the characteristics of such a queer space of transgression against the wounds of everyday life, from the norms of *chrononormativity* – these characteristics are hope, humor, queer failure, and pleasure. Now I will discuss the phenomenon of the theatrical-erotic performance of the new

[1] When mentioning the relieving effect of the joke, of course Sigmund Freud must not remain unmentioned, who in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconsious* spoke about the joke as a kind of energetic and emotional vent and relief meant as a safe disposal of repressed desires. See Freud 1983.

burlesque, and whether it can function as such a space, starting with a historical excursion to the origin of the new burlesque.

2. (New) Burlesque. Queer beginnings?

As described above, a queer space is characterized by the questioning of hegemonic structures and binaries, and the rejection of playing roles according to heteronormativity. In this text, I argue that the (neo-)burlesque binds such a queer space and reveals, in a humorous way, the entrenched opinions about gender and sexuality, and how one should live in general. This humorous subversion is already evident if one analyzes the etymological origins of the word "burlesque," which comes from the Italian word *burla,* meaning "joke." The origins of the burlesque can be traced back to the Italian *Commedia dell'arte* of the 16th century and its parody of high culture; *burla* (a kind of practical joke) and *lazzi* (an improvised comical sequence and a precursor to modern clown acts) were part of the typical artisan repertoire of the *Commedia dell'arte* (Kupferblum 2013; Theile 1997). But burlesque can be found in various forms: as a literary genre, as a musical piece, and as a theatrical-erotic performance, the latter being the subject of this essay. The different meanings of burlesque are connected by the fundamental function of the humorous, grotesque distortion, and the travesty of cultural quotations of so-called high culture. The burlesque is also recognizable in Mikhail Bakhtin's (1968) concept of the carnival, the abolition of norms, the overturning of the world, and the parodist reversal, which he captures in the example of festivals in Middle Age Europe, where the jester could be temporarily crowned king and the beggar a pope. This paper analyzes the burlesque and its late 20th-century revival as the new burlesque within the meaning of the comical-theatrical and erotic bodily performance, which is very complex in its form and which is emphasized in the definition of burlesque by Marie-Cécile Cervellon and Stephen Brown, who see the burlesque 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" (Cervellon & Brown 2014: 271). The origins of the theatrical-erotic burlesque can be found in Victorian burlesque, which was a very popular theatrical art the middle of the 19th century, especially in London. Those shows were based on comical interpretation, a travesty of works of so-called high culture, such as the works of Shakespeare, Byron, and Greek

mythology. In London began the fulminate career Lydia Thompson, who is considered to be the first performer of the burlesque associated with the erotic aspect and spectacle of femininity and who, from the 1860s, was performing a mixture of theater, comedy, and ballet. Thompson and other female performers played male roles and performed in men's clothing, for example, in shorts. From today's perspective, one cannot speak of nudity back then, because the performers always wore body-colored stockings underneath their clothes, but at the time, this and the attendant inversion of Victorian gender roles were considered scandalous. As the scholar of the US-American burlesque Robert C. Allen accurately emphasizes, innuendos of female corporeality and the lower parts of the body were in themselves equated with nudity, and the burlesque began to be associated with the female spectacle and raised questions about the role of women on stage and the representation of femininity.

During their tour through the US in 1868, this scandalous aura accompanied Thompson and her five-member troupe, *The British Blondes*, with whom she established burlesque there. Thompson began her tour in New York with the burlesque play *Ixion; or, the Man at the Wheel*, by F.C. Burnard, a parody of classical culture and the myth of Ixion, whom Thompson played. These performances became very popular, attracted great attention, and were widely discussed, because, as Allen impressively shows in his book, Thompson's burlesque revealed, above all, the fears of the bourgeoisie of the danger of lechery and moral decay, propelled by the fear of the spectacle of femininity, especially femininity that was so clearly different from the then ideal of sentimental, high-necked, asexual, puritanical femininity (see for example Dijkstra 1988). The burlesque was denigrated as "leg business," and legs were meant, as Allen points out, as "the synecdotal sign of the lower body and of female sexuality in general" (1991: 146). It was the self-confidence of the performers, their physical erotic charisma, that brought sensual femininity to the stage, which has been banished to this day to the red-light and working-class districts, thus confusing the division between the holy, obedient Madonna and the unruly "whore" woman:

> After decades of referencing the norms of femininity, primarily in terms of the "high" – angels, spirituality, ideality, fairies – bourgeois males saw that burlesque constructed femininity with reference almost exclusively to the "low" – the lower body, the profane, the working classes, prostitutes. (Allen 1991: 146)

Drawing on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's concept of the *low other*, Allen shows how burlesque was marginalized as "low" by the dominant bourgeois discourse, and how the bourgeoisie defined its identity by the elimination of what was seen as low: "dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating" (Allen 1991: 146), lower body parts, lower social classes, and the lower culture of those lower classes. The burlesque was associated with the working class and its jargon, unsophisticatedness, and impertinence, but, at the same time, it aroused fascination and desire (see also Dolan, 1984).[2] An interesting aspect that Allen points out is that not only did the femininity of voluptuous, working-class women cause excitement, but also the "horrible prettiness" of the performers, as one critic described the appearance of women in Thompson's burlesque troupe (1991: 25). Their poised appearance and performance of masculinity in the plays made them a genderless curiosity: "[T]hough they were not like men, [they] were in most things as unlike women, and seemed creatures of a kind of alien sex, parodying both. It was certainly a shocking thing to look at them with their horrible prettiness, their archness in which was no charm, their grace which out to shame" (Allen 1991: 25). In the days when a woman returning the male gaze on the street could already be perceived as a prostitute, not only did burlesque performers address their audience directly and returned the gaze, but they also did it with "awarishness" (Allen 1991: 148; see also Buszek 1999).

