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**“For Her Eyes Only”:  
Male Strippers,  
Women’s Pleasures,  
and  
Feminist Politics.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
**Master of Arts**  
in Sociology at Massey University.

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## **Abstract.**

This thesis explores women's experiences of male strip shows (specifically, the pleasures they gain from these) utilising a post-modern feminist perspective which emerges from a critique of some anti-pornography and radical lesbian feminist orthodoxies. This perspective includes a feminist 'politics of pleasure', in which popular pleasures are centralised as a site of political importance. Pleasures help organise women's inscription into dominant cultures, but also are sites where women's agency and resistance to norms of femininity and heterosexuality can be identified.

Semi-structured interviews with eight young women who attend male strip shows (as well as many informal conversations and observations) are used to understand the various types of pleasures available. These are discussed in relation to the social and cultural context of 1990s Aotearoa/New Zealand and feminist politics.

The conclusions of this research are that male strip shows can provide some safe spaces (physical and cultural) for women to explore their pleasures, sexualities, desires and fantasises, and that exploring these pleasures will have some positive implications for many women. That is, it can help empower them in some way: by experiencing what a utopian situation of 'freedom from personal and social constraints' would feel like; by having some control over the spaces and terms of their entertainments; by being active desiring agents without being objects to be looked at; by recognising the support of other women; and by denaturalising women's association with passivity, deference and 'innocence'.

This research also challenges commonly-accepted feminist understandings of popular culture, sexually-explicit material, women's pleasures and audiences arguing for a recognition of the diversity and creativity of women.

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# CHAPTER ONE.

## Introduction.



(Painted on the outside of the "Ladies Bar", Vivian St. Wellington).

*'On stage, the strippers are men transformed. Sexy. Energetic. They pout; they smile come-hither smiles; they make goo-goo eyes; and they tear vigorously at the Velcro that holds their outfits together. The crowd is also transformed. Mild-mannered Hamilton denizens have become screaming maniacs. Whole families-mother, daughters, grandmothers-are frenzied, frothing for Manpower flesh. The actual show is pretty tame...[but] what really seems to get the crowd going is the expectation of a feel-up, as the strippers bound up and down the aisles, fondling and being fondled. It is definitely a striptease...The shows starts. "Get yer gear off" shout the drunk women. "Show us yer cock" yell the drunker women. Scream, scream, scream.'* (Schaer, 1994a:38,42).

When considering these two representations of male strip shows, it becomes obvious that a feminist analysis of this increasingly popular form of entertainment for women is needed. Questions are conjured up about equality; role-reversal ('women-on-top'); women's pleasures, fantasies and sexualities; pornography and censorship; private and public spaces; and more generally about the nature of entertainment and popular culture for women audiences. The cartoon and the article also refer to two commonly accepted, but opposing ideas: firstly, a

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popular perception that these kind of shows represent equality for women (now they can be like, and act like men) and secondly, a well-known feminist claim that sexually-explicit material (like strip shows) is degrading and exploitative to both women and men.

This thesis considers all of these questions and ideas relating to male strip shows in order to develop an alternative understanding of what these shows might mean for feminist politics in the 1990s in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I do this through a focus on a central question emerging from the above representations: Why do women like these shows? In particular, what pleasures do they obtain from the show?

Women’s pleasures have a central importance in this research due to the historical silence, and the current contradictions surrounding these pleasures. Women’s sexual and entertainment pleasures have long been defined and limited by those (most often men) who have the power to control the material and discursive conditions of women’s lives.

Feminisms and the ‘sexual revolution’ challenged the ‘norm’ of male pleasures, and created spaces for women’s pleasures: as sexual beings (not just reacting to male advances); as consumers; and as audiences of popular culture. However, a paradoxical situation exists where the free exploration of women’s pleasures is both encouraged and discouraged. Within popular media, there is a constant enticement to seek pleasures and sexual fulfilment (Segal,1994). Many women’s magazines for example, take it for granted that women are aware that they already have the right to say ‘yes’ to pleasures, and already have the means to do this. There is a new script for women’s pleasures ‘with a common theme of female-centred sexuality [and pleasure], of enjoyment for oneself, of not living vicariously through one’s partner’ (Seidman,1992:129).

Simultaneously though, the dangers involved in pleasures are stressed, and women are encouraged, as they have been traditionally, to contain their pleasures for their own good, such as in the ‘Just say no’ safer sex campaigns, aimed at

young women in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In such campaigns, women are discouraged from publicly expressing their pleasures and sexualities, and are disallowed knowledge of their own bodies, desires and wants, by being denied safe places to explore these (Leroy, 1993). Women who seek out pleasures are seen to be in danger of (and responsible for) violence, harassment, social stigma, pregnancy and ill-health.

A sticker in women's toilets of the Sociology Department reminds me of these contradictions every day. Put up by the Students Association, as part of their 'A Kiss Is Not A Contract' campaign, it advises women that 'It is your right to set limits on what happens sexually'. One woman has changed this to read 'It is your right to *get on* what happens sexually'.

In this research, I show that both uncritically urging women to follow the path of pleasure, and encouraging women's restraint, denial, or limiting of pleasures, can be problematic for feminisms. The first position does not take into account the conditions of the wider social context which do constrain women's agency. There *are* real dangers and fears for women who assert their rights to pleasures. However, the second position addresses women as they have traditionally been, encouraging them to put men's pleasures first, and to be responsible for controlling men's sexuality<sup>1</sup>. Women's pleasures are regarded as dependent on men's, contained within the bounds of heterosexual relationships.

The representations of male strip shows displayed at the beginning of this chapter, contain these contradictory ideas about women's pleasures. In both, women are enjoying themselves, drinking, yelling, screaming, laughing, and 'going wild', but there is a sense that maybe it is not good or right for women to be doing this. They are acting like men, or like animals. They are lewd 'screaming maniacs', and wild beasts, 'frothing' in a flesh-frenzy. They are hypocrites, because many women

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this exists in the recent Police Community Safety handbook, where prevention of male violence is called 'self-awareness for women' and women are urged to take responsibility for male actions by not 'provoking' attacks.

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have said that it is bad and oppressive for men to gain pleasure in this way. There is also some ridiculousness and unreality in it all. The cartoon seems to be asking: ‘Women do not really want this, do they?’ Similarly, some feminists fear (re)claiming what have been seen as ‘male pleasures’, in case it involves ‘stooping’ to men’s level. That is, perhaps claiming women’s right to the erotic gaze, will lead to women’s sexual aggressiveness and violence?

Within the dominant culture of Aotearoa/New Zealand then, there has been a disregard for the importance of women’s pleasures, and a denial of the diversity of these. Women pleasures are subordinated to men’s, and are trivialised and degraded through being perceived as the opposite to work, seriousness and politics. Popular culture aimed at women audiences (e.g. soaps, romance novels) is seen as trashy entertainment, and the ‘lowest of the low’, often addressing women in line with traditional femininity.

Within feminisms, there has also been a failure to recognise women’s different pleasures, together with a separation of women’s pleasures from the important issues of male domination and feminist politics. In this thesis, I argue that the dominant feminist position in regard to sexually-explicit material such as strip shows, and in regard to pleasures and sexualities, has been the anti-pornography perspective, which has contributed to a silence surrounding women’s various heterosexual pleasures (see Segal,1994; Williams,1990; Valverde,1987; Snitow, 1986; Myers,1982). Feminist politics has been linked to women’s anger and displeasure, and a critique of male pleasures, not recognising pleasures as a site of valid feminist praxis.

I also argue that feminists must move away from any elitist position which furthers anxiety, guilt, shame and silence about women’s pleasures and desires. For women’s empowerment (especially young women’s), more safe places and spaces to explore their own sexualities, bodies, and pleasures, are needed: chances to

develop and affirm new 'languages of desire', women's own stories and experiences of being active desiring agents<sup>2</sup> (Segal,1992).

Feminists, from a pro-sex position (e.g. Vance,1984; Segal,1993,1994), and from within the cultural studies (e.g. Radway,1987; Ang,1985;) and feminist film studies (e.g. Stacey,1994; Hansen,1991) traditions, have recently turned to a focus on women's pleasures. However, I show in this thesis that these often involve: 1) a focus on established and traditional forms of popular culture aimed at women audiences (like soaps and romance novels); 2) an assumption that audiences' pleasures can be read from a textual analysis of the film/book/show; 3) notions of pleasures as singular, intrinsic, and individual; 4) a conclusion that pleasures are separate from or antithetical to, feminist politics. Many of these studies begin by seeing pleasures as part of 'something bigger' (such as psychological processes of identification; the workings of patriarchal society; means of resistance to male power). It is rare that pleasures are first thought of just as pleasures (Dyer,1992; Harrington, and Bielby,1995).

Male strip shows, as a form of popular cultural practice for women audiences, were chosen for this research as they allow these exclusions of feminist research into pleasures to be addressed. In order to understand what these shows might mean for feminists, I argue that the women who attend the shows must be consulted as to their pleasures and meanings, rather than once again subjecting women to insupportable generalisations or silence. This process of audience research highlights and centralises diverse kinds of pleasures, desires, actions and fantasies, (some of which differ from the kinds usually discussed within feminist and common-sense understandings) as well as the collective and social nature of pleasures. Furthermore, it enables pleasures to be situated within an explicitly political context, not one only concerned with women's disempowerment and oppressions at the site of pleasures, but with women's empowerment, agency, and resistance, as well as social change.

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<sup>2</sup> Segal (1994) claims that considerations of women's active pleasures also must involve recognition of the possibilities of men's disavowed passivity.

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This is the idea of a ‘politics of pleasure’, which is central to this research. In this, popular culture is regarded as an important site for politics because it embodies power and resistance. Pleasures may give the illusion of being personal and private, but they are social constructions and sites of power struggles.

Male strip shows then, are seen as a cultural site of the power struggles over sexualities and pleasures, where dominant norms are being both constructed, and resisted, perhaps even refigured by women. Choosing to focus on power and pleasure in popular culture was influenced by my enjoyment of the corporeal and intellectual pleasures of popular culture, especially that which appeals to the erotic, as well as my experiences as a young feminist attempting to speak about pleasures, and the negotiation of heterosexuality.

While I can not unambiguously identify either liberatory or hegemonic practices within women's experiences of male strip shows, I consider the possibility that attending these shows may help to expose taken for granted ideas about women, and perhaps point to the constructedness of gender, sexualities and pleasures through allowing women to experience a fantasy world or utopian state where women are active, desiring subjects, in control of their pleasures and the space where these are enjoyed. I argue that it is important for feminists to claim and intervene in popular pleasures (like those from male strip shows), in order to provide women with feminist understandings of their experiences, validate ‘abnormal’ and alternative pleasures and meanings that women have, confirm diversity among women and finally, encourage women’s resistance to male-defined femininity, and heterosexuality.

This research is guided by three questions, derived from the above considerations:

1. What are the different pleasures some women audiences obtain from male strip shows?
2. How do these relate to the wider cultural and social context of 1990s Aotearoa/New Zealand?

3. What implications do women's experiences of male strip shows have for a feminist politics concerned with women's empowerment and social change?

This remainder of this thesis consists of four chapters and a conclusion.

The second chapter discusses issues pertaining to the nature of pleasures and popular culture in general. I situate male strip shows within sexually-explicit popular culture, and consider how this has been understood by anti-pornography feminists and relatedly, by radical lesbian feminists. I discuss the exclusions and problems with these theories, and outline the post-modern feminist perspective which informs my analysis of male strip shows. However, I also distance my position from the particular anti-feminist incarnation of post-modernism known as 'post-feminism'.

The third chapter looks in more detail at male strip shows as a particular form of entertainment for women, historically situated within a social and cultural world where eroticised representations of male bodies are increasingly available. I consider the claim that male strip shows represent some kind of gender and sexual equality, and discuss this in relation to representations of male bodies. However, I turn to active audience theories as the best way to approach this understanding. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Bakhtin's theory of 'carnival', in order to argue for a feminist 'politics of pleasure' where popular culture can be seen to contain the potential for providing a way of experiencing what women's empowerment could be like.

In the fourth chapter, the methodological and ethical issues pertaining to this feminist research are discussed. I consider the reasons for utilising semi-structured interviews to access women's experiences, and outline the measures that were employed to counter the power relationships between the myself as the researcher and the participants. I summarise the research process, and provide a section from an observation of a show. Lastly, the categories used to organise and analyse the interview transcripts are presented.

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The fifth chapter contains my analysis of the pleasures experienced by the participants. Seven different (but related) kinds of pleasures are explored through quotes from the women and my rewordings of the interviews, followed by a theoretical analysis, linking my own and the participant’s understandings with other feminist theories on culture, power and pleasure.

The conclusion draws the analysis together with the feminist theories presented in the first two chapters, and considers what this research suggests for a feminist ‘politics of pleasure’. I summarise my post-modern feminist perspective on male strip shows, and briefly explore the implications this holds for future research into popular culture, women audiences and women’s pleasures.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Popular Culture, Pleasures and Feminist Perspectives: Developing a Post-modern Feminist Approach.**

In this chapter I discuss the post-modern feminist perspective which informs my analysis of women's experiences of male strip shows. I position male strip shows within a wider frame of popular culture, and consider the way this has been understood within common-sense understandings, as well as within feminisms and other cultural theories. I examine in detail, anti-pornography feminism and the related critique of heterosexuality, as these have become feminist orthodoxies over the last 30 years in the west (Segal,1994). I claim that these perspectives are founded on problematic assumptions about popular culture, pleasures and politics. I turn to a post-modern feminist understanding, and argue that, despite some concerns raised by feminists, this is the best position to take for an investigation into popular culture.

#### **Definitions of Popular Culture.**

Popular culture is a slippery concept. It is 'entertainment', pleasure and leisure for 'the people'. It is also mediated texts such as movies, magazines, music videos and computer games. That is, the widely distributed cultural products enabled by new media and communication technologies in the west since the 1950s, and linked to the increasing importance of leisure and consumption (and 'de-industrialisation') in the west, together with the global expansion of commodity capitalism (see Hann,1995). It contains both the contradictory notions of a 'top down' culture imposed by the dominant (patriarchal and capitalist) culture, as well as the element of 'emerging from below', a product of the people's creativity and resistance (MacCabe,1986:4).

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In this study, I understand popular culture not as a fixed text or product, but as *lived social relations*, shifting cultural practices, processes of negotiation between producers, distributors, text and audiences (which is not to say that all have equal power in this process). My definition follows the cultural studies approach, to see popular culture as the everyday practices of audiences who negotiate cultural products such as magazines, videos, and concerts, with the aim of entertainment, leisure, socialising, and pleasure. Understanding popular culture as 'lived culture' (not as static) indicates that its meanings and pleasures can only be understood in practice; as it is used; read; listened to; watched; felt; danced to; spoken, written and thought about, by real people within particular social, historical and geographical contexts (see Bennett, 1986a and further discussion in chapter three).

I do not agree then, with the distinction that Perry (1994) makes between consumer capitalism's mass-produced forms (implied in the often derogatory term 'mass culture'), and resistive cultural forms, locally produced and consumed by 'the people' ('popular culture'). Definitions of popular culture have often be divided into these two camps:

[those] who defend it as the authentic experiences of everyday people, and those who see it as representing the ways in which the masses are duped into their own manipulation by the so-called culture industries' (Roman, et.al., 1988:9).

In this and the following chapter, I discuss these ideas, and in particular, explore how these are played out within feminist theories about popular pleasures.

Popular culture, especially when it is pejoratively termed 'mass culture', is constructed in opposition to high art or high culture, where high art is seen as cerebral, more serious, authentic, aesthetically complex, of more social and artistic value and having radical potential. Mass culture in comparison, is regarded as mindless, escapist, trashy, unhealthy, dangerous, tacky, hedonistic, simplistic, with little redeeming value beyond some cheap emotional release.

This daemonisation of popular culture has been wide-spread. The Frankfurt School condemned popular culture for being a means through which the minds of

consumers were poisoned with capitalist ideology, while conservative theories of mass culture, and psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship (notably feminist film theory) also focus on the (negative) effects of popular culture on audiences. This condemnation of popular culture, exists also *within* popular culture itself (such as on TV talk shows and in gossip magazines), and comes from those responsible for its distribution (like television programmers, see Dyer,1992:14) as well as from politicians, lobby and religious groups. Popular cultural practices are seen to have a corrupting influence on a passive and naive audiences, like children, youth, and women (see discussion next chapter).

Male strip shows (and other sexually-explicit material which has been defined as 'pornography') are included within popular culture in this research, precisely because they are seen as 'cheap and nasty', dangerous and mindless. The 'hidden partner of the high art/mass culture conflict' is the erotica/pornography divide, which, as we see later in this chapter, is pervasive in discussions on sexually-explicit material (Wicke,1993:62). Wicke (ibid.) maintains that issues of knowing, representation, seeing, education and agency, which relate to theoretical and political work on 'culture', underpin the discourse on pornography. Furthermore, male strip shows, like erotic videos and magazines, are included in definitions of popular culture because they are becoming increasingly common forms of popular entertainment in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

### **Popular Pleasures.**

Pleasure appears to be central to an understanding of what popular culture is, or what it does, and thus pleasures are also considered to be negative, or at best, neutral. Pleasures are thought to be negative, either because they encourage rebellion, violence, and disrespect, or because they are linked to exploitation and oppression. Other-times, pleasures are perceived to be apolitical or disengaging, encouraging apathy or escapism.

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Willis (1993:265) claims that pleasures are 'unstable, elusive, [and] subject to loss in analysis' which is why very little work has been done on understanding pleasures as pleasures. Rather pleasures are taken as the unproblematic 'sugar' masking the 'bitter pill' of the real meaning of popular culture, or else seen as something natural and unimportant, 'something you can *guiltily* have, or have after the important things' (Dyer, 1992:5,166).

When I think about such practices as reading *Cosmopolitan*, hiring an erotic video, going to see a band, I invariably consider that this is done for fun, for entertainment, for pleasure. These activities are often thought about in opposition to work, obligations, family responsibilities and politics. They are the other side to seriousness, to harsh realities and problems. The pleasures are those 'so-called sensuous, cheap, and easy pleasures of the body, distanced from the more contemplative, aesthetic pleasures of the mind' (Fiske, 1992:154).

Dyer (1992) claims that popular cultural pleasures are often experienced bodily (as in sexual arousal, tears, goose bumps, laughter etc.), and do not seem to go through much cultural or intellectual 'filtering'. This association of popular pleasures with the body adds to their position as the 'lowest of the low'. The pervasive mind/body dualism within western thought privileges the intellectual and the cultural over the body, which is unruly and degraded, associated with nature, carnality, death, sex and the feminine. Modleski (1991:23) recognises these as gendered dichotomies, and so claims that:

'our ways of thinking and feeling about mass culture are so intricately bound up with notions of the feminine that the need for a feminist critique becomes obvious'.

Unfortunately, many feminists have reinscribed the gendered oppositions of male/female, active/passive, mind/body and politics/pleasure which pervade thinking on popular culture and pleasures. Popular culture is thought to privilege male or masculine pleasures which exploit women, and repress women's 'true' pleasures. The popular pleasures that *are* available for women audiences (like those from soap operas and women's magazines) are often said to reconcile

women with patriarchal relations and maintain their subordinated position (see Radway, 1987; Modleski, 1982), thus distracting women from feminist politics. Some feminist film theorists see the need for popular pleasures to be deconstructed or destroyed (Pollock, 1983) because they are produced within a male-dominated society and so express male desires and fantasies. Other feminists picture pleasures in a more neutral light. Ang (1985) and Van Zoonen (1994), for example, both warn against over-politicising pleasure, arguing instead that pleasures and fantasies are quite separate from women's actions and politics.

These perspectives regard pleasures as natural, inherent, fixed or individual, something that is *already* located in the unconscious or the body. Using Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories (as feminist film theorists do), pleasures are believed to be intrinsic desires (the 'pleasure principle') which are shaped by the unconscious processes that occur during childhood. There is also another understanding of pleasure as something existing in human nature, of which Barthes' (1977) concept of *jouissance*, an orgasmic, unruly, physical/sensual pleasure of the body that defies cultural constraints, is an example. In the definition that I use however, pleasures are social and imbued with power. They are social constructions that are experienced socially (see Fiske, 1987 for a further discussion on definitions of pleasure).

When the pleasures of popular culture are understood as social, and thus changeable and multiple, they can be neutral, negative or positive and resistive for women, depending on the social and cultural context of the popular cultural practice and the specific women audiences that are concerned. Some pleasures may empower women, and it may be through pleasures that women are able to negotiate, undermine or reconstruct some aspects of dominant cultures. This recognition of the potential for agency and resistance within popular pleasures, is what is referred to in this research as 'the politics of pleasures'.

The 'politically symbolic value' and radical potential of pleasures has been highlighted by Foucault's (1981) insights on pleasures as both effects of power *and* means of resistance, as well as in some aspects of Barthes' work on the destabilising pleasures of *jouissance*, which have both been taken up by cultural theorists such as Jameson (1983) and Mercer (1983). However, feminist concerns with personal politics, that is, the political implications of the 'private' and 'natural', have also been central to understandings of the 'politics of pleasure'. Feminist projects have moved from arguing that pleasures *are* political, to identifying how popular pleasures uphold systems of male power by centralising some masculine pleasures and marginalising and silencing other (feminine) ones. The next step for some, has been to identify any agency and power women do have, and any possibilities for resistance, empowerment and change which exist within the realm of pleasures.

When examining feminist understandings of pleasure, the debates over pornography must be considered, as these have occupied a significant place in feminist theory and activism over the last 30 years. My discussion highlights the conditions surrounding the emergence of the anti-pornography feminist perspective and looks at the assumptions about popular culture, pleasures, and audiences which underlie these theories and actions. I also consider radical lesbian feminism and the critique of heterosexuality, because of the close links these have with anti-pornography perspectives. Despite recent challenges, the anti-pornography position remains a predominant feminist position on matters of representations of bodies, sexualities and women's pleasures (Segal, 1992, 1994). To begin with, it is necessary to place these ideas in historical context, and see how they emerged from early feminist activism at the time of what has been termed the 'sexual revolution'.

## **The Sexual Revolution.**

The sexual freedom movement of the 1960s and 1970s was hailed by some early second-wave feminists as vital to women's liberation, seeing this alongside

economic liberation, as a way to women's freedom. Segal (1993:7) claims that in the 1970s many feminists supported the idea that women should challenge male definitions and representations of sex, by asserting and exploring their own sexualities, pleasures and desires. According to Snitow (1986:12) there was a sense of hope that women could be freed from oppression, and could have the 'power of self-definition'.

It was not long though, before many feminists rejected the 'sexual revolution' as a 'media myth' which supported a realignment of male systems of power and privilege (patriarchal systems). It became clear that women's vulnerability in regard to pregnancy, sexual violence and abuse, sexual health and sexual exploitation, did not change. In fact, if anything, violence and oppression seemed more widespread, highlighted by the processes of identifying and working against women's oppressions (setting up Refuges, Rape Crisis, consciousness raising groups etc.). The social position of women did not appear to be improving as quickly as hoped: legal rights did not translate so easily in women's equality. For example, women's involvement in the work force, only meant double exploitation. Women worked for lower wages than men in poorer working conditions and still had responsibility for home and children. Furthermore, feminist efforts sparked a backlash from conservative elements in society, challenging any rights won by women and reasserting power through realignments of patriarchal relations.

Feminists thus became disillusioned with any attempts to find women's freedom and equality through heterosexuality and sexual pleasure. Germaine Greer, for example, once encouraged women to live their lives according to a 'self-regulating pleasure principle', to be vociferous, daring and willing to be labelled as 'outcasts, eccentric and perverts' (1971:327-8), yet a decade later claimed that permissiveness was the same as repressiveness, and denied that women's sexual revolution ever happened (Greer,1984). Former advocate of women's sexual freedom, Erica Jong, commented in 1985 that 'the freedom to say yes to everyone and anyone was really another form of slavery'. The mood within feminisms changed from a positive progressive one, to a focus on the negative aspects of

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culture, especially women's victimisation (Snitow,1986). Issues of male violence, and women's fear and vulnerability over-shadowed concerns about women's rights to self-expression or reconstruction of sexuality and pleasure (Segal,1993).

The dominant feminist agenda shifted focus from the family and women's work, to the now exposed and politicised area of sexual violence against women. Male *sexual* power came to be understood as pivotal to women's oppression: 'Far from being a by-product of economic or political power, the specifically sexual was made central' (Pringle,1992:81). Sexuality may have come to be regarded as the central site of women's oppression because, as Foucault (1978) has pointed out, it has increasingly in western society come to be seen as *the* essential part of our identity: it is the 'truth' of ourselves.

This focus on sexuality as the site of women's oppression, in practice, meant that many feminists privileged two interconnected areas for critique and activism: the 'institution of heterosexuality' and pornography. I discuss these two areas below.

### **Lesbian Feminism and the Critique of Heterosexuality.**

The critique of the institution of heterosexuality was a direct reaction to the violence and pain uncovered in women's lives. Feminists looked at how women's sexuality had been male-defined and constructed around male pleasure and privilege, and consequently came to regard heterosexuality as oppressive for women. Women could not be free as long as they were tied to men in heterosexual relationships, suffering all the abuses that seemed linked to this: rape, family violence, financial exploitation, child abuse, and sole domestic responsibility. Jeffreys (1990:1) claimed that the only freedom the sexual revolution gave to heterosexual women was the ability 'to take pleasure in their own eroticised subordination'.

Rich's (1996) influential article 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (published in 1980), provided a pivotal critique of heterosexuality, arguing that it was an institution imposed on women, and held in place by various

male powers which constrain and control women, physically, ideologically, spiritually and emotionally. Rich argues that heterosexuality is made compulsory through mechanisms like idealising marriage and romance, erasing lesbian existence, controlling women's fertility and children, and sexual harassment which encourages or forces women into 'accepting' this as the only choice. However, she recognises that many do not want to challenge the 'lie of compulsory female heterosexuality' (ibid:139), because:

'to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organised, propagandised, and maintained by force, is an immense step to take if you consider yourself freely and 'innately' heterosexual' (ibid:135).

Underneath the imposed normality of heterosexuality, which some women have resisted at great cost, Rich believes that all women exist on a 'lesbian continuum' (a range of women-identified experiences), whether they name themselves as 'lesbian' or not.

Although Rich (ibid.) is critical of women's lack of choice, she warns against condemning all heterosexual relationships per se. However, many feminists did just this. Dworkin (1990) for example, considers hetero-sex to be primarily an act of male violence. Penetration is akin to rape, and symbolic of all violence against women. Any pleasures women get from hetero-sex are considered the same way as rape fantasies are: women are under a false (male) consciousness. They are 'male-identified', having pleasures and a sexuality was like the (negative) 'masculine' norm, and are denying the love between women which is the route to liberation. Jeffreys (1990:2) argues that 'heterosexual desire', inevitable in women's relationships with men, will 'eroticise power differences', and so must be replaced with 'homosexual desire', which eroticises mutuality and equality. The better alternative for women was the 'woman-identified woman', a purified loving, nurturing and 'good' lesbian sexuality which any woman could take on.

The male violence and oppression which radical lesbian feminists claimed was inherent to, and problematic within heterosexual relations, was still to some extent hidden in <sup>the</sup> private realm and not spoken about in public by non-feminists. However, what was openly available in public was graphic *representations* of male-

dominated heterosexuality in the form of 'pornography'. This material appeared to involve emotive images of the kinds of crimes against women that feminists were discovering everywhere: incest, rape, family violence, sexual harassment. The representations of bodies seemed also to celebrate the masculine norm of sexuality, while rendering invisible, even actively destroying (especially lesbian) women's nurturing, loving pleasures. Thus pornography, as the portrayal of women's oppression at the site of (hetero)sexuality, became the central concern for many feminists.

### **Anti-pornography feminism.**

With the 'sexual revolution', sexual representations within popular culture increased, most of these produced by men, for men. Initially, some feminists saw this as a product of male control of the now liberalised culture industries, and called for feminists to produce their own sexually-explicit material to counter the masculinist bias. Increasingly though, rather than seeing pornography as a *symptom* of male systems of power and privilege, it came to be regarded as the *cause*. Pornography was thought not only to represent, but to *inscribe* male heterosexual pleasure, and lead to male violence. Snitow (1986) claims that feminists seized on pornography as the 'symbol of female defeat', because it appeared to celebrate male sexuality and power at a time when feminists became painfully aware of the sexual dangers and persistent inequalities for women.

Beginning in the 1970s then, increasingly more feminist theory and activism was organised around eliminating pornography. Women Against Pornography (W.A.P.), formed in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1983, had considerable membership here, as well as many other western countries. Their workshops and educational material formed the basis of many consciousness-raising groups (see Dann, 1985). Within the wider public and media, feminism and anti-pornography activism became synonymous, aided by the extensive publicity of W.A.P. protest and graffiti campaigns; their hyperbolic rhetoric; and through their (unfortunate) alignment with

the arguments of the conservative New Right and Christian lobby groups concerned with the decline of morality evident in sexual freedoms.

Women Against Pornography (1989:7) assert that all pornography 'is about male power over women-coercion; control; violence; dictating who women should be; promoting women as victims and as saleable objects; male profit; and male propaganda'. Pornography is seen to encourage 'rape culture': where men's sexual urges are able to run wild. Men are conditioned like Pavlov's dogs: 'they orgasm to women's degradation' (ibid:41). Thus, pornography is said to directly effect male violence, while it also instructs women to be passive victims or sex objects (and so falsely representing women's true sexual nature).

### **Sex, Pleasures, Censorship and Audiences: Problems with Anti-pornography Feminist Positions.**

This view of pornography can be said to be predominant within feminism during the late 1970s, 1980s even into the 1990s in Aotearoa/New Zealand. However, the arguments made by anti-pornography feminists about sexually-explicit material contain several very problematic assumptions and harmful implications. Recognising the limitations of these perspectives was an important part of my motivation for doing this present research, and thus it is necessary to take an in-depth look at the areas of concern which are related to: 1) women's and men's sexualities and pleasures; 2) the issue of censorship; and 3) the workings of popular culture and the nature of its audiences.

Firstly and most obviously, the rhetoric of anti-pornography feminists is flawed in that it conflates violence and sex. Just as all sexualised representations of women become pornography (see Kapplaer,1986) and all pornography becomes violence. Under some definitions, all hetero-sex becomes rape and domination. This leaves all women who enjoy sex with men in the position of 'fucking with the oppressor' (Brown,1976:114).

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This conflation of heterosexuality with heterosexism, and sex with male violence, is founded on assumptions of the essential nature of women's and men's sexualities. Anti-pornography feminists represent male sexuality as inherently violent and dominating, while women's sexuality is gentle, loving, nurturing, based on equality and without power. As Manion (1991:293) claims:

'This implies that left to our own devices, free of male coercive interference, women are reasonable, self-determining beings with a sexuality that is unproblematic, unpathological, gentle and good'.

Within feminisms, as well as within traditional contexts, the 'non-sexual woman is the credible, "good" woman' (Williams,1990:xi). This reifies women's sexual purity, and denies the realities of some women's violence and some women's pleasures.

In attempting to revalue the feminine through promoting the inherent 'goodness' of women and the 'woman-identified woman' identity that went with this, feminists have actually prescribed a sexual identity for women that is not far removed from traditional feminine ideals. This also means lesbianism 'was not being seen as a sexuality at all, but as a political practice, gutted of its history, passion, sexual meaning and significance' (Segal,1994:172-3). Nestle (1987) claims that lesbians have a subversive sexuality which disrupts the alignments of sex and gender, challenging heterosexuality and patriarchal relations. Yet as Segal (1994:173) points out, the 'genuinely womanly woman' (the lesbian ideal), desexualised lesbian experience, undermining this challenge.

Furthermore, these normative identities silenced heterosexual and bisexual women's experiences of the pleasures and pains of sexual desire. When men's sexuality is thought to always involve violence and domination, and when women's continued vulnerability, fear and powerlessness are emphasised, women who love and desire men are seen as 'victims' of a false consciousness because heterosexuality can never provide them with freedom, mutuality or empowerment. Within feminism, it becomes very difficult to talk about women's pleasures in any positive sense, especially when these involve men (Williams,1990).

This critique of heterosexuality, and ideas of an essential femininity which holds true across cultures and borders of time and place, may have been necessary hyperbolic rhetoric (shock tactics) for anti-pornography and radical lesbian feminists concerned with exposing the extent of sexism in the world. It can also be understood as a manoeuvre for encouraging the development of women's community, i.e. if all women around the world share the experience of universal male violence, then they should and can work together. This 'myth of sameness' within feminism did enable some unity, but at the expense and marginalisation of many different groups of women. The bias of western feminism's dominant white, middle class identity overshadowed different sexualities and pleasures which already existed (like bisexual women's, butch/femme lesbians), as well as limiting the space for new and alternate sexualities to be constructed.