Claire Nally sees the term "alien sex" in relation to burlesque performers of the time as concepts that can be found in contemporary theories about drag and cross-dressing. Following Marjorie Garber's "third term" concept, she underlines the role of the cross-dressing and drag performer as a cross-over between the sexes, not as one of the sexes being performed (Nally 2013: 115). The transgression and the queer element in terms of gender norms can thus already be seen in 19th-century burlesque and is, as will be shown later, one of the many elements that make contemporary burlesque a queer practice.

[2] As Efrat Tseëlon remarks in reference to the "low other" concept by Stallybrass and White, the suppression of the low and carnivalesque by the bourgeoisie did not succeed; it was only shifted into the realm of the unconscious: "It was displaced into such areas of bourgeois discourse as art and psychoanalysis (in the form of unconscious). To use the terms of the discourse of psychoanalysis itself, the repressed carnivalesque has returned in the ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion exhibited towards the objects and subjects of these cultural forms. what has been expelled as other returns as the object of horror and fascination, nostalgia and longing" (Tseëlon 2001a: 8).

Here we come back to the concepts of queer spaces, where hope and pleasure prevail in order to forget the wounds of everyday life. It is interesting that, as Jacki Willson (2008) noted, the highlights of the development of burlesque are linked to economic crises. When the time of the constitution of the US-American burlesque began, the time of the Long Depression (1873 to mid-1890), including the consequences of the US Civil War, was still present. Not only burlesque, but also other forms of popular entertainment had their flowering time from the middle of the 19th century such as circuses, infamous "freak-shows," minstrelsy, extravaganzas, variety, vaudeville, among others, due to the growing industrialization and urbanization and increasing demand for affordable entertainment for working classes (see, for example, Adams 2001; Bogdan 2009; Jando *et al.* 2008). The second peak of burlesque occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, that is, during the period of the Great Depression. During this time, US-American burlesque reached its heyday and found its way into the famous theaters of Broadway. The burlesque of that time, however, differed from Thompson's burlesque, especially in the stronger eroticization, which had already started at the end of the 19th century with belly dance ("cooch") and which, from 1920 on, was more and more supplemented by striptease (Allen 1991: 243). But very soon, burlesque was relegated back to the place of the low other: In 1937, New York mayor Fiorello LaGuardia decided to close all burlesque theaters because he saw the danger of the city's moral decay. Burlesque was thus banished to the underground and gradually replaced by more and more exposing striptease and go-go dancing. With the growing porn industry, striptease came to include more and more nudity, and burlesque with its theatrical seduction was no longer needed (Allen 1991; Briggeman 2009; Buszek 1999; Łuksza 2016; Staśkiewicz 2017 and 2021; Werner 2015).

The revival of the so-called new burlesque started in alternative and queer bars in the 1990s, with growing popularity in the 2000s. The aesthetics of new burlesque is based on the US-American burlesque of the 1860s, but also plays with the nostalgia for the pin-up tradition and the vintage style of the 1930s to 1950s, combined with the *retromania* and revival of swing dance and rock-and-roll (Cervellon & Brown 2018). Not only burlesque, but also other kinds of popular US-American entertainment, were taken up anew in the 2000s, in various forms, such as the Contemporary Circus (*Zeitgenössischer Zirkus*) in Germany, which places less emphasis on

artistry and more on theatrical performance, or the tradition of side shows, or "freak shows," not to mention the ever-increasing popularity of clowns – from the latest *Joker* film (2019) to the circus-clown-themed production of *Rigoletto* during the Bregenzer Festspiele in 2019.[3] In Great Britain, the retromania is particularly noticeable in the trend of neo-Victorianism and in subcultures such as steampunk, which draw their aesthetics from the Victorian period (Nally 2019).

However, it must be emphasized that, while early burlesque was more the affordable entertainment of working-class people, the new burlesque should be seen as more in the category of a subculture (Ferreday 2008), which attracts more the young, urban, culturally affine population, which takes place in alternative, often queer locations, using postmodern queer forms and practices like camp and drag, and, as I will also show later, which is very connected with the LGBTQ community, while also being a part of it. This leaves behind the early circle of the "low culture" of the working class, as contemporary burlesque is considered more art than striptease, which is being criticized because this attitude in burlesque views striptease as "not arty" and attributes the label *low other* to it (Harris 2013; Łuksza 2016).

Women who performed early burlesque mostly came from the working class and could find a path to economic independence, sometimes even to fame. As Red Tremmel shows in his powerful documentary *Exotic World and the Burlesque Revival* (2012), for many burlesque performers in the US in the 1940s and 1950s who came from less privileged classes and had no money for college, the burlesque was a way of escaping from provincial narrowness, sometimes from violent families, and from the typical "housewife biography" of this time. It was a way of satisfying one's hunger for the big world, glamour, and freedom – particularly for queer women, as performer Satan's Angel explains in the film. And indeed, Tremmel's documentary shows that burlesque offered liberation as well as a solid community for the performers of that time, a safe place where they could find refuge until the very end. Featured in the film is Dixie Evans (known as "the Marilyn Monroe of Burlesque"), who founded a museum with her social security checks to celebrate the women who had accompanied her

3 Also worth mentioning is the popularity of the many US mystery and horror series that take up the themes of "freak shows," the circus world, and the side shows of the 19th century, such as the series *American Horror Story* (especially the fourth season, *Freak Show*) and the series *Carnivàle*, about the travelling circus world. See, for example, Tyrrell 2020.

in the burlesque in the 1940s and 1950s. Evens also conceived it as a house for aging burlesque performers. The museum, which at first was remotely located in the Mojave Desert in Nevada, is now known as the Burlesque Hall of Fame in Las Vegas, and is also the final resting place for some of the performers. The view of ash urns surrounded by boas and fairy lights in the documentary looks like a utopian temple of burlesque.