A second problem area is that of censorship, the call for which is also based on ideas of naturally opposing sexualities of men and women. Pornography is believed to represent male sexuality and thus is violent, sexist, degrading, harmful and objectifying of women. Anti-pornography feminists do ostensibly support 'erotica' though, 'which involves non-exploitative [women-centred] depictions of sexuality' (W.A.P., 1989:7). However, in practice it proves impossible to distinguish sexist pornography from an acceptable kind of 'erotica' based on mutuality and loving. All sexually-explicit material is in danger of condemnation because "pornography" as a label always threatens to engulf any sexual representation that achieves a certain level of explicitness' (Ellis, 1980:81). Anti-pornography feminists thus, propose censorship of sexually-explicit material of most kinds.

Asking for 'protective' legislation however, means that anti-pornography feminists are moving dangerously close to a conservative, right-wing position, limiting spaces for women's exploration of sex and pleasures. Women are perceived as they have traditionally been (passive victims that need looking after), in addition to the fact that the state and dominant groups are provided with increasing powers to define, control and silence the practices and identities of women. Censorship laws only censor some sexist and violent representations, while legitimating others (like

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those of war and big business), and have resulted in banning and controlling material that feminists would not usually want to see censored, like safer sex information, feminist literature, abortion material and lesbian art (see Duggan,1995). Sexual danger is over-emphasised when advocating the control of men's sexuality for the safety of women, breeding more fears which constrain women's lives, and deny women's diverse experiences (Vance,1984:6). The anti-pornography perspective then appears to be anti-sex and anti-pleasure, being 'uncomfortable with pornography's aggressive, genital-and-body-centred eroticism' (Seidman,1992:110). This links back to traditional ideas that only *men* like sex (Assiter and Carol,1993; Rodgerson and Wilson,1991).

The third underlying problem of anti-pornography feminism concerns the workings of popular culture. Like pop psychologists who warn that violence on TV causes copycat violence in children, and fundamentalist preachers who claim that rock music leads to crime, drug-taking, violence, and suicide in youth, anti-pornography feminists see popular culture as inherently bad, corrupting, and all powerful, able to indoctrinate audiences who have no say in the matter. There is an acceptance of an unproblematic cause-and-effect relationship between viewing, fantasy and action. Pornography is thought not only to express *fantasies* about male power and female submission, but to *incite* violence against women, as encapsulated in the phrase "pornography is the theory: rape is the practice".

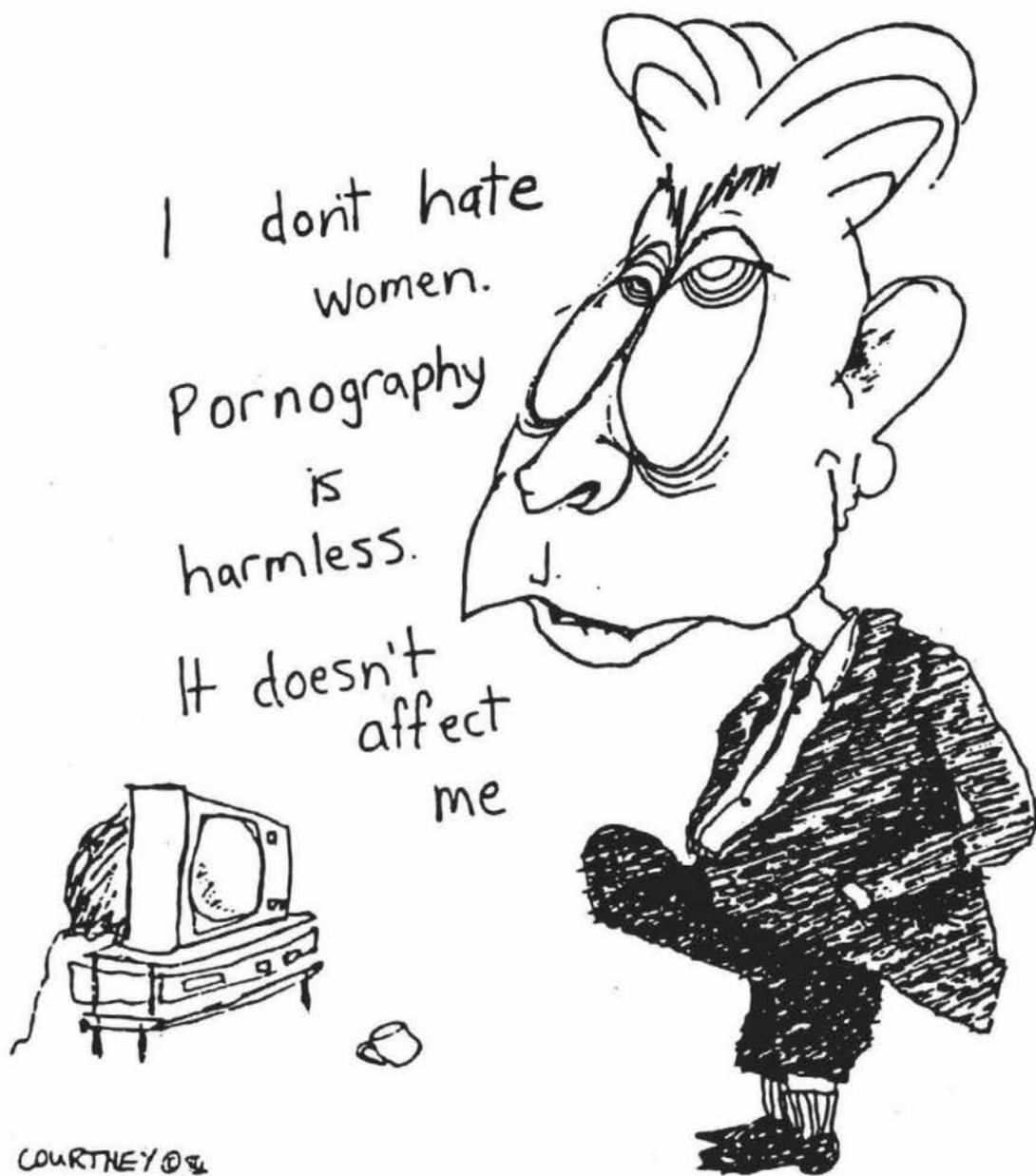
Perhaps pornographic images appear to have the power to incite action, because like all popular culture, they are so moving, seeming to speak directly to sexuality, desire, power, instinct and emotions. They appear to be experienced strongly by the body, rather than the mind, forcing the

'enthralled spectatorship of the eye,...[seeming] to fuse themselves directly to the eye, rather than taking the more circuitous route of the mediation of print' (Wicke,1993:67).

Pornography then, contaminated by its association with the body and nature, is thought to exploit and objectify people (women especially) and degrade and trivialise sex. Erotica, in contrast, is not associated with base sexuality and dirty



Women Against Pornography as the 'sex police'. All sexually-explicit material is lumped together and condemned. Cartoon printed in W.A.P.'s *Activist Handbook*. 1989. Wellington.



The conflation of sex and violence in Women Against Pornography's campaigns. Cartoon from W.A.P.'s *It's About Time* booklet. 1989. Wellington.

bodies. It is a metaphysical 'mind-fuck': it is about emotions and critical thinking, not pure escapism or enjoyment.

Anti-pornography feminists are able to talk about a direct 'effect' of pornography because they assume there is one fixed meaning there: that sexual representations are *only* about the subordination of women. However, two points need to be reviewed in answer to this 'effects' model, which has been largely discredited by media theorists (see chapter three; and Fiske,1987; Morley,1989; Dow,1996). These points concern the multiple meanings (polysemy), pleasures and fantasies available within a popular cultural text, and the agency of the audience.

Butler (1990a) argues that pornography does not give a single point of identification for its audiences, thus there is a multiplicity of meanings and pleasures. Cultural producers can not be said to have total control over the meaning of popular culture, rather audiences have the agency and creativity to negotiate these, bringing their own experiences and knowledges to bear on the popular cultural texts (see Hall, 1980; and chapter three). Furthermore, Butler (1990a) claims that anti-pornography feminism displays misconceptions about 'fantasy', relying 'upon a representational realism that conflates the signified of fantasy with its (impossible) referent'. Fantasy rather 'suspends' real actions: it is always about 'what is not *yet* real, what is possible or futural' (original emphasis) and does not 'suddenly transmute into action' (ibid:105,113).

The erotica/pornography divide upheld by anti-pornography feminists has been widely critiqued for being based on these presumptions of fixed, singular meanings, and a direct movement from fantasy to action. While some theorists recognise that there are problems with claiming that an image or text is intrinsically sexist, they still believe that pornography is negative and exploitative, this time on the basis of its production, being a product of the male-dominated capitalism. Kovel (1989) for example, suggests that pornography is exploitative because it is implicated in the blatant, irresponsible hedonism of the culture industry (commodity capitalism). Erotica, on the other hand, is part of pure and critical art:

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'Pornography is the captivity of the erotic within mass culture. It is the erotic less its negativity, less its ambivalence, its association with death, and, finally, its truthfulness' (ibid:66).

This idea surfaces as the belief that feminists and caring artists can produce erotica, while capitalists, misogynists and dirty old men produce pornography.

It was the strong influence of socialism within the women's movement, which led to the idea that working within the capitalist system is antithetical to feminist 'homespun' philosophies and politics (Young, 1988:177). On the other hand though, there is more than a hint of patronising elitism in these claims, pointing to the predominance of middle-class values in feminisms. The erotica/pornography divide is a class issue, in the sense that popular culture is thought to be for the working classes who are closer to nature (e.g. manual labourers), and less intellectual. It is uncritical 'turn-the-brain-off' material that appeals to base emotions, needs and instincts. Thus it can be seen that popular culture, especially pornography, is believed to directly corrupt people's thought and actions, because of the way it works (stimulation of the body), and because of perceptions about the type of audience it attracts (those enjoying hedonistic escapism from their physical or non-intellectual work).

The problematic presumptions of the anti-pornography position which I have just outlined, hold weighty implications for the recognition, acceptance and encouragement of diversity and difference, which is vital in contemporary feminist theory and politics. Firstly, some feminists (e.g. W.A.P. members) are set up as the elite 'sex police', being in the privileged, powerful and patronising position of dictating and regulating other women's pleasures, tastes and practices (like the feminists of the temperance movement did). They can glean the 'true' and transparent meaning from representations, and are able to warn the masses that they are being indoctrinated, duped and seduced. As with the critique of heterosexuality, women who enjoy sexually-explicit material that is not viewed as acceptable 'erotica', are castigated and accused of a false consciousness. They are either traitors or victims. Like traditional discourses of femininity, posing an inherent 'good' feminine subjectivity marginalises those women who do not fit, who

may experience sexualities, desires and pleasures in ways that are traditionally associated with men.

The sexual ethic at the heart of anti-pornography feminism is unacceptable for feminists who are concerned with speaking to, and working along side *all* women for empowerment. There are however, alternative feminist voices on the issue of sexually-explicit popular culture, which express some or all of the concerns outlined above.

### **Anti-censorship and Pro-sex Feminist Perspectives.**

Anti-censorship and pro-sex feminists claim, as I do, that anti-pornography feminists often fail to acknowledge or support women's agency and self-determination within the area of sexualities and pleasures where they already existed, and miss opportunities for encouraging them further because of the focus on dangers and women's victimisation. Anti-anti-pornography feminists often begin back at the much-maligned sexual revolution, to trace women's power, agency and pleasures (see Segal,1993; Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs,1987; Assiter and Carol,1993).

Women's 'sexual revolution' might have been hidden behind the spectacle of wife-swapping, massage parlours and increased availability of sexually-explicit material (a concentration on male pleasures) but this does not mean that there were no positive changes for women. Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs (1987) argue that critics of the 'sexual revolution', fail to recognise that since the 1960s, women have transformed heterosexuality itself, and this is evident in mass culture of western societies. They suggest that while the effects of the 'sexual revolution' are ambiguous and uneven, feminists need to highlight the aspects which *have* empowered and enabled women so as to be able to build on these further. If feminists fail to do this, then they leave space for traditional and conservative notions to be reasserted.

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Anti-censorship and pro-sex feminists do not deny that some sexually-explicit material or pornography, can be regarded as sexist (among other things), but it is not the *cause* of women's oppression. Segal (1990:227) maintains that pornography is not necessarily negative, as it can be regarded as one example from many, of new public discourses concerning what was previously private and unspeakable.

[When] there was little explicit pornography openly available, there was no public outcry against wife-beating, marital rape, child abuse; indeed, little fuss was made over any type of rape or violence against women...it does seem likely that it is when sexual expression is most contained within a sanctified private sphere that the least public awareness of, and discussion about, women's vulnerability to abuse exists' .

Within these new spaces for discussion, there are progressive possibilities for feminists to politicise the personal and for women to give voice to their experiences, desires, sexualities and pleasures which had been denied. As Assiter and Carol (1993:4) contend:

'It is only because censorship was reduced and the language of sexuality became a common part of our ordinary lives that we were able to spread the word on sexual issues, publish the insights of our consciousness-raising groups, read women's own descriptions of the parts of our bodies that polite society kept hidden and secret, and begin to understand the extent to which the sex dualism had robbed us'.

It becomes important then to oppose censorship, and to look at encouraging, not limiting, the cultural practices that women can be involved in. We can not claim that any particular representations or cultural practices are unequivocally sexist or progressive because 'culture can not be divided into feminist and anti-feminist, for it is always a question of how we engage with culture, and every engagement is a voyage of discovery' (Rodgerson and Wilson,1991:47).

Women though, can 'challenge the central assumptions about sexuality which determine sexual ideology in our culture' (ibid:12) through participating in cultural practices (speaking, reading, sharing experiences and knowledges). Anti-censorship feminists argue that we need to use sexually-explicit popular culture to represent women's experiences, producing a feminist erotica or a feminist readings 'against the grain' of mainstream texts (see Myers,1982). As Feminists Against

Censorship (1989) claim, 'women need open and safe communication about sexual matters...[including] sexually-explicit material produced by and for women'. Thompson's (1990) study of young women's sexual experiences supports this. Thompson concludes that in order to have control over their own sexualities and bodies and be able to have safer, more pleasurable and empowering relationships, young women need an 'erotic education'. They need to have the spaces to talk about, explore and learn about desires and sex, through their own practices and through access to diverse fantasies and stories, not just those narratives of romance and 'waiting' for love.

My agreement with anti-censorship positions though, is limited due to the fact that they often insist on the final qualifier that 'the real battle is elsewhere' (Rodgerson and Wilson,1991:75). Battles against violence, sexist education, lack of opportunities for women, unequal pay are what is *really* important and concerns with pleasures and desires are not. While I would never deny that these are important issues for feminists, I do not see them as separated off from popular culture and pleasures, as I discuss below. Furthermore, I am critical of the liberal understanding of power, implicit in these theories. Similar to anti-pornography positions, power is seen to repress a women's true sexuality which, when freed from social censorship and oppression, would be revolutionary and disruptive of the social order (Myers,1982). This is a problematic understanding of power, as I explain below.

### **Post-modern Feminist Approach to Popular Culture and The 'Politics of Pleasure'.**

The position that I take in this research, is an eclectic feminist perspective informed by some post-modern insights. Centrally, this encompasses the recognition and encouragement of diversity and difference, critiquing and looking for ways beyond the gendered dichotomies (clearly exemplified in the ideas I have outlined above) that are at the basis of western thought. A post-modern feminist perspective requires an understanding of socially-constructed (not essential) identities, and

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problematizes the category of ‘women’. It is recognised that many women have been silenced or marginalised by generalisations about ‘women audiences’ and ‘women’s pleasures’, and acknowledged that gender and sexualities are ‘contingent and multiple—a process rather than an a priori category’ (Schwichtenberg,1994:169). An alternative understanding of power is also necessary: where power is seen as productive (not only repressive) and as involving resistance and negotiation (not simply monolithic). For the area I am concerned with, popular pleasures, this general deconstruction of dichotomies involves an awareness of the relation of pleasures to politics, seriousness, and power.

As I pointed out in the beginning of this chapter, the main point of the ‘politics of pleasure’ is that pleasures are not separated off from ‘real’ politics. Pleasures are inextricably entwined in power and political concerns. Feminists have previously demonstrated that pleasures, in the realm of the personal, are linked to power relations, by exposing how women are controlled and oppressed through their sexualities, desires and bodies. Queer activists and theorists have also shown how people are oppressed through the control and fixed definitions of pleasures, but have importantly demonstrated that pleasures can also be a site of political resistance and empowerment (see Rubin,1984; Butler,1990b; Martin,1992; Henderson, 1993).