In the following, I will show that today's burlesque has revived the former gender transgression in the sense of the male impersonation performed by Thompson's troupe: Not only are there now burlesque performers who define themselves beyond the gender binary, but they also use different ways of bodily staging, which are always associated with the main characteristic of burlesque – humor.

3. Humorous bodily transgressions

While the bodily transgression in the first burlesque period up to the 1920s was mainly done with the female-to-male cross-dressing, masquerade, and a pinch of nudity, the contemporary new burlesque uses eclectic ways of representing the body, combined with the elements associated with LGBTQ culture, such as drag and camp, but also with side shows, circus, clowning, or "freak shows." Nevertheless, the most important element of new burlesque is the humor. Jacki Willson analyzes the contemporary feminist performances based on the example of the burlesque art and emphasizes how humor, especially tongue-in-cheek humor, works like carnivalesque laughter turning the world and norms upside down, making "nonsense of the normal" and "normal appear ridiculous" (Willson 2015: 5). According to Willson, humor has a political effect; it refers to the absurdity and ridiculousness of norms and politicizes the disagreements: "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 its people impose foolish rules" (2015: 10). Similar to what Eugène Ionesco (Esslin 2004) said regarding the *Theater of the Absurd*, the recognition of absurdity and ridiculousness already allows one to go beyond them; one can see the similar mechanism in the new burlesque, particularly regarding gender roles.

Nowadays, as the erotic performance of new burlesque "can be performed by anybody, and any body, regardless of shape, size, gender or ability" (Brownie 2017: 41), the ways of transgression of norms also go far beyond

the former female masquerade and *female-to-male* cross-dressing. Just as in the burlesque of the 19th century, when women in men's clothing were perceived as "aliens" in their scary "horrible prettiness," in contemporary burlesque, the performers intentionally and humorously turn themselves into genderless "aliens." As Claire Nally notes, drag and cross-dressing in burlesque are no longer about passing as a man or woman, but about questioning categorizations in relation to gender norms. She gives an example of a boylesque performer, a drag queen, who refuses to stage femininity and stylizes himself as genderless in order to ridicule gender roles. That is a reminder of what Gertrud Lehnert (1997) writes wrote about gender masquerade as the staging of gender, and an ongoing process in which not the reproduction of a gender, but rather the demonstration of different possibilities and meanings of the masquerade is the focus of attention. Destabilization, shaking, and questioning of binaries and deadlocked points of view is also what Efrat Tseëlon sees as the effect of the masquerade:

> 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 aith constructions that in reality are more messy, diverse, impure and imperfect. The masquerade, in short, provides a paradigmatic challenge not only to dualistic differences between essence and appearance. (Tseëlon 2001a: 3)

The masquerade in the new burlesque is connected to *camp*, which Susan Sontag read as exaggeration, artifice, and theatricality, and which I understand, according to Claire Nally and Moe Meyer and unlike Sontag, as a political practice, a "queer parody" producing new meanings (Nally 2013: 117). The queer parody is particularly evident in new burlesque in drag, which is found in the new burlesque in several forms, such as *female-to-male* and *male-to-female* drag, but also as *female-to-female* drag. The complexity of drag in burlesque is also shown by the phenomenon of the so-called *draglesque*, a performance "[w]here burlesque and drag collide" (Allan 2018) and in the discussion over the last several years of whether a faux drag queen (or "bio-queen"), that is, a cis-woman who does campy, cartoonish make-up and performs as a drag queen, can really be a drag queen.[4] Considering the aforementioned concepts of pleasurable queer

4 See, for example: Scriver 2016; Verman 2016.

spaces, one has to ask whether such drag-subcategories are significant, and whether burlesque as such can be regarded as a queering practice and a queer space of gender diversity.

Not only humorous gender stagings like drag, cross-dressing, and masquerade, but also the various representations of bodies allow for the recognition of absurdity and ridiculousness of body norms and for resistance against these norms (Klein 2014). The bodies of burlesque performers range from normative bodies corresponding to contemporary ideals of beauty to the so-called "bawdy" look, a look that eludes contemporary mainstream ideals of beauty. Millner and Moore (2015: 22) connect bawdy beauty with "street style, postmodernism, punk, goth, rockabilly and radical drag to embody a nonchalant play with double standards and mixed messages," and see bawdy beauty as carnivalesque motifs in the style of Mikhail Bakhtin, because the non-conformist appearance reveals the binarity of the distinction between accepted and non-accepted sexiness. Bakhtin saw in carnival the possibility for people to distance themselves from the so-called high culture of the ruling elites. He combined his dichotomous approach of the parodistic degradation of the high (the above) by the below, that is, by the people, with the concept of grotesque bodies. For him, these bodies are to be understood topographically: genitals, belly, and bottom represent the bodily bottom, while the top is represented by the face and head. Bakhtin's grotesque bodies are assigned to the material-bodily realm, like food or sexuality, and are stylized by exaggeration, hyperbole, or excess. In Bakhtin's concept of the body, Mary Russo (1995) emphasizes the aspect of the processional, the unfinished and the changeable of the popular grotesque body, which is in opposition to the closed classical body of the bourgeoisie. In particular, she sees in the unfinished and changeable a space of "overlapping trajectories" that would create "fantastical connections between and within genders, bodies, costumes, subcultures, architectures, landscapes, and temporalities" (Russo 1995: 106; see also Staśkiewicz 2018).

These "overlapping trajectories" can also be found in burlesque shows, because the different bodies of the performers are in the process of becoming and appear as unfinished, hyperbolic, and grotesque bodies. Annie Blanchette (2014: 174) also takes up Bakhtin and Russo and connects the grotesque in burlesque with the common association that burlesque has to do with "low"; the lower bodies in burlesque would then be non-ideal bodies, such as bodies that are "too fat," "too ugly," "too old," or "too passée." In

the performances, non-ideal bodies enable a distancing from the ideal and therefore have a subversive character. But normative bodies, too, which correspond to the current ideal of beauty and do not appear as grotesque bodies or "queer anti-normative" at first sight, are subversive and a form of drag (Staśkiewicz 2018). Debra Ferreday (2008) points out, for example, that burlesque in which performers play with heteronormative notions of female sexuality and hyper-femininity is a *female-to-female* drag that shows that femininity is also performative and can be learned.

As already mentioned, in addition to the revival of burlesque, we can also see a nostalgia for other forms of popular entertainment, such as the circus, side shows, and "freak shows" – the display of people who do not conform to the norm, which was popular between 1840 and 1940 as a kind of "curiosity cabinet." The connection of burlesque with circus elements and with "freak shows" was already there, as Allen shows, in the burlesque of the 19th century. Thus, Thompson and her troupe appeared on stage together with "Siamese twins, hermaphrodites, pinheads, and pickled fetuses" (Allen 1991: 232). Meanwhile, female sexual spectacle was seen at this time as a "freak show," and aroused the same curiosity in the audience as something strange, other, and that one could not see at home. As Allen explains, following Leslie Fiedler and the connection he makes between the spectacle of bodily "abnormality" and sexual spectacle, a woman presenting a sexual spectacle like an erotic "cooch" dance was considered a "freak." On the one hand, the performer seemed to the male audience like an "ordinary" woman, and, on the other hand, her expressive sexuality seemed exotic, as something that a man of that time could not experience at home (Allen 1991: 235). The contemporary new burlesque shows offer not only a play with seduction, but also a grotesque and titillating spectacle of circus art; as Jacki Willson (2008) emphasizes, many burlesque performers are also well trained in circus, artistic, or side shows. The elements of the early "freak shows" are also present, but, without the historical racist, inhumane attitude, it is rather a queer re-coding of these infamous shows with humor and ironic self-deprecation. The burlesque performers declare themselves ironically as "self-made 'freaks'" (Willson 2008: 150), which Willson connects with the "desire to dream-like escapism" (p. 155): from conforming bodies, a conforming world, and conventional glamour.

That recalls the concept of *queer freak theory* by Renate Lorenz (2012), who taking into account the inhumane history of "freak shows," develops a

queer approach in which she also gives a new meaning to the term "freak": "'Freak' does not mark any *position* in the aside, but instead marks a *movement* of distantiation, of keeping distance from ideals of being-white, being heterosexual, being-normal, being-efficient" (Lorenz 2012: 28). The burlesque performers, as I will show next, not only destabilize and denormalize gender norms, beauty ideals, and norms about which bodies can be considered sexy, but they also question and deconstruct historical myths and comment on the current political situation with their body stagings, their drag, their pleasurable, bawdy look, and their self-irony combined with the celebration of erotic sensuality – all of which make the burlesque into liberating, distancing *queer freak art.*

4. Erotohistoriography of national demons and humorous enchantment of the present

We are now about to leave the theoretical realm and enter a magical, fun, queer, almost utopian space, taking place in Warsaw at the beginning of 2018, in the cold winter months in the middle of the third year of the term under the right-wing conservative PIS party. At the end of 2017, *Madame Q* was opened in the middle of a block settlement in Warsaw. It is an alternative club that offers regular weekly burlesque by international and national performers. It was founded by Betty Q, a burlesque institution in Poland that established burlesque there in 2010. The large room with a small stage and a bar, furnished in a cozy vintage DIY look, has meanwhile become an established burlesque venue that offers not only burlesque shows and burlesque classes, but also academic and non-academic lectures, workshops, and discussions on gender and queer topics, such as the regular series *Let's Talk about Drag*.

An interesting aspect of burlesque that I observed in Warsaw is the combination of elements from Anglo-American burlesque, such as retro and vintage stylings, with scripts from Polish history and especially national Catholic myths and their playful inversion. The recently deceased prominent Polish literary scholar Maria Janion conducted research on Polish Romanticism, focusing particularly on Polish historical traumas, as well as Polish "demons and vampires", and she called for a paradigm shift in thought and a reinterpretation of Romanticist history – in a sense, a supplementation of this history in order to deal with the repressed, the *Other*,

and the marginalized in history (Sucharski 2008; Panek 2020). Janion criticizes the Polish martyrdom myth, which is full of inferiority complexes and positions Poland as a victim of history. She sees the origins of these inferiority complexes in pre-Christian Slavdom, which was suppressed in the collective memory by the loss of Slavic myths over the course of Christianization. Janion (2007) speaks here of "Slavic trauma," which leads to a feeling of marginal significance, of belonging to the weak, forgotten, and humiliated. According to Janion, the Polish Romantics were aware of this trauma, this "uncanny Slavdom," and were also captured by it. She writes, "The uncanny Slavdom – both foreign and close at the same time – is a sign of tearing, a shattered unconsciousness, a native, non-Latin side. The displaced Slavic religion may have appeared in the form of a secret ritual of contact between the people and the dead (as in Mickiewicz's *Dziady*)" (Janion 2007: 28-29, translation author). Janion mentions here the poem *Dziady* ("Forefathers' Eve") (Mickiewicz 2016), by the Polish poet of Romanticism and a kind of national sanctuary, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), more precisely its second part, which was written in 1823. This part of the poem is about a pagan autumnal ritual of celebrating the dead, in which the spirits of the deceased are called upon, on the one hand, to gain the affection of the spirits, and, on the other hand, to help the spirits find peace in the beyond (Kowalska-Lewicka 1994).