This is an understanding of the ‘politics of pleasure’ (pleasures as both oppressive and empowering) that is outlined by Foucault’s idea of the regime of power/knowledge/pleasure. Foucault (1981:119) argues that rather than repressing our inherent sexuality, power ‘needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body’, working to *produce* subjectivities, bodies, knowledges and pleasures through practices at the micro-level. That is, ‘the sexual isn’t already given, but is produced through a variety of social practices which extend across the fabric of daily life’ (Myers,1983:15). Some of these practices are controlled through being legitimated and condoned (e.g. heterosexual

relations), while others are controlled through condemnation and punishments (e.g. pornography).

Power operates at sites not previously recognised, like popular culture and pleasures, which are grounds 'for an individual's negotiated inscription into the social world' (Gotfrit,1988:127). It is here where women learn, construct and negotiate their personal and collective identities, desires, pleasures, bodies, and histories. This means that pleasure is not neutral nor is it something natural that is repressed by power, but rather power works through pleasure. Foucault (1978:106) maintains that:

'the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistance, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power'.

Power incites 'the desire not only for pleasure but also for the "knowledge of pleasure", the pleasure of knowing pleasure' (Williams,1990:3 quoting Foucault, 1978:177).

Negotiation, contestation and refusals are inevitable consequences of power according to Foucault: 'There is always something in the social body, in classes, in groups, in individuals themselves, which in a certain way escapes relations of power' (quoted in Dews,1986:100). Gotfrit (1988:128) claims that because:

'[w]e struggle against being tied to identities of self that subject us to domination and exploitation', the 'cultural order' consists of both dominant culture(s), and those subordinated and competing ones.

Using this perspective to look at popular cultural practices like pornography and strip shows, it is clear that it can no longer be said that these express a true masculinity and a fixed male power, nor do they repress women's essential identity. The pleasures and desires involved, are not expressions of gender but are 'technologies of gender' (de Lauretis,1987), which create subjectivities through processes of *becoming*. Everyday practices and cultural norms (like those within popular culture) contain gender performances or 'rituals of gender behaviour' (Goffman, 1979:84) which work to fix bodies, pleasures, sexualities and desires into stable identities which are 'acceptable'. These 'disciplinary practices', fix

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women into narrowly defined relationships with men and other women, constructing the social and cultural relations where male systems of power and privilege dominate. They also produce guilt, shame, fear, stigma in those that do not or can not conform, leading to women’s own self-disciplining.

What pleases us or turns us on then, is embedded in historical, cultural and social contexts, and is related to fashion, cultural style, genre conventions, patterns of production and consumption, etc. in popular culture (Wicke,1993:73). It is in and through these popular pleasures, that women internalise and naturalise social and cultural norms about how to be a woman in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1990s<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, it is women’s sexualities and bodies that ‘often become the ground upon which women’s social regulation in forms of popular culture take place’ (Gotfrit,1988:122).

However, while pleasures are involved in shaping men and women as they are, subjectivities, sexualities, relationships and knowledges can also be reconstructed and organised differently through pleasures. Thus feminists need to identify popular ‘legitimate’ pleasures which appear to encourage conformity to dominant and masculinist notions of women’s identity, in addition to those pleasures that are in excess or ‘illegitimate’, which allow some women the space where alternative ways of being and knowing can be negotiated.

Feminists concerned about post-modern politics have criticised what they see as disempowering and disabling attempts to deconstruct the subject, allowing only free-floating, fluid and contradictory subjectivities (see Flax,1990; Soper,1990). For post-modern feminists though, there is a strong desire to *reconstruct*, redefine, do differently and uncover alternatives. As I have said, this involves firstly the

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<sup>3</sup> To this extent this constructivist approach can be reconciled with some anti-pornography feminists’ arguments, which see pornography creating a ‘rape culture’ or gendered identities where men dominate. They differ in that anti-pornography feminists do not highlight women’s subjectivities and pleasures as multiple, changing and not always opposed to male ones, nor do they centralise women’s pleasures (as a route to liberation/empowerment).

problematization, not a dismissal, of the category of 'women', understanding the differences within this which have been elided, and secondly, a view of gender as 'a process of negotiation with culture rather than as the assumption of necessarily feminine qualities, attributes or identifications' (Schwichtenberg, 1994:171). This leads to the recognition that, like other cultural practices, feminism is itself a set of discourses which constructs or allows various feminist subject positions. Dominant feminisms are tied up in power relations which marginalise or disallow certain subjectivities and identities through legitimising what feminists can and can not, do, say, wear and who they should and should not work with, desire and seek pleasure with.

When differences between women are addressed, and when sexualities, desires and pleasures are regarded as diverse, changing and open to contestation, the picture for women is a lot brighter than that painted by anti-pornography feminists. To claim pleasures, especially sexual pleasures, as legitimate feminist goals is radical in the sense that those who wish to deny and constrain women's pleasures are also those who push conservative and New Right agendas in employment, education, health, etc. Just for women to insist on pleasure, is to assert some power (Ehrenreich et.al., 1987:195). The power, agency and potential for contestation and resistance that women already do have is valued and highlighted, making it clear that it is not only enlightened feminist activists who are and can be 'political'.

Grosz and Probyn (1995:xi) maintain that to consider diverse and marginalised pleasures and sexualities, is not to simply invoke a 'wild and free space' (an untainted essential sexuality) but to encourage sexualities and pleasures which disrupt the accepted and expected, and so have elements of resistance and subversion. They want feminists to look for

'new connections between and among bodies, desires, pleasures, powers, cruising the borders of the obscene, the pleasurable, the desirable, the mundane and the hitherto unspoken' (ibid.).

Looking for resistance *within* the dominant culture, at the micro level of lived cultural practices, is central to my idea of the 'politics of pleasure'. The answer is not a total withdrawal from the institution of heterosexuality or censorship of sexual representations, but to encourage women to do these differently. While I do not deny the need for large-scale political movements, it is also necessary to understand micro-level cultural practices where everyday resistances and transgressions are made by women living through and reworking the dominant culture. As McRobbie (1994) argues, we need a new kind of feminism for a new age. One which does not require that political consciousness and political action begin *outside* of the dominant culture, and one which involves pleasures, desires, fantasy and entertainment.

### **Problems of the Post-modern Approach.**

Many feminists though have been wary about taking a post-modern approach to feminist politics (see Benhabib,1992). One central concern has been that post-modernists sometimes seem to uncritically celebrate pleasure as resistance, regarding all pleasures as inherently subversive and beyond social constraint, in similar ways to the liberal position I outlined earlier. Clarke (1990) identifies this as 'cultural populism', a position diametrically opposed to the pessimism about popular culture described above. In this post-modern populism, the distinction between high or dominant culture and popular culture is not deconstructed, but reversed. For example, Chambers (1986:13) valorises popular culture as the

'informal knowledge of the everyday, based on the sensory, the immediate, the pleasurable and the concrete...[which] rejects the narrow access to the cerebral world of official culture...[and] offers instead a more democratic prospect for appropriating and transforming everyday life'.

Barthes' (1977) concept of *jouissance* similarly pictures immediate and sensory pleasure as disruption or resistance. Fiske's (1989a;1989b) analyses of 'producerly' readings of popular culture appear to claim that audiences' pleasures are intrinsically resistive to dominant powers. However, as I have claimed earlier (Hann,1995), Fiske conflates pleasure with resistance, equating agency with opposition and empowerment, and audiences' power with that of the dominant culture industries, in ways that are unhelpful for feminist politics.

It is misleading to see pleasures as purely subversive when they are also sometimes effects of power relations, helping to organise and control people's inscription into dominant culture. Dyer (1992) points out that the perception that pleasures are 'wild' and beyond social constraint, forgets that pleasures are historical and culturally constructed as the opposite of what is work, conformity, legitimacy and politics. As Roman et.al. (1988:11) claim,

'to argue that because popular cultural forms may evoke in people an awareness of sensory, pleasurable, or immediate concrete experiences, they necessarily or inherently possess the potential to democratise daily life, is to fall into the trap of romanticising the effects of popular cultural forms without actually providing evidence of such democratisation'.

What is thought to be counter hegemonic resistance could actually be imaginative 'ways of living subordination' (ibid.:13).

Some feminists argue that this post-modern populism is merely a value-reversal of the gendered associations of popular culture with passive consumption, the feminine and triviality (see Modleski,1991). Baudrillard (1983) for example, believes popular culture is invested with subversive potential because it is 'feminine', where femininity equals excessive consumption, hyper-conformity, surface play, and the 'somnambulant masses' who submit to it. However, this cannot count as feminist resistance because it does not challenge traditional femininity and retains gendered hierarchies like active/passive, high/low culture etc. McRobbie (1980:40) is also critical of the unexamined sexism in some cultural theorists' claims about the pleasurable resistance of subcultures, which she believes 'frequently hinge on a collective disregard for women and the sexual exploitation of girls'.

There is an understandable concern about this problematic post-modern populism, because it appears not only in some male-centred theories, but in a diluted form *within* contemporary popular culture bearing a feminist facade (thus it has been labelled 'post-feminism').

## **Post-feminist Discourses on Pleasure and Politics.**

Traditional discourses were concerned with *restraining* pleasures and desires in order to be a proper woman or man, a good worker, be in control and successful. Sometimes pleasures were things to be enjoyed in moderation as a naughty and self-indulgent treat after the work is done. This understanding of pleasures underpins anti-pornography feminists claims, as well as liberal discourses on pleasures ('each to their own', 'just go for it'). However, a new discourse exists within, and about, contemporary popular culture in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It surprisingly sounds like the liberal philosophy of free choice and individualism, at the same time as employing feminist political rhetoric (such as 'empowerment', 'liberation', and 'equality'). Furthermore, women's pleasures are not marginalised or suppressed within this discourse, but appear central and important.

Sonnet and Whelehan (1995:82) call this new discourse (seen in women's magazines, films and television serials) 'post-feminist' because of its three central characteristics: 1) the belief that women *already* have equal rights to pleasure; 2) the view that pleasure is a separate issue from other inequalities, which are either marginalised or hidden; and 3) the daemonisation of feminism which is 'cast as static and inflexible, [and seen] as the *dominant* oppressor of women'. According to this discourse, we have supposedly 'moved beyond the bad old days of 'women's lib' to a period where women can be both sexy *and* powerful' (ibid:81).

Within post-feminism pleasures, especially sexual pleasures, are pictured as the way to power. Self-determination and liberation are said to be gained through pleasurable consumption and enjoyable disciplines (like sports, diet, beauty routines) (ibid.). The fact that more women are openly doing this (for example, taking an interest in sexually-explicit material) is seen to be an indication that women are now equal with men. 'Sex, success and liberation' (Lee,1988:169) become the same, all accessible through the site of the female body and female pleasure.

According to Sonnet and Whelehan (1995), post-feminist discourses involve a 'politics of appearance and looking', where the possibilities of liberation are given in terms of not only sexual power, but economic power (career, success and consumption). Pleasure/power is a purchasable commodity (books, videos, lingerie, movies, shows). This speaks to, and simultaneously constructs, the 1990s liberated female consumer who is sexy, smart and hard working. A woman who is in control, independent, knows what she wants, and goes for it. Elle McPherson epitomised this in an interview recently, saying something close to: 'I own my own business, I employ my own staff and have creative control, what more do feminists want'?

As Lee (1988) notes though, this powerful, sexy woman does not appear to be very different from old patriarchal definitions of women. The 'new woman' reinscribes traditional femininity with little change, and without challenging the structures which hold it in place, while post-feminism 'does not provide any means for engaging with the consequences of occupying a space beyond the conventional 'feminine' (Sonnet and Whelehan,1995:82). For example, while there has been increased discussions about women's use of sexually-explicit material, these often still take for granted women's association with 'coyness', emotionality, desire for tenderness, softness, identification and mutuality (for example, see Schaer,1994b). Feminine power and identity is juxtaposed to masculinity<sup>4</sup>, while women are represented as a homogenous group, not divided by class, ethnicity, sexuality etc. Traditional values like heterosexual monogamy, romantic love, self-discipline, individual responsibility, and capitalist consumerism are presented as unproblematically good and desirable (Sonnet and Whelehan,1995).

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<sup>4</sup> Helen Williams, editor of a women's erotic magazine, utilises post-feminist discourses to claim that:

'we have this incredible double standard in women's favour, for once. It's like a wonderful joke on men. I think it's [women's erotica] is seen as OK because we don't have as sleazy an image. Men's sexuality is still seen as predatory and a bit dangerous- but it's not like women are going to go out and become rapists' (quoted in Schaer,1994b:43).

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Contrary to the post-feminist claim that pleasure equals empowerment, this discourse appears to be an example of how power works through inciting pleasures and desires, while making them *appear* natural for women.

Sonnet and Whelehan (1995) think that post-feminist discourses of pleasure and spectacle, empowerment through consumerism, strategies of play, contradiction and disruption, can not possibly challenge existing patriarchal structures. The pleasurable control offered may in fact mean further disempowerment for women. As Bordo (1989:28) reminds us, there is a need to be aware of the contradictions between rhetoric and real life in the routes to liberation offered in popular culture.

'Popular representations... may speak forcefully through the rhetoric and symbolism of empowerment, personal freedom, "having it all". Yet female bodies, perusing these ideals, may find themselves as distracted, depressed and physically ill as female bodies in the nineteenth century, perusing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity and delicacy'.

The vilification of feminism within post-feminism is of further concern.

'Feminism- as tyrannical, anti-pleasure, and anti-sex - is quite categorically situated as the enemy of 'post-feminist' 'new' women, in ways that patriarchy, capitalism and New Right pro-family legislation are not' (Sonnet and Whelehan,1995:83).

Feminists are stereotyped as the anti-pleasure 'drab dungareed dyke', concerned with 'natural femaleness'. It is assumed, as Robyn Langwell, editor of *North and South* (quoted in Court,1995:1) does, that a feminist analysis and politics are irrelevant to contemporary society, being 'necessities of the past'. It is as though 'feminism taught us that we're equal to men, we don't need to prove it any more' (Lee,1988:168). However, the kind of activism invoked by post-feminism is of self-help and individual responsibility. Collective political action, as well as social transformation is elided and revolutionary feminist rhetoric is appropriated for anti-feminist ends. Post-feminism is not a transformation of the existing state as it represents itself to be, but a

'a pronouncement of female power emptied of any feminist political resonance; the personal is publicised as *the* crucial site of women's power' (Sonnet and Whelehan,1995:84).

## **From Post-feminism, to Post-modern Feminisms.**

Feminisms should not become the target for criticism when so many inequalities exist still in society. Furthermore, it is misleading to stereotype and chastise 'old' feminists for their puritanism and alienating practices, picturing feminisms as static and homogenous (which I attempted to avoid in my earlier discussions of anti-pornography and radical lesbian feminisms). The problems with post-feminism are, as I discussed, the fact that agency is conflated with subversion; individual empowerments are privileged over collective ones; and pleasures are not seen as social constructs. However, this does not mean that all post-modern insights need to be discarded, indeed feminists can not fail to engage with them (Lee,1988; Winship,1985). Feminist theories and practices informed post-modernists in the first place (Owens,1985), and this influence needs to be brought to the fore.

While Sonnet and Whelehan (1995) complain that feminism has been reified and caricatured, they, like some others, have done the same to post-modernism. They fail to acknowledge the legitimacy of *any* challenges to feminism, thus discounting some important criticisms made by women of colour, Third World women, lesbian, bi and queer women, about the undeniable suppression of diversity and elitism within dominant feminist agendas.

A recognition of the diversity of women and their lives, as there is in *post-modern feminisms*, would involve an acceptance of multiple and different paths towards liberation and empowerment, while also both allowing *and* encouraging a variety of political actions on different scales (micro and global) at different sites. Post-modern feminist politics would look for ways of

'constructing forms of intervention that can be effective in particular, historical locations, that can re-form specific institutional or cultural practices' (Duggan,1995:4).

In the area of sexually-explicit popular culture, this means 'reclaiming and reinventing' this on behalf of women, neither trying to abolish it, or defending it as a right of free speech and choice (*ibid.*). Post-modern feminist strategies are politics based in 'specific local interventions', but always retain an awareness of the lived

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relationship these have to larger economic and political structures. As the slogan of the environmental awareness movement says: ‘Think global, act local’. It is recognised that a ‘pure’ politics is uncertain. Even the best of feminist intentions have backlashed, been co-opted and used for anti-feminist means (consider the example of pro-censorship anti-pornography activism).