This short introduction to the world of Polish Romantic literature is necessary to understand burlesque performance, which I saw at *Madame Q* in January 2018, performed by the Polish *boylesque* (male burlesque) performer and dedicated LGBTQ activist Gąsiu. The appearence of Gąsiu is marked by a combination of androgyny and glamour. His well trained and dance-shaped body and long platinum blonde hair is reminiscent of a rock glamour star, while his elegant movements and dance in high heels play with constructions of femininity. Gąsiu began his performance standing with his back turned to the audience, in a long, skirt-like robe.[5] His androgynous body moved gently to a traditional regional Polish folk song. He slowly turned to the audience and used transparent fabric, previously tied to his skirt, as a kind of curtain, carried in front of his body. Behind this transparent curtain, with artificial flowers hanging on it, Gąsiu could be

5 Another recording of this burlesque act can be seen online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=r21ItGKgrWo.

seen from the front, wearing dark sunglasses, a tight tank top, short shorts, and high heels. Suddenly, the music changed, and, after the quiet Polish folk song, followed by an interlude of music box-like sounds, the song *Bring Me to Life*, by the alternative rock band *Evanescence*, chimed, and in that moment Gąsiu began to recite a passage from *Dziady*. What is remarkable is that Gąsiu quoted the passage about the ghost of Zosia, a beautiful shepherdess, who in her lifetime rejected the advances of young men. As punishment for those rejections, she was unable to find peace in the afterlife. Gąsiu staged himself as the ghost of the girl, indicated by a wreath of flowers in his hair. Then he threw off the transparent curtain he had been holding in front of himself and started voguing to the song, interrupting his dance repeatedly to recite further passages from the poem.[6] During the dance, he stripped off his sunglasses and t-shirt, baring his naked upper body, jeans shorts, high-heeled boots, and wreath of flowers on his head. He finished his performance, again with music-box sounds, quoting the famous Zosia's verses from *Dziady*: "S/he who has not touched the ground once / Can never be in heaven" (translation author), with a pose reminiscent of a crucified Jesus, especially as his wreath of flowers began to glow red, like a crown of bloody thorns.

What makes Gąsiu's performance so fascinating is not only that he uses a poem from the canon of Polish Romanticism, which almost every Pole knows from school, to tell the story of his burlesque show, but also, and especially, the way he reinterprets this work with body stagings. His drag in the female spirit of Zosia has both human and non-human traits. On the one hand, his props, the wreath of flowers on his head, seem to remind us of the former rural life of the young shepherdess and her innocent femininity; on the other hand, the use of bright contact lenses, which give him spiritual traits, reminds us that he represents a ghost. This masquerade, as well as his androgyny – which he underlines with the simultaneity of different characteristics of gender constructions, with high-heels and short men's shorts – brings these gender constructions into a fascinating construct of a being from beyond, all in a humorous way. This recalls the concepts of *cosgender* and *cosqueer*, a combination of the words cosplay (costume

6 The origins of the dance art of vogue can be found in the gay Latino and African American Ballroom scene of the 1960s in New York. Since the 1990s, vogue has enjoyed increasing popularity, especially in the LGBTQ community, underwent a mainstream process and became a popular campy dance style among the young urban population. See: Chatzipapatheodoridis, 2017.

play) with gender and queer, and terms where gender roles are confused by humorous disguise (Mountfort *et al.* 2019). Cosplay is especially popular in fan culture, where fans transform themselves into their favorite characters from popular culture, like movies, anime, cartoons, manga, and so on (Rahman *et al.* 2012). Sometimes these characters are not human – they can be aliens, robots, animals, or other fantastic creatures. Cosplay as a genderless figure, or, as in the case of Gąsiu, the female figures of Zosia and her ghost, undercuts not only gender boundaries, but also boundaries between biological and non-biological bodies, and can therefore be interpreted as *posthumanist drag*, as Paul Mountfort, Adam Geczy, and Anne Peirson-Smith (2019) call it in their book on cosplay, in reference to, among others, Donna Haraway's cyborg concept.

Renate Lorenz (2012: 29) also distinguishes between different types of drag that go beyond the human: *radical drag*, which transcends the binarity of woman and man; *transtemporal drag*, which distances itself from and questions established heterosexual concepts of time and stages of life (e.g., marriage and starting a family); and *abstract drag*, in which human bodies are represented by non-human objects. In the case of Gąsiu, it is his human body that represents the non-human, but in that moment he becomes a non-human object on the stage, and, through this abstractness, he transgresses the poem *Dziady*; his transgression is political. He challenges the pantheon of Catholic national myths, such as the myth of a victim nation mentioned by Janion. In *Dziady*, Mickiewicz develops his messianic concept of Poland as the "Christ of the nations." Janion describes this messianic patriotic discourse as "a caricature of the Romantic paradigm" (2004: 150), based on the victim-myth of a country colonized by the historical neighbors Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary. Janion reminds us that Poland was also a colonizer – of Ukraine – and pleads for Polish post-colonial discourse (2004: 151). Gąsiu's closing of the performance by staging a crucified Jesus is reminiscent of the Romantic-messianic myth of suffering Poles and thus stimulates reflection on this myth. Such a playful interpretation of the canonical poem and religious conclusion of the erotic performance in times when conservative politics together with the church cling to these national-Catholic myths works as a pleasurable act of resistance.

Janion also pleads for a paradigm shift through the telling of "another history," especially including the perspective of women: "This 'other story'

should also become a women's story – who up to now have been trapped in the mother role of a 'Mother Poland,' without a voice of their own, or with a voice drowned out by the hustle and bustle of the fighters for 'God, Honor and Fatherland'" (2004: 151, translation author). In an earlier article, I argue that the burlesque art of Betty Q can be seen as such an "other story" told from the women's perspective, and with the help of humor and eroticism (Staśkiewicz 2017). In her older shows and events, she took up the national myths, such as the famous myth of the self-sacrificing Mother Poland, who, like the Mother of God, sacrificed her son and sent him into the hopeless battle for Poland (Adam Mickiewicz also had a role in establishing this myth, about which he wrote in the poem *Ode To Mother Poland*). Alluding to this myth, Betty Q hosted the show *Niepodległość jest kobietą* (*Independence Is a Woman*) in 2013 on the occasion of Polish Independence Day, in which she presented an erotic performance that stylized the female figures of the "Mothers Poland" as seductive and powerful fighters.