I agree with Duggan (ibid:5) that feminist post-modern politics is about ‘grasping at every opportunity for progressive change’, and not settling for ‘minor tinkering with the status-quo’ but I do not think that we need to avoid ‘unrealistic fantasies of revolution’ as she does. Feminist utopias, fantasies of a revolutionised world are what sustains the everyday political actions that we undertake, but we must not hold out *only* for revolutionary destruction of capitalist and patriarchal systems. This wastes time, and alienates many women who could be developing a feminist understanding through different means (Lee, 1988; Segal, 1994).

Young (1988:178) rightly claims that:

‘If feminism is to remain a radical or subversive political force women cannot afford to simply emulate the old Left’s dismissive disdain for mass culture or the new Left’s apparently indiscriminate endorsement of anything that appears to be popular’.

Targeted feminist engagements with popular culture are vital, because as the proliferation of post-feminist ideas in popular culture demonstrates, feminisms have not in fact been marginal to popular culture, but have made a significant impact (ibid.:174). Popular cultural practices such as male strip shows, are spaces within dominant culture that have been enabled by feminists (through fighting for women’s economic, sexual, and legal rights), thus they still hold potential for feminists. Feminist cultural practices such as women’s publishing, theatre, art and music, have already been very successful strategies for change and empowerment, having connected many women and men to feminist perspectives. Feminisms have become a ‘major popular cultural force whose vitality seems unstoppable’ (Bennett, 1986b:7). While it is important to be more active and influential in the production and distribution of popular culture, we also need to consider how the consumption of popular culture, the audiences’ practices, can link them to feminist

understandings. This latter aspect is the focus of my research into women's experiences of male strip shows.

Multiple feminist interventions into the popular culture then, must be encouraged and highlighted (Lewallen,1988:100). Feminists need to both challenge the apolitical, individualistic rhetoric which currently passes as 'feminism', and the association of popular culture and its audiences with the passive, subordinate 'feminine', in addition to advancing feminist understandings and political actions through, and within, popular culture. While Sonnet and Whelehan (1995) believe that post-feminism fails to meet patriarchy at the sites of oppression, I argue that feminists need to identify and work on all the sites of where power operates. Because power often goes undetected at the site of pleasures, and because many women can relate to these pleasures in popular cultural practices (often feeling powerful through them), feminists need to be searching for 'inroads into the cultural terrain that constitutes the 'popular' and to the systems of power that shape and define the female subject' (Young,1988:188).

In order to understand how pleasures can be involved in viable political feminist action, feminists must look to the ways that pleasures are experienced by women, and how they are connected to their lives, social positions and communities. We must look to the ways that pleasures are 'mobilised and reconstructed' (Mercer,1983:84), so as to not only identify resistance and contestation already occurring, but to develop ways that feminists can encourage popular cultural practices which make resistance, and not conformity, more possible by highlighting the gaps and contradictions where this can develop. Rather than seeing all pleasures as the route to empowerment and equality, feminists need to get specific, considering the degrees and contexts of resistance in certain popular cultural practices, recognising that pleasures are sites of domination as well as potentially, but not always, sites of resistance and self-determination. For example, feminists can trace ways that women are already actively reconstructing heterosexual relationships and pleasure, so as to point the way for other women to do this.

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We need to look to specific situations and groups of women, to avoid insupportable generalisations about women audiences. Young (1988) believes that it is important to look to subjectivities that do not fit into the feminist/not-feminist distinction (like Madonna), in order to recognise differences in the category of 'women' and the potential for alternatives to male-defined femininity. Being sexually powerful, and not conforming to feminine passivity and naiveté (as seen in the 'new liberated women' of post-feminism) is not an unequivocal feminist subjectivity (if there is such a thing). However, it is possibly a shift in gender relations, where some women feel empowered and are able to take more control over, and redefine their sexualities. As such, this positive improvement for women needs to be claimed for feminist agendas and encouraged. We can not afford to dismiss such women as anti-feminist, but rather try to build connections and links between different women and diverse feminist agendas.

Feminists need to have more to say about the things that women do on a regular basis (of which popular cultural practices are a significant part), in order to articulate women with feminist ideas and actions. Because sexism is more covert and insidious in 1990s Aotearoa/New Zealand, many women do not experience anger and pain at clear injustices. Feminists who fail to acknowledge this, alienate some (especially young) women.

It is important to also recognise that a focus on displeasure and victimisation, and a critique of the world of fantasy and escapism (evident in some anti-pornography positions), denies the fact that being a feminist is an intensely pleasurable experience, full of dreams and desires. I experience pleasures from community, camaraderie, love, friendship, fun, comfort and strong independent role models, and am sustained by fantasises of feminist utopias. It needs be emphasised that feminists are not adverse to pleasure, and that in fact, it is central to our politics.

## **Conclusions.**

In order to understand what male strip shows might mean for feminists in contemporary Aotearoa/New Zealand, I have explored ideas about popular culture and its pleasures and audiences. I outlined how these have been understood within common-sense knowledges, and cultural theories, especially feminist ones. I identified common assumptions about the negative effects of popular pleasures, (being associated with low/working class, triviality, harm, naturalness, and femininity).

I provided a critique of influential anti-pornography and radical lesbian feminist perspectives, which rely on these assumptions. This rejected the view that pornography is only about the graphic portrayal of women as subordinated sex-objects, which incites male violence, and causes women's oppression. I argued that this conflates heterosex with violence, and fantasy with action; seeing women's and men's sexualities as singular, fixed and opposing; while also supporting censorship which limits spaces for women's exploration of sex and pleasures. This ends up as an elitist silencing and castigation of women who do not fit into the prescription given by feminists. As Segal (1993:19) claims:

'in the end, anti-pornography campaigns, feminist or not, can only enlist today, as they invariably enlisted before, guilt and anxiety around sex, as well as lifetimes of confusion in our personal experiences of sexual arousal and activity. In contrast, ...[feminists] must enlist the widest possible resources to empower women socially to seek only the types of sexual encounters they choose, and to empower women sexually to explore openly their own interests and pleasures. We do need the space to produce our own sexually explicit narratives and images of female desire and sensuous engagement, if we are to embark upon that journey'

As an alternative feminist perspective on popular culture and pleasures, I turned to a post-modern feminist approach and the 'politics of pleasure' which centralise the interconnectedness of pleasures with power and politics, recognising that pleasures are both oppressive and empowering, *and* that politics are pleasurable. The social constructedness of women's identities, sexualities and pleasures are highlighted, along with the diversity among women, and their agency and

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resistance, which opens up multiple sites and levels of political action. In order to speak to the lives of many women, popular culture must be regarded as an important site for feminist intervention. Despite problems with some post-moderns' claim that all pleasure equals resistance, I argue that feminists need to look at the ways different women experience pleasures and negotiate dominant culture, to identify and encourage women's reconstruction of male-definitions of pleasures, (hetero)sexuality and femaleness.

The next chapter deals with women's experiences and women's participation in popular culture in more detail. I argue that in order for feminists to know what male strip shows are about, they need to ask the women audiences who are involved.

## **CHAPTER THREE.**

### **Approaches to Male Strip Shows: Looking at Representations and/or Audiences.**

This chapter moves from the previous general discussion about feminist politics, popular culture and pleasures to a more specific focus on male strip shows. I outline various ways that feminists can approach a political understanding of this popular cultural practice: that is through common-sense ideas and media interpretations; through an analysis of the representations of men in the show; and finally through a consideration of audiences' experiences.

I first place male strip shows within an historical context, arguing that it is only recently in Aotearoa/New Zealand that we see the forms of representations and the address to women audiences, of which these shows are an example. I go on to examine whether these shows can be seen as indications of equality. This question of equality pervades public discussions on such shows, and must therefore underlie any feminist engagement with the topic. A feminist understanding does not only involve a description of the events of the shows, but must consider whether these empower or oppress women in any way. It is necessary to think about how these shows link into wider issues of gender and sexuality, and thus power.

Critiques of cultural representations of gender have been central to western feminisms since the second wave, becoming the 'leitmotif of feminist agitation' (Wernick, 1987:277). Thus it is understandable that many feminists will approach male strip shows by considering the representations involved. However, this perspective contains many problematic assumptions which elide women's experiences, pleasures, meanings and agency, often ending in a negative dismissal of this form of entertainment enjoyed by some women.

I end this chapter by arguing that if we are to look at women's resistances, pleasures, diversity and think about the possibilities of change, then we must centralise audiences' experiences of the show. This focus on 'active audiences' is central to my post-modern feminist approach.

### **Male Strip Shows in an Historical Perspective.**

Male strip shows are a new form of popular entertainment for women in Aotearoa/New Zealand. They are part of the increasingly public discourses and practices about sexualities and pleasures. The shows are interesting in that they involve changes both to the way men, male bodies, and masculinities are represented in our culture, as well as to ideas about women's engagement with popular culture (i.e. who makes up the audience, what their experiences are, and what meanings and pleasures they have).

Increasingly the sexual representation of male bodies is becoming more common in our culture. As Star (1994:27) comments,

'the range of arenas where 'masculine bodies' and 'masculinity' may be legitimately displayed has expanded, and with it the opportunities for looking'.

In the 1980s, the Levi's ad with Nick Kamen taking off his jeans, and in the Underdaks ad<sup>5</sup> with a man walking down the street in only his underwear, were early indicators of a wider cultural trend of exposing male bodies and masculinities<sup>6</sup>. Now, audiences are faced with a proliferation of semi-naked and eroticised male bodies selling a variety of commodities (see examples opposite),

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<sup>5</sup> The Nineties ads for underdaks, do not show women looking on in shock (as the 1980s one did) but with lust, in fact actively creating a situation, at an airport customs check, where they can look erotically at the man who has to undress.

<sup>6</sup> Representations of male bodies have historically, usually only been available as an erotic object for men's needs and desires, not women's. The presence of male nudes in ancient Roman and Chinese societies was due to active modes of homosexuality and bisexuality being more acceptable. The display of male nudes in contemporary western society has been greatly influenced by the increasing acceptability, power, visibility and market potential of gay male community (see Dyer, 1992).

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Eroticised representations of male bodies constructed for women's gaze and pleasures. Advertisements from *Cleo* magazine February 1996 (this page) and *The Dominion* November 18th 1996 (over).

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although still not as often as women bodies are used. These representations of male bodies are both implicitly and explicitly displayed for male *and* female desire. For women audiences, nude male pinups abound; famous actors strip-off in films; 'wannabes' 'bare it all' for enthusiastic women audiences in pubs all around Aotearoa/New Zealand; while professional male strippers entertain women at hen parties and 'girls-nights-out' in the home or the night-club/pub scene<sup>7</sup>.

It is not until recently that popular cultural practices for women audiences have become so overtly sexualised, moving away from the private into the public realm. Entertainment for women has traditionally evolved around the pleasures of house and family (the cult of domesticity), and Ip (1988) claims that this is still common today. Women's leisure and pleasure often has to fit into their domestic labour, as well as having to be sanctioned by the male partner (that is, 'girls' are allowed to do things which are non-threatening to men). However, the various social and ideological changes that have occurred in the last 30 years mean that sexual pleasures are increasingly touted as a legitimate form of public entertainment and pleasure for women.

These public practices of women's pleasure and the display of men's bodies:

'are certainly not coming from a political avant-garde but are emerging within popular culture as a result of the renegotiations over masculinity brought about by radical political discourses' (Moore, 1988:48)

These occur within the context of significant shifts in the social, cultural and economic position of some groups of women and men, and involve a variety of sometimes contradictory factors which intersect at the site of popular cultural practices. Women's increasing economic power (careers; independent incomes; better, but still not equal pay; more jobs for women) is central; along with trends of women putting off marriage/partnerships and/or children longer; linked to the increasing recognition of women's rights (rights to their bodies and sexualities; opposing violence against women in its many forms etc.). Thanks to the women's

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<sup>7</sup> In that these representations invite women's pleasures but resist homoerotic pleasures, they problematically contain heterosexism, which feminists must surely simultaneously critique as they work to reform heterosexuality.

movement many feminist ideas have been adopted as common-sense by a new generation of women (and some men) in the west. Also central in this cultural shift are the gay and lesbian critiques of heterosexism; the politicising and publicising of women's desire by lesbians and bisexual women; and gay men's production of material that eroticises male bodies and politicises their desire to desire men.

The improvements for some groups of women and gay/queer men has been paralleled by limited undermining of male power and privilege. Masculinities, male bodies and some men have been increasingly subject to critical attention, where as before, the invisibility and silence surrounding these served to uphold male power (Lehman,1993), as the 'male' and 'masculine' was taken as natural and normal. When the male body is not open to desire, men maintain the position of desiring subject and controller of the powerful gaze, while women's heterosexual desires are disallowed (Coward,1984). Exposing men, their subjectivities and bodies has created what Kroker and Kroker (1991a) refer to as the 'hysterical male': masculinities in crisis, pathologised, blamed, subject to change and fragmentation. This change has also been seen as the 'feminisation of men'. It is now accepted that male actors, for example, often have to show their bodies for audiences, and as the British Carlton Television documentary *Hollywood Men* (broadcast 2-12-96 on channel 2) demonstrated, men must submit to beauty, training, diet routines, as well as cosmetic surgery and multitude of other interventions in order to be successful actors. One commentator remarked that 'men are becoming women'.

## **Equality or Not?**

The underpinning question of this research is whether this critical and erotic attention on masculinities produces changes that can benefit women. Does the proliferation of representations of men and masculinities really open them up to criticism, deflating the power that was once maintained by shielding men from scrutinising gazes? Or do these cultural changes merely mean refigurations of systems of male power and privilege? Does centralising and catering for women's pleasures in sexually-explicit popular culture allow for any kind of empowerment for

women, or are these pleasures male-defined constructs that constrain and oppress women? Do new forms of 'pornography for women' allow for more liberated sexualities for women? These became important questions for me in the construction of a post-modern feminist perspective on male strip shows.

In the media, male strip shows are often presented as a move towards some kind of equality. That is a 'democracy of vision' (Chapman, 1988:237); a levelling of the playing field, through positioning both men and women as the subjects *and* the objects of the look. A *New Zealand Women's Weekly* (1994) article for example, calls the male strip-shows 'women's revenge'. The manager of a local strip club also sees male strip shows as equality for women. In an informal conversation he said to me that feminists are always complaining about the female strip shows, but putting a couple of males in the shows will mean they have to keep quiet.

Anti-pornography feminists on the other hand, as I have shown, portray strip shows, whether female or male, as exploitative and oppressive because they involve the commodification and objectification of bodies, and lack mutuality, thus demeaning both women and men<sup>8</sup>.

In order to explore these questions of equality and power, I first discuss theories which make claims based on their analyses of the representations of male bodies involved in sexually-explicit popular culture. Pointing out the problems in this approach, I turn to a focus on those who participate in popular cultural practices as audiences and consumers, arguing that we can only start to consider the political implications of popular culture when we know what audiences think about, and do with it.

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<sup>8</sup> The definition of pornography used by MacKinnon and Dworkin in the 1983 draft of anti-pornography law in the U.S.A, is taken up by W.A.P. (1989) who claim that 'the use of men, children or transsexuals in the place of women is also pornography'

## **Eroticised Representations of Male Bodies and Realignments of Dominant Culture.**

Contrary to the ideas of equality in popular discourses, many social theorists believe that these sexualised representations of men have not dramatically shifted the power relations. They argue that changes in the hegemonic masculine<sup>9</sup> culture merely indicate a realignment of power. As I discuss below, this is evidenced by the fact that: 1) there are differences in representations of men (compared to those of women) which still construct men as active and in control; 2) the images of men are not as common as those of women; and 3) the social context of gender relations has not changed.

Firstly, as Dyer (1992) argues, it can be said that representations of men are of a different order to those of women. They are more likely to involve active, powerful poses and roles for men, than those for women, which upholds dominant ideals of 'masculinity-as-activity'; resists 'feminisation'; and disavows passivity (ibid.:66). Eroticised male bodies still appear to be the idealised muscled, pumped up hyper-masculine body (e.g. the Manpower strippers), and these exist in popular culture alongside images of hysterically macho, violent men (like Stallone and Van Damme). Steinman (1992:207) claims that producers of material aimed at women audiences are aware they 'must both eroticise male stars and preserve their masculinity, which threatens to disperse every moment men are configured as passive objects for women's eyes'.

Secondly, while sexualised images of women abound in our culture, in every genre, not only in what is conventionally termed 'pornography', eroticised representations of men are sparse, still having a novelty value when they are seen.

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<sup>9</sup> Hanke (1992:190) claims that 'hegemonic masculinity':

'refers to the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that operates on the terrain of common sense and conventional morality that defines "what it means to be a man", thus securing the dominance of some men (and the subordination of women) within the sex/gender system'.

Nude women are common and accepted, while male bodies are still largely hidden, and the erect penis still classed as 'obscene'.

Thirdly, even if men and women are represented similarly, the social and cultural contexts of these are inescapable. Anti-pornography feminists make the important point that women's nakedness renders them vulnerable to (and responsible for) abuse, attack, stigma, blame and guilt in a way that men's nakedness does not. According to Seidman (1992), for men, being the object of the gaze does not involve the vulnerability of being reduced only to a sexual object that it does for women, in fact it actually strengthens masculinity and power. Men can use their sexual attractiveness to their advantage, gaining 'passive power', the power to give or withhold sex and love, in a way that women have in the past (Chapman, 1988:245).

All these factors are considered by the New Zealand Ministerial Committee of Inquiry into Pornography (1989) when they comment on male strip shows, rejecting submissions which claim the shows are evidence of equality between men and women. The Committee asserts that male strip shows are only speciality events, not everyday occurrences, and this 'novelty value' undermines the objectification of male bodies. Thus they are not the same as female strip shows:

'When men strip for women's titillation in a society which does not accept women as men's equals, it is ironic, and therefore amusing. In our view, such [male strip] shows merely caricature the pervasive inequality between the sexes' (ibid.:147).

Chapman (1988:235,247) agrees with this view, arguing that the 'new men' of popular cultural representations (like male strippers) are 'Great Pretenders'. They are:

'a humanist ideal, a triumph of style over content, a legitimization of consumption, a ruse to persuade those that called for change that it has already occurred'.

New figurations of masculinities thus attempt to 'win consent' from women and gay/queer men who have criticised, and tried to undermine, hegemonic masculinities. These dominant and legitimate masculinities have rather mutated, and redrawn the lines in order to maintain power, through the inclusion of some

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previously marginalised representations of male bodies<sup>10</sup> (by mainstreaming representations found in alternative feminist and gay art and media, for example).

According to Chapman (ibid.) any progressive possibilities within the representations have been neutralised and co-opted by the culture industry, under the control of big business. While popular understandings of male strip shows often refer to the market as encouraging a 'level playing field', the market's involvement actually leads to more exploitation, because it celebrates capitalist values while critiques are silenced.

Wernick (1987), for example, is wary of the kinds of equality offered through the consumption of popular culture, claiming that it involves individualistic politics where people are encouraged to 'maximise their value as tokens of exchange' (ibid:295). According to Ehrenreich, et.al.(1987:205-6) consumer culture offers 'sexual revolution without revolutionary ideology, innovation without daring, new frontiers without the old risks of exploration'. It provides only small pleasures and small choices in unchanged social relations of exploitation, trivialising the collective choices women can make.

Wernick (1987:280) though does acknowledge a contradictory position. He claims that advertising and popular cultural practices can sometimes 'disrupt' gender codes in the bid for consumers and audiences. Advertising is a major cultural force, which taps into, and helps construct our desires and experiences. Because of this, it can perhaps encourage 'gender trouble', as Butler(1990a) calls it, abetting gendered subjectivities and experiences that are openly discontinuous and diverse through its address to audiences. For example, advertising targets and markets all kinds of men, from 'playboys' who refuse traditional familial contexts, to 'gender-blending pop stars' and 'out-gays', all non-traditional masculinities. Narcissism for

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<sup>10</sup> Chapman (1988:229), however, reminds us that advertising in consumer capitalism, which pictures these 'Great Pretenders', not only constructs social trends, but also reacts to them. New gender relations then must really exist and are not 'pure media hype'.

men, promoted by advertising, pluralises gender codes and norms because it encourages men to prepare for, and accept, being the object of 'the look', which goes against heterosexist codes of masculinity, challenging the idea that it is only men who look. Prolific representations of male bodies can also provoke some men to reflect on their masculinity and sexuality, as Gibson (1996) claims.

However, the conclusion drawn by Wernick (1987) is that equality can not come from buying into the leisure and self-improvement industry, although equality need not be anti-pleasure. He ends with the cryptic statement that 'live music.. is best' (ibid:295), meaning I assume, that we can have pleasures and entertainments which are not caught up in consumerism. As I stated earlier, I am critical of the idea that there can be some 'pure politics' outside capitalism. The claim that live music, or local-level popular culture, is untainted by consumerism is clearly inaccurate (consider entry tickets, broadcast rights, band paraphernalia etc.)<sup>11</sup>. We need to look for ways for politics to begin *within* the system, as well as working towards structural changes.

Do contradictions exist in these representations between male power and capitalist sensibilities then, leaving spaces for some women audiences to disrupt dominant meanings? Or are these disruptions subsumed back into dominant culture? How can we tell what these representations mean for women audiences? The focus on the representations of men (once again) marginalises women's experiences and perspectives. Negative pronouncements are made by theorists who assume there is only one meaning to be gleaned, one implication for all women and men. While I do not wish to argue that because it is pleasurable it is good, the fact that some women take great pleasure from these sexualised representations of men, needs to be considered. The images can not be simply 'written-off' as oppressive, without looking to how they are used and understood by audiences.

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<sup>11</sup> I do consider below though, in regard to carnival theory, and later in the themes that emerge from the interviews, that the live context does have some impact on the way that popular culture is experienced, which may indeed be different to that consumed in the private sphere.

## Looking At Female Spectators.

Within feminist research it is important to make women's perspectives central to knowledge, but those feminist theories which focus on representations of men, unfortunately do not do this<sup>12</sup>. I argue that we can obtain a better feminist understanding of male strip shows by considering the real socially-situated people who make up the audience, and their values, subjectivities, pleasures and meanings. Theorists who look at the 'female spectator' (from the feminist film studies traditions), may seem to be rectifying this, but as I will show actually perpetuate the invisibility of real women through their reliance on an ideal notion of the 'female spectator'. This still pictures women in the abstract, and does not challenge any stereotypes about women audiences.

In theories of female spectatorship, Mulvey's (1989) article *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* (published in 1975) is highly influential. Mulvey claims that Hollywood films<sup>13</sup> are structured around the obsessions, desires and fantasies of the patriarchal society in which they are produced, and thus they position all audiences in terms of the 'male gaze'. This universalising suggestion that spectatorship and pleasures in popular culture are always male or masculine, encouraged many feminist film theorists to take for granted the maxim that 'men look and women appear' (Berger, 1972). This however does not provide any space for diverse feminine (visual or other) pleasures and subject positions. The only possibilities for women are 'masculinisation, masochism or marginality' (Stacey, 1988:116).

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<sup>12</sup> As Tasker (1993:109) notes, that while:  
'an 'either/or' opposition has tended to frame critical discussion [on new representation of male bodies]...It is more appropriate to frame an analysis in terms of 'both/and', a phrasing which allows for a discussion of the multiplicity and instability of meaning'.

<sup>13</sup> Mulvey (1989) is concerned specifically with Hollywood cinema, but her theories are used by others to understand a variety of popular cultural practices.

'Female gaze' theory (see Gamman and Marshment,1988) in a reaction to Mulvey's (1989) assertions, establishes the idea of female spectators' active desirous look. Furthermore, while Mulvey urges feminists to destroy pleasure and look to the avant-garde for radical possibilities, female gaze theorists have encouragingly validated popular culture as a site of struggle, arguing for feminist 'intervention[s] in popular forms in order to find ways of making feminist meanings a part of our pleasures' (Gamman and Marshment,1988:2). Interventions often take the form of a 'feminist reading against the grain', a recuperative strategy of analysing popular texts (like romance novels, Hollywood movies etc.) to highlight the 'secret subversions and profeminist counter narratives' (Walters,1995:71).

While female gaze theory does consider the possibilities of women's looking disrupting traditional notions of femininity and heterosexuality, it still, like earlier feminist film theory, deals with an ideal spectator that is not grounded in a social and cultural context. This marginalises the practices of socially-positioned audiences, often only allowing for a singular (heterosexual) 'female spectator', who is the same across time and space. When the audience's experiences are merely read off the text, it is easy for feminist theorists to start talking of '*the* female gaze', which is sometimes contrasted to, and other times conflated with, an also singular 'feminist gaze' (for example see Gamman,1988). Furthermore, because the process of 'reading against the grain' is done without considering the social and cultural limitations on actual women audiences, theorists can over-emphasise the resistances possible (Walters,1995).

I have previously outlined my concern with this disregard for the diversity between and within women. Viewing audiences as abstractions, results in the tendency to under-estimate the resistance that is possible by women audiences, generalising about harm and danger (as we see in Mulvey's theories and anti-pornography feminism); or else overemphasise the subversions present in popular culture (as we see in the feminist 'reading against the grain' of female gaze theory). It is rather in the non-coincidence of the ideal spectator (given in the text), and heterogeneous

experiences of actively desiring women audiences, that resistance can be located (de Lauretis, 1984).

### **Women Audiences: a Post-modern Feminist Perspective.**

As I briefly mentioned in chapter two, the post-modern feminist position that I take in this research, begins from a different view of women audiences to those described above. Theorists who prioritise the text/image or the ideal spectator (one positioned by the text), rely on an assumption that audiences are uncritically absorbing the material they are spoon-fed by popular cultural producers (i.e. that audiences pleasures and meanings are given to them). This simplistic 'hypodermic' or 'effects' model, pictures the act of consuming popular culture as a passive, individualised, isolated and private event. I chose to research women's experiences of male strip shows, as this appeared to allow me the chance to critique these assumptions, along with the many other problems and exclusions of popular cultural theorising which have been identified.

Firstly, women audiences' participation and active enjoyment of the show, contradicts any ideas of audiences' passivity. This idea of passivity perhaps emerges when theorists focus on mass mediated forms of popular culture (magazines, television, movies) and forget about situations where embodied audiences become a part of the spectacle. Women attending male strip shows though, demonstrate that audiences are actively involved in negotiating their pleasures and meanings, that is, in the *practise* of popular culture.

Secondly, the physical presence of diverse women participating in male strip shows, emphasises the fact that audiences are not virtual or scattered, nor are they homogeneous or unitary, thus rendering problematic those theories which regard them as such. The differences between women (based on their different life experiences and social positions), as well as the (temporary) community formed from shared experiences, impacts on women's pleasures and meanings.

Thirdly and relatedly, this particular cultural practice challenges the idea that popular culture is a private affair, happening in the domestic context and in isolation, in a realm opposed to the public world of work and politics. At male strip shows audiences are gathered in, and 'occupy' physical and public spaces. This indicates the need to both see consumption as occurring within communities and groups, and to place this in social and cultural contexts. This is especially important for women audiences, who are traditionally associated with the private sphere, and whose connections to the public sphere (as workers and consumers) has been obscured and/or obstructed. The controversial nature of the shows, and the public discussion linking these to ideas of equality, also indicates that popular culture is not outside areas of political importance.

Furthermore, when considering specifically sexually-explicit popular culture, the example of women going to male strip shows challenges commonly-accepted feminist thought. I have noted that these shows break down feminist assumptions on what pornography is, and the kinds of bodies, subjectivities and pleasures it appeals to. The production of male strip shows opens up the area regarded as 'pornography for women'<sup>14</sup> (usually romance novels and erotic magazines, see Snitow, 1983 and Diamond, 1985). Male strip shows are explicit sexual material that does not take male audiences (or couples) as the norm, nor does it solely address a feminine subjectivity in line with traditional male-defined norms of passivity<sup>15</sup>. Appeals to romance and relationships are muted (although still existent) in these shows. Lust and sensuality dominate, while importantly, shame, guilt, self-control,

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<sup>14</sup> Snitow (1983:255) believes that romance novels are pornography for women who do not want to admit to reading pornography. The romance and relationships make the sex acceptable to those with traditional ideals of femininity, but 'behind these reassuringly familiar restraints [marriage, romance] they celebrate a wild, eager sexuality [similar to that in pornography]'.

<sup>15</sup> While passivity can be pleasurable for women, it is problematic because it is women's 'designated role rather than [always] their choice' (Lewallen, 1988:95). If we are to see passivity as empowering then we have to take on new understandings such as those suggested by S&M lesbians, who see the strength, power and activity in being passive, as well as the vulnerability and dependency of being in the active role.

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responsibility, deferment, and modesty are *not* encouraged. Women audiences are in powerful positions as paying customers, and are addressed as the active initiators. The space is provided for them to 'go wild', and explore their desires and pleasures. Many women do.

The political and subversive potential of women attending male strip shows emerges then, when I consider the ways that some common-sense assumptions, social norms and feminist theories are challenged by this practice. However, I am aware of the problems of celebrating resistance without considering the real dangers and limitations which exist for women in society. Below I discuss Bakhtin's (1984a) theory of 'carnival' which allows a way of thinking about the shows as simultaneously containing the maintenance of dominant culture, in addition to resistance and change that is positive for women.

### **Carnival Theory and Women Audiences.**

The Ministerial Committee of Inquiry into Pornography cite the novelty value, parody, humour, and infrequency of male strip shows within a context of unequal gender relations, as detracting from any possible progressive political value. However, it is precisely these factors which are recognised in Bakhtin's (ibid.) theory of 'carnival', as holding the potential for critiquing and challenging dominant cultures. According to Bakhtin, the spirit of the carnival unleashes people from everyday life, into a situation of wild celebrations where 'everything is pregnant with its opposite' (Stam,1989:22). Bakhtin sees carnivals not only as festivities sponsored by authorities, but as simultaneously 'the oppositional culture of the oppressed' (ibid:173), where there is not just an 'inversion of differences' (Hanke,1992:196), but possibilities for social change.

Stam (1989), like Butler (1990b), reads Bakhtin to emphasise carnivals as living social practices, not purely as textual strategies. They are the explosion of everyday cultural struggles, where official, dominant culture is turned upside-down. Social norms and taboos are transgressed; hierarchies are destroyed; the obscene

and the grotesque are celebrated; fears and dangers are parodied; time and space are organised differently; the material body and corporeal pleasures (like eating, drinking, sex, dancing and life/death energies) are privileged over the mind and celebrated; the margins are brought to the centre; and there is a 'transfer to a utopian world of pleasure and abundance' (Stam,1989:87).

I class male strip shows as a situation of carnival. As I have said, conventions of erotic representation; of desirous and disciplining gazes; and of audience's gendered pleasures are all challenged in this situation. Commenters on male strip shows certainly place them in the realm of the 'carnavalesque' (that is, having the strategies, practices and imagery of the carnival), when they talk of 'women's revenge'; women 'going wild' and 'acting like men'; together with the objectification, eroticisation and 'feminisation' of men.

The key question is whether these carnivalesque practices are about a temporary occurrence, or whether they have subversive potential for change. Eco (1984) thinks carnival has a 'safety valve' function, a kind of tokenism allowed by those in power, which upholds their control and the status quo, by letting subordinated groups sometimes feel powerful (thus they are less likely to demand *real* change).

Both Stam (1989) and Butler (1990b) though, think that within the collective practices of carnival there is room for social transformation. They both believe that the carnivalesque, under some conditions, can be used by feminists and gay/lesbian/queers to subvert male-dominated heterosexist culture<sup>16</sup>. Gender roles can be overturned and sexualities pluralised, leading to, as Bakhtin (1984b:123) believes, 'a new mode of interrelationships between individuals'. Women are 'on top' in the carnival. They are disorderly, released from the constraints of gender and sexuality norms. There are multiple desires, bodies, sexualities and ways of

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<sup>16</sup> Although Russo (1986) among others, comments that Bakhtin himself does not address women audiences and the social relations of gender, it does not mean his ideas can not be useful for feminism.

becoming women<sup>17</sup>. This gives rise to social and cultural critiques, knowledges and desires within the carnival, which can have consequences in real life (Stam, 1989). Thus, in the theory of carnival there is no separation of politics from pleasure, nor the mind from the body, but 'the cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given here as an indivisible whole' (Bakhtin, 1984a: 19).

While some carnivalesque strategies can then be subsumed into the dominant culture, Stam (ibid.) believes that the subversive potential of carnival lies in the celebration of material bodies in community. The media often offers the *promise*, or a simulacra of carnival pleasures, but according to him, these are not always participatory, pleasurable, critical or productive. It is when there is an active audience, when there is no distance between the audience and the act, when people 'make a spectacle of themselves', that spaces for resistance and change are enabled. In the case of sexually-explicit popular culture, representing erotic images is not enough to change social order. Popular culture must involve *practice*, alternative ways of relating, and 'alternative structures of feeling' related to the collectivity (ibid.:179). People can then link into the utopian ideals; into community-building and 'social networks of desire' (James, quoted in ibid.:185); into questioning and developing alternative power relations; and discourses of pleasures and desires. Speaking of what carnivalesque means for embodied pleasures in the age of AIDS and 'panic sex' (Kroker, Kroker and Cook, 1989), Stam (ibid.:171) claims that 'the spirit of carnival can nourish the principle of hope and the possibilities of community' in the face of private despair, individualism and fear.