Current political themes, such as the struggle of Polish women for reproductive rights, are explicitly taken up in the burlesque performances of Betty Q. In early January 2018, the Polish parliament rejected the civic project of the committee *Ratuj Kobiety* 2017 (Save Women 2017) on the liberalization of abortion, but accepted further work on the project of the Civic Committee *Stop Aborcji* (Stop Abortion), which tightens regulations, eliminating the possibility of legal termination of pregnancy due to severe defects in the fetus. This situation triggered protests by women's organizations and demonstrations (see, for example, Hussein *et al.*, 2018). In February 2018, in the middle of this political situation, Betty Q performed her act *Cycles* at Madame Q, which she explicitly dedicated to the Polish fight for women's rights.[7] She appeared in the show dressed only in a white linen blanket, which she wore in the beginning wrapped as a short dress. At first, she looked like an innocent, carefree child on stage, until the moment when she bent down and suddenly took a red flower out of her lap. At first acting confused by this flower, she immediately tied it seductively into her hair as adornment. After that, she pulled the blanket so that it transformed into a long dress, which then looked like a wedding dress. In between, she completely removed the blanket and danced almost naked, apart from

7 Another recording of this burlesque act can be seen online at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FoS65aW-GRo

breast pasties and a G-string. Then she wrapped the blanket as if a little baby were swaddled in it and gently swung it from side to side. Then she played with the sheet as if it had been transformed into an ever-growing child that grew up and went away. After wiping her tears with the blanket, she picked up the red flower, removed it from her hair, and threw it to the floor. Then she dropped to the floor herself and covered herself with the blanket.

In this show, Betty Q embodied the life cycle of a woman, which is determined by biology to be from the first period to menopause to, finally, death. This strong link between women's lives and women's physiology, fertility, and motherhood could be understood as a critique of the state's policy on reproductive rights, which claims control over the bodies, sexuality, and reproduction of women. The connection between women's biological life cycles and the criticism of conservative state policies regarding abortion rights is reminiscent of what Julia Kristeva wrote in her essay *Women's Time* (1981): On the one hand, women are associated with cyclical time, with the nature and reproduction and limitedness of human life, and, on the other hand, with the monumental time of nations, redemption myths, and eternity. In her performance, Betty Q showed precisely this double temporal dimension of women, how their lives, their cyclical time, are controlled by the monumental time of the state, which makes the female body and the question of reproductive rights a national concern and not simply a personal matter for women.

Both Gąsiu and Betty Q provide, through their body stagings, their own interpretations of history, or rather, their own ways of dealing with the wounds of history and everyday political life. The erotic element of undressing and the theatrical playfulness relieve the national-Catholic myths of their severe weight of meaning, especially in Gąsiu's pastiche of Mickiewicz's *Dziady*. Betty Q's subtle, sensual, erotic staging contains a clear political message – it becomes a manifesto. Therefore, these performances show how burlesque can be a queer space as described in the beginning of this paper – a space that deals pleasurably and humorously with binarities, norms, and restrictions, a kind of escape from the confines of everyday life that has a de-hierarchizing, destabilizing effect on these restrictions. In addition, the burlesque also offers a pleasurable approach to historical traumas and myths that works like the aforementioned *erotohistoriography,* which, as Elizabeth Freeman explains, "admits that contact with historical

materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses, even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations" (2010: 95-96).

Finally, I would like to mention another event with a similar queering *erotohistoriographic* effect that took place in Warsaw in the alternative club *Pogłos* at the end of February 2018 as the result of solidarity and cooperation among the LGBTQ community, the burlesque scene (in which many members are part of the LGBTQ community), and the alternative theater scene. This event, called *Queer Explosion – Post-Apocalypse Paradise*, was declared as a protest against the political situation in Poland and the feeling of powerlessness. The political message was already contained in the announcement, described by the organizers in the following:

> The first episode takes place in the near future in a country ruled by His Impotence, the Gray Little Emperor. One boring day His Impotence prohibits all relations that do not lead to fertilization. But that's not all… in fear of losing power, the grim politician decides to produce an army of humano-robo-drones, thanks to which he will win all the elections until the end of his days. Of course, on his way there will be economically frustrated scientists, teenagers abusing psychoactive substances, as well as glittery forms of life of extraterrestrial civilization.[8]

This event was not explicitly a burlesque event, although some burlesque performers took part, such as Gąsiu, but was an interesting, humorous, colorful fusion of theater, comedy, drag, and burlesque that was visually reminiscent of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. In the show, the emperor's plans to ban sexual relations not aimed at reproduction do not succeed; his "miracle weapon," the human-robo-drons, eluded his power. Instead, a victory of love, pleasure, and joy was achieved, which spread throughout the country and was celebrated in the closing scene with the waving of rainbow flags. This fantasy-futuristic parody created a utopian, joyful queer space that was totally contrary to the political mood and growing homophobia in Poland – for a while, the confining world outside could be forgotten.