Dyer (1992) also believes that popular culture provides people with utopian fantasies: the promise of fulfilling our needs and desires, and of showing us what it would *feel* (not look) like to have that which has been denied to us by the dominant capitalist culture. Dyer (ibid.) claims that to be entertaining, popular culture has to

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<sup>17</sup> Stam (1989) argues that Bakhtin does not prioritise sexual pleasure but sees it as inextricably linked to other plural bodily pleasures. 'For Bakhtin, sexuality exists only in relation-in relation to the general existence of the body, to other persons, and to the common social life' (ibid.:178).

offer utopian sensibilities that connect to audiences' real experiences, thus we can not regard these 'utopian solutions' as separate from 'reality'.

However, in order to remain in line with the dominant culture, popular culture only offers 'legitimate pleasures', ones that answer the social needs which can be met within the system. Thus entertainment 'provides alternatives to capitalism which will be provided by capitalism' (Dyer,1992:25). Herein lies the contradiction that can allow resistance to flourish.

'[In order to] be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience. Yet to do this, to draw attention to the gap between what is and what could be, is ideologically speaking, playing with fire' (Dyer,1992:25-26).

This means that political potential exists in those pleasures that fail to fully satisfy and resolve the social needs which have been referred to. An example of this resistive possibility lies in the pleasures of 'community'. The social problem of fragmentation can not be totally answered and made to disappear by the pleasures of 'community' that are given in the text, thus these pleasures hold the potential for critique and change, because they can not be easily recouped by the dominant culture. Furthermore, Dyer locates the potential for resistance in pleasures that are 'illegitimate' ('ignored' by popular cultural producers, and not 'given' in the text of the cultural product).

Both Bakhtin's and Dyer's theories point to the need to look beyond the representational level, to audiences' experiences of emotions, colour, movement, sound, context and atmosphere (the embodied and sensual pleasures) to understand the meaning and implications of popular culture, and to identify any resistance.

However, at times within 'carnival' theory, there appears to be a desire for an authentic kind of popular cultural practice *outside* dominant capitalist culture and corporations, a longing for the nostalgia of the 'pure' carnival of medieval times. I am critical of this idealism in Perry (1984) and others. Stam (1989:223) however, reiterates that we can not separate 'bottom-up' carnivals (originating in some

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adversary culture) from ‘degraded/corrupted’ carnivals put on by the authorities: they are always a mixture of both.

Bakhtin's idea that people in carnivals are free from work, dominant cultural norms and values, and are free to ‘go wild’ can be criticised for not recognising that women and men have a different embodied experience of the carnival. Firstly, the preparation, clean-up and organisational tasks (such as making food, costumes and drink) has to be done in actual carnivals, and this is work commonly done by women. Secondly, realities of violence against women do not go away in the carnival setting, in fact on the public streets at night, and in the riotous atmosphere, women may be less safe to have fun and ‘go wild’ than they usually are.

Nevertheless, Stam's (ibid.) readings of Bakhtin are important for me in that they centralise a ‘politics of pleasure’, highlighting Bakhtin's embrace of the popular, along with the subversive possibilities of collective desires, pleasures, humour and play (in early 20th century Russia, and even somewhat now, a radical turn). Bakhtin's theories also emphasise the embodiment of pleasures, and the importance of ‘bodies-in-community’ as a route to resistive collective knowledge and empowerment. They remind us that popular culture is heteroglossic with no one text, no single producer, no unitary audience, and finally they highlight the need to look beyond the representational to what audiences feel about, and do with popular culture.

All these factors are important to a post-modern feminist perspective on popular culture where a focus on women audiences' agency, diversity, resistance and locatedness within social and cultural contexts, is necessary.

### **A Post-modern Feminist Perspective and Active Audiences.**

Wicke (1993:70), argues that feminists need to look at how sexually-explicit material is ‘used, worked on, elaborated, remembered, fantasised about by its subjects’. I agree that feminists need to look beyond the text to the audiences.

However, when Wicke still problematically casts audiences as 'subjects', and deems consumption to be a fixed and singular *act* (not a changing and contradictory process), it is clear traditional ideas about popular culture are still entrenched in feminisms.

This research hopes to challenge such accepted thinking, through researching audiences' experiences and ideas, an approach elaborated in 'active audience' theories, developed within the cultural studies tradition in response to criticisms of the 'effects' model. 'Active audience' theories, following Hall's (1980) classic 'encoding/decoding' model, recognise the work of audiences in decoding (creating meanings and pleasures out of the limits set by popular cultural texts). Cultural struggles, and processes of negotiation between the production, distribution and consumption of popular culture (Gledhill, 1988) are central here. Thus, while meanings are constrained by the context and methods of production, audiences can accept, negotiate and reform, or resist what is given, having a certain degree of autonomy in embellishing it with, and linking it to, other experiences, meanings, contexts, subjectivities, and histories.

Within post-modern feminist perspectives the ideas of negotiation and resistance (thus change) allow for the recognition of the diversity and multiplicity of women. As I have indicated previously, women audiences are not thought to possess any essential 'womanliness' that influences their experience of popular culture, instead their pleasures and subjectivities as seen to be 'in process', always under construction. So there will be differences *and* similarities in the way that various groups of women experience popular culture (Saco, 1992:33).

When audiences' experiences are considered, it also becomes clear that there are factors such as the pleasures of community, friendship, fun, comfort and safety, which are common to some popular cultural practices and to being involved in feminisms. As feminists, we can open up the links between these two, attempting to speak to many women by capturing their imaginations, sharing a fantasy world of topsy-turvy carnival, that allows women to develop 'languages of desire'; to speak

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of things women (as audiences) are often silent about; to resist even briefly the stereotypes and cultural norms, as well as the disciplines and consequences for overstepping these, which surround women's sexualities and desires. It could help to picture new feminist utopias, which I believe are central to feminist activism. Understanding what audiences do is important for diversifying feminist agendas so they have relevance to the lives of different groups of (especially young) women. Within commercial popular culture there exists fertile political sites that feminists can identify, create, commandeer, encourage and utilise. These should not be written off as apolitical and/or conservative.

Thus it is when women speak of their pleasures and desires in an environment that is safer and supportive; when they look back and at men; when they critique the male gaze and its power through a 'mockery of machismo' (through humour, parody and irony); when they assert their right to be active desiring subjects (not objects); then the possibilities for a 'politics of pleasure' are evident (Gamman, 1988).

Bobo (1988:103), provides an example of this in her study of Black women audiences of *The Colour Purple*. Bobo claims that under certain conditions, some women established a community through their 'intertextual cultural experiences'. This enabled them to resist the classism, sexism, and racism in the movie, while taking some pleasures and meanings from the film which linked to herstories of Black women, and use these to empower themselves personally and collectively.

### **Conclusions.**

It is through a focus on the active women audiences of male strip shows then, that I will look for a feminist understanding, one which includes instances of control by, and compliance to, the dominant culture, as well as resistances and feminist potentials. I have critiqued two opposing positions on male strip shows, one that regards them as indicators of equality for women, and one that views them as a new facade of hegemonic masculine culture. A way between these two problematic

rigid positions, is implied by Bakhtin's theory of 'carnival'. That is, to turn from a focus on the representation of male bodies, to the audience; from a singular meaning to the heteroglossia of the show; from a stereotypical female spectator to the diverse experiences of real women; from the constraints upon women to their agency and resistance. These are expressed in the post-modern feminist approach that I take.

The next chapter deals with the method of this active audience research, linking it in with feminist ethics and research considerations, and outlining the themes I used for analysing women's pleasures from the show.

## **CHAPTER FOUR.**

### **Research Methodology: Locating and Interviewing Women Who Go To Male Strip Shows.**

In the previous two chapters, I outlined how my research builds on methods of the 'active audience' research of cultural studies and feminist research, specifically from a post-modern feminist perspective. I aim to understand male strip shows through interviews with women who participate in the shows (rather than focusing on the text of the show or the performance), because it is important to highlight the audiences' practices, agency and creativity. I have rejected the theories of those who attempt to discover fixed and singular meanings and pleasures within popular culture, claiming that this is elitist, and once again renders women invisible and mute. Feminist research must instead begin from the lives of actual socially-situated women, because otherwise it becomes too easy to make problematic generalisations which allow no spaces of resistance and reconstruction within popular culture.

Seiter et.al. (1989:227) claim that such audience studies are in the tradition of ethnographies in that they are an 'investigation of cultural practices as lived experiences'<sup>18</sup>. According to Skeggs (1995:192) this research method contains the following aspects: 1) some review of other relevant theories; 2) some account of the social, cultural and economic context; 3) the researcher's observation of, and participation within, the environment of the participants; and 4) a focus on the experience and practice of participants, seen within a wider structural context. Having discussed the first two parts (that is the theoretical issues around the

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<sup>18</sup> Interviewing audiences is different from ethnography though, in that it does not involve long periods of contact between researcher and participants (Reinharz,1992).

post-modern feminist cultural studies approach, and the historical, social and economic context of eroticised representations of men, as well as of women's pleasures), this chapter moves on to examine the third aspect of audience research identified by Skeggs. This includes issues relating to my role as the researcher, and the methodological processes involved in becoming part of the diverse category of 'young women who go to male strip shows' myself, as well as locating and interviewing other women who are part of this category.

Firstly, the ethical considerations of doing feminist research are considered. Research procedures comprise the second part of the chapter, and include an outline of my initial observations (so as to give the reader an idea of events at a male strip show), the procedure for locating participants, along with a short introduction to each participant and reflections on the interview experience. The final section of this chapter describes the themes used to analyse the women's interviews, some adapted from Dyer's (1992) work on pleasures in musicals, and some generated from the interview data itself.

### **The Ethical Considerations Of Doing Feminist Research.**

My identity as a feminist, my reading of feminist theories, and my feminist political activities are central influences upon this research. My experiences as a feminist who loves and desires (some) men influenced my choice of research area. In the early days of my involvement in feminisms, there was a silence around relationships with men (especially the pleasures involved in this) which meant not only some guilt and denial, but also that heterosexuality was often pictured as immutable and monolithic. There were however, women around me who were negotiating and reconstructing heterosexuality through their relationships with men.

My concern then, like most feminist researchers, is that women's realities have been either mis-represented or invisible in understandings of the social and cultural worlds. There is a need to do research that starts from, and centralises, women's experiences and knowledges (Ristock and Pennell,1996). The

audience studies method I have chosen fits very comfortably with these feminist principles as they focus on women's agency and sense-making. Because my central interest is with the marginalisation of women's desires and pleasures, the main focus of this exploratory research is the audiences' experiences<sup>19</sup>.

Feminist researchers aim not only to discover and describe women's experiences (and their pleasures and meanings) but to use these to develop understandings of aspects of women's oppressions (Skeggs,1995). Furthermore, post-modern feminist approaches to research centralise 'research as empowerment', that is, research which considers power relations, cultural contexts and social actions. Researchers seek 'to change the conditions of people's lives, both individually and collectively', by 'illuminating people's lives and social issues...in order to facilitate understanding and change' (Ristock and Pennell,1996:2). According to these principles then, the three guiding questions developed for this research are:

1. What are the different pleasures some women audiences obtain from male strip shows?
2. How do these relate to the wider cultural and social context of 1990s Aotearoa/ New Zealand?
3. What implications do women's experiences of male strip shows have for a feminist politics concerned with women's empowerment and social change?

Women's oppressions and empowerments in the area of popular culture are the focus of this study, but in order to do feminist research it is necessary to take into account how these oppressions and empowerments are also played out through the research process. Feminists need to 'avoid perpetuating the exploitation of women' in their research (Reinharz,1992:27). This 'reflexivity', or awareness of the power relations in research involves firstly informing the

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<sup>19</sup> While audiences' experiences must remain central, analysing the text and/or interviewing the strippers could provide understandings to complement the findings of audience research.

reader of the researcher's biography (as I explicitly do in this, and other chapters); secondly highlighting the relationship between the researcher and the participants; thirdly managing the different realities of the researcher and participants and finally, being explicit about power in research and writing (Stanley, 1990). The last three aspects of reflexivity are discussed below.

***The researcher-participant relationship.***

In the researcher-participant relationship, the principal consideration is the impact that the research has on participant s' lives. As in most social research, the issues here are of informed consent, confidentiality, and potential harm to participants.

In line with the Code of Ethics of the Sociological Association of Aotearoa (New Zealand), informed consent was gained by first briefly informing some women about the research (through posters (see Appendix 1) and word-of-mouth), providing the opportunity to indicate a possible interest. Information Sheets (see Appendix 2) were sent to these women, outlining the research, the interview process and participant s' rights, along with the invitation to contact me or my supervisor for further information. Some were asked to indicate their agreement to participate by replying in the stamped envelope enclosed (two did). Others provided their phone numbers, and I followed the letter with a phone call a few days later, inquiring as to whether more information was needed, and/or if they would like to be involved in the research. The Information Sheet clearly stated that should they agree to participate, it was possible to reverse this decision anytime. It was reiterated to those who consented, that they could withdraw without any explanation, refuse to answer any questions, and/or ask to turn the tape recorder off at any time. All participants signed a Consent Form (see Appendix 3) which restated these principles.

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The women were assured of confidentiality through the posters, in the Information Sheet, and on the Consent Form. Although they did not have to disclose any personal details, all participants did give me their addresses and phone numbers. These are kept private, and will be destroyed after a copy of the finished research is sent to the participants. As promised, confidentiality was maintained by allowing no-one except myself and the transcriber (who signed an agreement to maintain confidentiality), access to the interview tapes which were erased once transcribed. In the text, the names and any details which might identify the participants were changed.

I did not anticipate that any harm would come to the participants through being involved in the research, however I was acutely aware that talking about sex, sexualities, pleasures, and relationships can possibly unearth pain, grief, displeasure, and unresolved feelings. As a trained worker for Women’s Refuge I felt confident that should these arise I would be able to listen to and support the woman, know what choices to offer regarding further help, and at her request, be able to assist her in doing this. Women were informed that they were able to contact me at a later date for further discussions or comments should they wish. Listening to, believing and validating women’s experiences, which is central to this research, seems to be something many women need more of in their lives. I was a keen and interested listener, and most of the women seemed eager to spend time during and after the interviews, talking to me about their lives. This helped to develop a sense of trust, which facilitates the sharing of information (Reinharz, 1992).

***The different realities of researcher and participants.***

Managing the different realities of those involved in the research means, in this research, being aware of the differences between women. Contrary to the epistemologies of other feminist research like the ‘standpoint’ position<sup>20</sup> of anti-

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<sup>20</sup> Feminist standpoint epistemology involves the belief that through an awareness of their position of subordination, women can produce more

pornography feminists, there is no single female perspective, nor one 'truth' or 'grand narrative' that can be discovered by the researcher. Rather there are 'multiple awarenesses' that respond to the 'diversity of women's experiences' (Ristock and Pennell, 1996:4).

I chose to interview only young women (18-30) because I recognised that there could be large differences between the social, cultural and historical contexts, and thus the ideas, experiences and actions of older and younger women. However, I also expected to find variations within the group of younger women. The small number of participants means that I was unable to explore in any depth, differences related to class, ethnicity, sexuality etc. although these issues do arise in the analysis.

I negotiate these differences in my research by explicitly stating my positions, while being open to, and believing the women's stories. Reinharz (1992) notes that this is the most appropriate approach for feminists, and as I have learnt in my work for Women's Refuge, listening to, believing, and respecting women, not speaking *for* women but with them, is vital. The semi-structured interview method allows for women to speak about their experiences from their perspective, enabling women's diverse experiences to emerge (rather than being entirely constrained within the researcher's frameworks). This is not an entirely inductive process, where the participants are able to determine the process of the research, as some feminists claim (see Reinharz, 1992:21). However, it does mean that while my ideas still structure the research, I interact with the women's understandings in the development of the analysis and research conclusions.

In some situations, it was difficult for me to always believe, or empathise with, participant's comments, such as when views were expressed in line with traditional ideals of femininity (e.g. wanting to be romanced and 'swept off their feet' by a powerful and handsome man). I would not claim as anti-pornography

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comprehensive and ethical knowledge than masculinist understandings (Ristock and Pennell, 1996).