8 See the Facebook event page: www.facebook.com/events/pog%C5%82os/queer-explosion-post-apocalypse-paradise/1581064381942687/

5. Nerdlesque, clownery, and Politics

It is fascinating that the new burlesque as a pop cultural phenomenon has a worldwide presence but is nevertheless a situated phenomenon and reflects the sociopolitical situation of the place where it takes place. Besides the universal elements of burlesque, such as cross-dressing, drag, masquerade, and parody, the history of burlesque reflects the different characters of wherever it is situated and their "everyday wounds" or cultural fascinations. In New Orleans in 2015, I came into contact with the so-called *nerdlesque* for the first time, a burlesque art very popular in anglophone countries that parodies the scripts of pop culture. Similar to the pastiche of Shakespeare plays or classical myths in Thompson's burlesque of the 19th century, in *nerdlesque*, the objects of pastiche are, for example, cult films like *Star Wars*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Batman*, and *Harry Potter*, or TV series like *Doctor Who* or *Game of Thrones*. In an earlier paper of mine (Staśkiewicz 2018), I linked this American fascination with pop culture with cultural fetishism, which, according to Hartmut Böhme (2006), increased in the 1970s and turned more and more into "excessive consumerism," especially in youth culture. This also includes "fetishistic travesties and performative identification games" (Böhme 2006: 347), which brings us to one of the most important elements of *nerdlesque* – the cosplay, cosgender, and cosqueer, which I already mentioned in my analysis of Gąsiu's performance. The performers of *nerdlesque* transform themselves into characters from superhero comics, US science fiction films and series, or Japanese cartoon characters, often playing with gender norms – through a "gender crossplay" that plays with gender-role images that go beyond essential attributions. Through cosplay, one cannot only transform into a "hero," but "from a woman to a beautiful boy, from an ordinary person to a celebrity – this changing identity of performativity is a magic wand or time machine which can offer excitement, contentment, escapism, and empowerment" (Rahman *et al.* 2012: 334). Performers also transform into fictional figures beyond the gender binary, such as elves, aliens, or robots, in a *posthumanist drag*, as mentioned earlier.

Even if *nerdlesque* is a countrywide as well as worldwide burlesque phenomenon (the first international Nerdlesque Festival took place in New York in 2014), New Orleans is a very fruitful place for the development of this kind of burlesque, due to its history and carnival tradition. During the carnival season, New Orleans hosts not only the famous Mardi Gras

parades, but, since 2011, also the alternative *Chewbacchus* parade, a big celebration of "nerds" who perform their favorite characters in colorful costumes, using cosplay and homemade props. In 2014, Xena Zeit-Geist founded a nerdlesque group called *Society of Sin*, and has since produced regular *nerdlesque* shows, like the weekly *Talk Nerdy To Me*, and larger thematic events like the Disney-movie-themed *Once Upon a Tease: A Villainous Burlesque & Variety Show* (June 2018) and *Beam Me Up, Hottie!: A Star Trek Burlesque Show* (August 2018). These shows are characterized by a diversity of body shapes, genders, skin colors, and the aforementioned cosgender and cosqueer: Performers embody aliens, animal-like creatures, and futuristic figures, playing on temporal and spatial dimensions and creating a space of transgression, or a utopian place, as Michel Foucault describes it. Through the creation of such a utopian place, the *nerdlesque* causes a queer intervention in which the limits of hetero- and chrononormativity are temporarily lifted (Staśkiewicz 2018).

As already demonstrated by examples from Poland, burlesque works as a political barometer by commenting on the current political situation and wounds of everyday life. During my stay in New Orleans in 2018, in the second year under Donald Trump's government, I could observe that burlesque performers in New Orleans often used their shows as a political manifesto. This may also be due to the open character of the city and its myth of decadence, the "southern Babylon" (Long 2005), as well as its openness towards sexual freedom, its strong LGBTQ community, and its celebration of said community. The entertainment scene in New Orleans around the burlesque, comedy, side shows, including circus performers, artists, and musicians, is also very liberal and committed to women's reproductive rights, LGBTQ rights, the fight against racism, and so on, through benefit events. Unlike the metropolis of New York, New Orleans does not have many established theaters, but does have alternative theater venues and puppet theaters. A close collaboration among the new burlesque, circus, drag, LGBTQ, and alternative theater scene can be observed, for example, during the annual independent *InFringe Festival,* established in 2016 and produced by Michael Martin, who as an actor, burlesque/drag performer, LGBTQ activist, and promoter of the local cultural scene combines, through his own person, different milieus and entertainment arts.

In New Orleans, there is a special, alternative, queer space, almost a local institution, that consolidates these milieus from burlesque/drag

shows, clownery, comedy, music, and theater performances – *The AllWays Lounge.* Arranged similarly to Madame Q in Warsaw, in a cozy, campy way, with a small stage over which artificial clouds float and a larger event room in the back, *The AllWays Lounge*, off the beaten track from the touristy, crowded French Quarter, offers a perfectly charming place to escape from the everyday and to create a pleasurable queer space. They present not only the famous monthly burlesque/drag shows *Dirty Dime Peepshow* by Bella Blue and *Storyville Burlesque* (based on the legendary Red Light District of 1895-1917), but also the weekly *Bingo Burlesque* event, hosted by Lefty Lucy and Tsarina Hellfire. One of the shows I saw in September 2018, at the *Bingo Burlesque*, was an act performed on Lefty Lucy in which she took up the political discussion at the time around the appointing of the conservative Brett Kavanaugh, who was accused of sexual harassment, as Supreme Court judge. Lefty Lucy started her performance wearing a white dress, recalling Marilyn Monroe's famous dress from *The Seven Year Itch,* a blonde wig, and high heels. At first, the show looked like a vintage/pin-up stylized burlesque, until Lefty Lucy took off her dress. She revealed her white underwear – not sexy lingerie, but pure white slips smeared with red blood-like paint. At the end of the show, she revealed her breasts totally, not with nipples covered with the usual pasties of burlesque. This connection of a white, innocent-looking dress, the imitation of blood on her slips, and her nakedness at the end evoked a feeling of being helpless and objectified; it became a powerful manifesto that could also be felt in the silence of the touched audience that lasted a few seconds before the applause started. Maybe instead of the word "nakedness" the word "undressing" is a better description of Lefty Lucy's performance. As Barbara Brownie points out, "Undressing 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" (2017: 3). The act of undressing can, according to Brownie, "be a tool for protest as well as for pleasure, and a body exposed through undressing can become a sign of defiance, distraction, deception, revelation, pride, vulnerability, normalcy or otherness" (2017: 6). Lefty Lucy's act of undressing showed a strong protest through vulnerability.

Another aspect of burlesque in New Orleans that I observed in 2018 is what I call the "clownish burlesque," or better, *clownesque* (see also Staśkiewicz 2021). In New Orleans, it is especially the performer Tsarina

Hellfire who performs this kind of burlesque, very often together with the clown Scabies the Clown. Tsarina Hellfire's clownesque is a mixture of striptease and pantomime, masquerade and the grotesque, creating an erotic, scary clown. I saw her performance in November 2018 in *The All-Ways Lounge* in the context of the *InFringe Festival* in New Orleans. Hellfire began her performance by slowly emerging from the darkness of the auditorium. She wore a scary clown mask, a woman's wig with blonde braids and several colorful bows, a child's bowling hat, striped stockings, a short corset-style blue dress, and high-heels. Arriving on stage, she took off the mask, screamed, and brought out a scornful laugh. Then she began to move pantomimically like a marionette or a coin-operated puppet to the sound of dark electronic music. She finished her performance by sitting on a chair with her legs spread, pleasurably presenting her seductive, tattooed body (Staśkiewicz 2021).

Tsarina Hellfire's creepy clown burlesque act is interesting because she combines her pleasurable, female sexuality with the script of a clown, or, to be more exact, with the "creepy clown," which is so well known in the US. The "creepy clown" is not usually associated with eroticism, and especially not with femininity, though she turns it into a sexy clown (Staśkiewicz 2021). A sexy clown or a woman as a clown is still a rare phenomenon, as clowns, as Margaret Irving (2013) points out in her doctoral thesis, are still connoted as male or androgynous. Irving recalls that, in her training as a clown, she was taught to hide her femininity. But there is also a similarity between a woman and a fool figure, as Efrat Tseëlon explains in her essay:

> Both embody a paradox: a synthesis of irreconcilable opposited; the impossibility of existing as one thing and its opposite […]. Both are hideously attractive: they induce horror and fascination, approach and avoidance. Their intermediary position between order and chaos (like that of monster, mermaids etc.) – nonsense and wisdom – is expressed in the woman in the dynamic oscillation between contrasting modes of appearance and voice (Madonna/whore). They both play with fantasy. In addition to being figures of fun, the woman and the fool inhabit a position that anyone can fall into if caught off guarded. What is threatening about them is that we all recognise ourselves in them. We can all "make fool of ourselves" or "let ourselves" go. (Tseëlon 2001b: 169)

Nevertheless, Tseleon also describes this similarity as a description of two different figures, the woman and the fool, which she refers to with the

pronoun "he," – she, too, connotes the fool with masculinity. Tsarina Hellfire's sexy clown not only overcomes this dualism, but, through the humorous, enjoyable way of "making a clown of yourself," makes being a clown not a degradation to be afraid of. On the contrary, being a clown allows one, as already mentioned by Sheir Klein (2007), to rebel against the wounds of everyday life, to change the world in a magical circus, maybe even a queer circus, where boundaries and differences disappear for a while.

Tsarina Hellfire's clownish burlesque leads me to the question of whether there are meaningful differences between clowning and burlesque at all; I consider burlesque as a whole as a kind of *clownesque*. As Yvonne Augustin (2018) writes in her book about the cultural role of clowns, the figure of a clown is a symbol of failing and failing again, of stumbling, being silly, being imperfect. But being a clown is a means of social criticism; it is a metaphor of failing and stumbling over social norms and rules. A clown holds a mirror up to us and how we are in the world. The failure of a clown and their parodistic neglect of suiting behavioral norms reveals the meaning and nonsense of such dead-locked and often reflected behaviors, rules and orders. Humor as the immanent element of burlesque uncovers the nonsense of these rules, as Jacki Willson points out: "[T]he wit works to make transparent, ridicule and politicize cultural paradoxes and discrimination" (2015: 5). One of the questions I wanted to explore with my burlesque research when I started was whether burlesque can be subversive and change meanings. Meanwhile I see the power of the burlesque especially in its humorous distantiation. Then what cannot be more distant from reality than humor, "a form of repetition with ironic critical distance, marking difference rather than similarity" (Hutcheon 2000: *xii*)? In that way, burlesque has a cathartic function and works as a queer refuge from the world of "similarities" and as a clownish "escapism from the daily grind" (Blanchette 2014: 160-161). This clownish escapism of the burlesque reminds of the concept of the circus as a small, magical version of the world. As the circus scholar Paul Bouissac puts it:

> A circus performance tends to represent the totality of our popular system of the world, i.e., it actualizes in one way or another all the fundamental categories through which we perceive our universe as a meaningful system. According to this cosmological view of the circus, the constituents of the acts are symbols or tokens of their class, and their identification by the audience constitutes an

> important part of the decoding process. A circus performance is easily understood because, in a way, it is redundant with respect to our culture; and it is gratifying because it enables us to grasp is totality in a limited time and space. (Bouissac 1976: 7)

However, unlike this description of the circus, the new burlesque not only allows a magical, smaller version of the whole to be captured in a limited time and space, but it also makes this smaller version a queer, better interpretation of a sometimes dreary reality. It is a circus in Jean Starobinski's sense, a "glittering oasis of magic" (cited in Klein 2007: 129). The burlesque is a *queer circus*.

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