### ***"For Her Eyes Only".***

feminists do, that women who say this are suffering a 'false consciousness', but in line with a post-modern approach, my analysis contains considerations of the social, cultural and discursive contexts in which the women are located, in order to understand how women's experiences, pleasures and meanings have been constructed (and can be reconstructed). As Ristock and Pennell (1996:6) claim:

'By attending to the specific ways in which public discourse structures and limits our thought, making some thoughts unthinkable, researchers can begin to imagine how to disrupt the terms of dominant discourses so that other ideas, perhaps less oppressive in their social consequences, become thinkable'.

This perspective enabled me to appreciate and respect the views espoused by women even when they were not in line with feminist understandings, or when I did not identify with them.

Thus, my realities, the theories I draw on, and the contexts I place women's stories in, mediate the participants' experiences. I have interpreted, edited, reframed, and reworded; necessary for producing a thesis for grading within a university, and indeed in any kind of writing. Being 'loyal' to the women's stories, can only remain an ideal that is never fully realised.

### ***Issues of Power.***

As within recent cultural studies audience research, feminists are concerned about the authoritative and powerful position of the researcher vis a vis the participant (see Stanley and Wise, 1983; Smith, 1987). Ristock and Pennell (1996:6) assert that for valid and ethical research, feminists must 'critically analyse their own power and use it responsibly'. There should be a concern with honesty and reciprocity, with empowering not exploiting, and a self-reflexivity on the part of the researcher aiming to vacate the position of the 'objective expert', so that power over women can be minimised.

The power relations between myself as the 'educated outsider' and the participants who were opening up to me are explicitly addressed throughout

this thesis. Firstly, I began this research looking for examples of women's power and resistance as articulated through pleasures, seeking ways that these can be utilised, and expanded to improve women's lives. This is not to say that examples of displeasure, disempowerment, pain and compliance are ignored, but that women are not primarily regarded as 'victims'. In chapter two, I argued that to represent those women who enjoy popular culture (especially that which is sexually-explicit) as victims of false consciousness, and/or exploitation by men and capitalism, involves an elitist, moralistic intolerance of the diversity of women's experiences, which enhances power differences in the research.

Secondly, I chose to research a group of women that I am a part of. I explicitly position myself within the category of 'young women who attend male strip shows', informing participants that the research is meaningful to me, that I enjoy the shows, and that I am not more immersed in intellectual culture than popular culture. Posters, flyers and Information Sheets were worded so as to make it clear that I was not interested in condemning or judging women for their pleasures, and during the initial contact, I discussed my participation in, and enjoyment of male strip shows, talking about shows that we had both attended. In some way I hoped to reproduce, for the interview, some of the community spirit, openness and camaraderie that existed at the shows, by referring to shared memories, and common ground. The aim was to make the participants feel comfortable, and reduce the power differences between us.

Thirdly, I chose to use semi-structured interviews, rather than surveys or structured interviews, to gather information about women's experiences of male strip shows because this

'offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher...[which is] an antidote to centuries of ignoring women's ideas altogether or having men speak for women' (Reinharz, 1992:19).

This method enables the researcher to 'listen carefully to attitudes and feelings, those non-quantifiable things that are not usually covered in social surveys' (James, 1986:26) and allows women to 'give voice to their realities', vital for women's empowerment (Ristock and Pennell, 1996:3).

### ***“For Her Eyes Only”.***

Lastly, I shared my ideas, feelings and experiences with the participants, to try to nurture trust, and break down my position of power. During the interview I shared coffees, jokes and gossip with the women (and in some cases, briefly with their families), while also answering their questions about my history, life and research (sometimes for up to two hours). This ‘self-disclosure’ is important for demystifying academic research, for sharing knowledges, reciprocating the participant’s openness, as well as developing dialogue and connectedness (Reinharz,1992). Furthermore, I offered the participants (verbally and in the Information Sheets) the opportunity to comment on the draft copy of my research. While no-one took up this offer, all were keen on obtaining a copy of the findings upon completion of the research<sup>21</sup>.

### **The Research Procedures.**

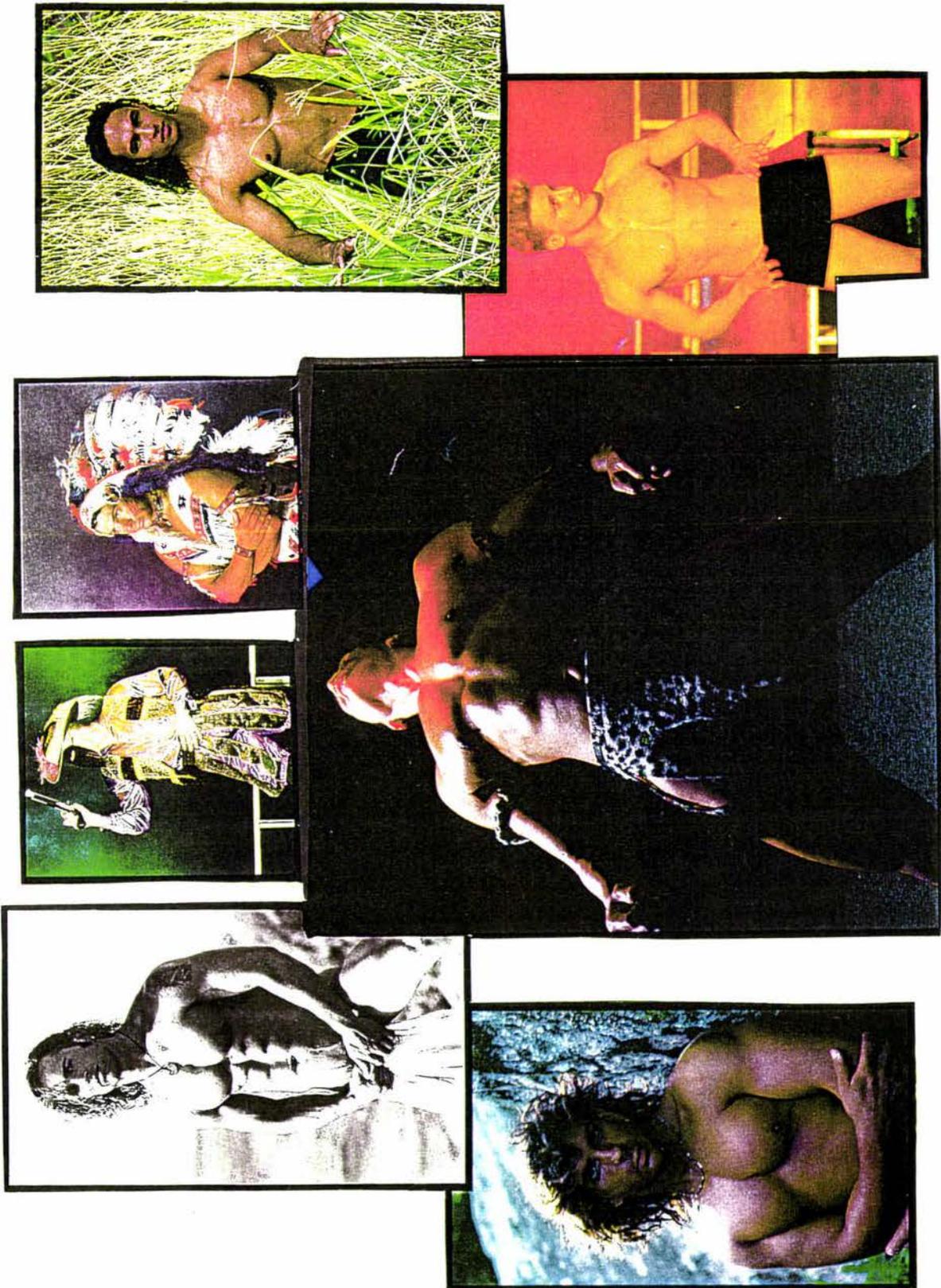
#### ***Observations: Watching women watching men.***

My first action after deciding to undertake an audience study of women who attend male strip shows, was to go along to some shows. Having previously enjoyed Man-O-Man shows<sup>22</sup>, but not having seen professional male strippers, I attended a variety of different kinds of shows: Manpower, a touring Australian revue that performed at the Palmerston North Opera House to hundreds of women; the Wellington based Playgirl International whose shows take place at their permanent ‘Ladies Bar’ in Vivan Street, and around provincial Lower North Island in pubs and sports club rooms; and a male strippers night at the local Firecats Night-club, which usually holds female strip shows (see pictures opposite).

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<sup>21</sup> The participants will be able to choose to read the thesis as presented to the university, or a summary of the findings and conclusions, emitting a lot of the sociological and feminist technical language, or both.

<sup>22</sup> These shows involve a group of men who compete for prizes by trying to impress women audiences with their talent, pickup lines and stripping abilities.



Pictures from a Seductions Male Revue (Australia) poster.

THE MEN OF  
**PLAYGIRL**  
INTERNATIONAL



**MOTION PICTURE TOUR**

APPEARING:

**KIA TOA RUGBY CLUB**

**TUE 13th AUG 7.00pm**

WORKS BY  
**LEADERSHIP**  
WITNESS

WORKS BY  
**JANCO**  
Sensory Studio

Photography: Sal Criscillo • Digital Art: Intergraphics • Stage Art: Scott Signs

Managing Director: Danny Valentine • 025 491 4

*Welcome to Your Fantasy*

Poster advertising a male strip show.

The first show I attended was Manpower at the Palmerston North Opera House, which left me full of enthusiasm for this kind of entertainment. It was exciting, fun, energetic and sensual. I participated in the fun with hundreds of women of all ages, all occupations, and different cultures, finding it exhilarating to share the occasion with a large group of women who were 'letting their hair down'. I also talked openly with women I had not met before, about sex, desires and fantasies.

For the second show (Playgirl International at a local pub), I went alone with my notebook. This may have made me noticeable in the crowd of about a hundred women, however most of the women appeared to have their eyes and minds focused on other things. The following is based on my observations of the first fifteen minutes of the show.

Women in groups of two up to about fifteen are seated at tables drinking and talking. I take a place at a table and within a few minutes the women there start including me in on their conversation. Neil Diamond plays loudly (very loudly) for a few minutes, the lights and the smoke machines are tested out, then trumpet music sounds to introduce the five "Men from Playgirl International". Amid smoke and cheers from the audience, five men emerge dressed in fire-fighters uniforms. They dance and gyrate to loud rock music, heavy with drum-beats and bass, while gradually loosening and taking off their clothes. When down to their g-strings, the strippers disperse into the audience, doing individual dances for women; briefly kissing and caressing them; sitting on women's laps, encouraging them to have a 'feel'; and climbing atop the tables of those groups who yelled the loudest to attract their attention. Some women appear embarrassed at first, but only two that I see actually avoid the gaze of the stripper and refuse to take up the offer of a 'feel'. Many actively pursue the strippers. The woman next to me turns to her friend, screaming and laughing after the stripper has been rubbing himself against her. Some women try to pull off the strippers' g-strings, but are treated to a stern look, and a playful slap on the hand. The men return to the stage and the compere makes an entrance, welcoming the audience to a "fantasy filled evening". He says, "there's only two things you won't find here tonight, that's husbands and boyfriends" which is greeted with loud cheers and clapping from the audience.

As well as attending more shows, I talked with many women about their experiences of going to strip shows, and their ideas and experiences are

### ***“For Her Eyes Only”.***

embedded in this research. Talking with women was an easy task, as when people became aware of my area of research, many were only too willing to volunteer information concerning anything to do with sex and pleasures. I spent a few nights in local pubs, having conversations with women I had never met before, about sex shops, ‘porn’ videos and sex toys, concluding that there is a serious lack of opportunities for women to safely and openly discuss their pleasures and to evaluate relationships, especially when it relates to things not usually accepted as part of women’s sexualities. There are social norms and stereotypes (like the trivialisation of women’s ‘gossip’, feminine modesty and passivity, and the dominant discourse of romantic love) which hold women back from any explicit discussions with women friends and partners.

### ***Finding Participants: ‘I want to know what you think’.***

The process of finding participants for my study began after my proposals were accepted by the Human Ethics Committee at Massey University. Firstly, posters were placed around the venue of the strip show, with flyers to take home. These asked women who wanted to talk about their experiences of the strip show to contact me at university. Although nearly all of the flyers were taken, over the three nights that the posters were up, only two replies were forthcoming. Next, the ‘snowball method’<sup>23</sup> was employed to contact more participants. From the women who contacted me, and two friends who attended the shows, I gained the first names and addresses of those who indicated an interest in the research.

All those interested were sent an Information Sheet detailing the research. Two replied via a stamped addressed envelope, two phoned, and five out of the 12 or so who were contacted by phone wished to participate. One woman dropped out

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<sup>23</sup> The snow-ball method for locating participants begins with one contact, who ascertains whether a friend or acquaintance (who fits the participants requirements) is interested in participating in the research. This friend then asks one of their friends, and so on, until the required number of participants have agreed to be involved.

because of lack of free time to do an interview, leaving the eight participants who are introduced below.

*Introducing the Participants.*

**Sian** is in the sixth form at High School, and despite being only 18, she has been to several male strip shows, before attending (with her Aunt) the same Playgirl International show that I did. She is very enthusiastic about the shows and the strippers, collecting posters, autographs, and snippets of information about them when ever she can. She knows all of the Manpower strippers by name, and they are often part of her fantasies. On first appearances, Sian appears quiet, but once a conversation starts, she is passionate, chatty and articulate, with a keen awareness of social issues and a wicked sense of humour.

**Yvonne** was having a night out for the first night in years, when I saw her at a Playgirl International show. One of the reasons she decided to go to see males strip, was because she had done some stripping herself in the past, and was interested in the men's performance. Being a 25 year old mother of three young children, and having a partner who is not really involved with any family responsibilities, she is a busy woman. I talked with Yvonne over several cups of coffee and the interview constantly drifted into stories about other aspects of her life, many sad and horrific, some humorous.

**Ellie** is a trendy 23 year old university student, who is also a sole parent of a pre-school-aged daughter. Her social life is important to her and she tries to organise to go out every week or so. I interviewed her after her first experience of a male strip show, to which a friend urged her to go. She surprised herself about how much she enjoyed and got involved in the experience, despite her initial qualms that this show might go against her feminist principles. Feminism is a central part of her identity since her 'rediscovery' of herself after the end of a marriage.

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**Cath** has given up her job to stay at home with her two year old child, and is being supported by her partner, and her part time job. ‘Girl’s nights out’ are important to her (when she can get the opportunity), and she has seen several male strip shows with a group of friends. For days afterwards, it provides material for shared conversations and laughs. A photo of her group of friends with the strippers sits on the cabinet in the lounge. At 22, Cath is happy that she is in a loving and equal relationship.

**Jody** is a very outgoing ‘laugh-a-minute’ kind of woman who never seems to slow down. Her social calendar is full most of the time: she loves going out dancing and drinking with her women friends. Male strip shows are one of the places Jody enjoys ‘partying’. Jody very openly admits that although she goes out with many men (often at the same time), she does not want a serious relationship. She is just in it for the fun and moves on after a while, although she does sometimes dream of sharing her future with a sexy, honest and understanding guy. Being independent and in control of her own life are central to her. Jody, 27, works as a PR/administrator in a small company, but hopes to go to university soon.

**Trudi** is a well spoken and quiet woman of 20, who has begun a career in the fashion industry that she hopes will take her overseas and earn her fame and fortune. For this reason she dates men occasionally, but does not want to get into a serious relationship. In the future though, she hopes to have a family. Trudi has only attended one male strip show where she went along with a family member. It was a different experience for her, she wasn’t used to women getting so ‘wild’.

**Karina** attended the Playgirl International show at a rugby clubrooms with her friend Melissa, whom she was also interviewed with. They had both been to several male strip shows before and knew lots of personal information about the strippers from Playgirl International, as one of their friends had dated one of the strippers. Karina is 21 and unemployed, sometimes taking on temporary jobs since she left school. She lives at home with her parents, but is quite independent. She

was open in talking about her desires and pleasures, and cracked plenty of jokes during the light-hearted interview.

**Melissa** likes spending time with her friend Karina, hanging out at her place, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and chatting. She is 21 and the sole parent of a daughter she had when she was young. She enjoys going out drinking with her women friends when she has the time and the money, and does not want to be stuck at home and isolated. Going to a male strip show is a special night, because of the cost involved, but it is not an opportunity she wants to miss out on. Melissa says she is wary of men, having had a few bad relationships, but holds on to the ideal of a loving and kind man that she and her child could spend their lives with.

### *The Interview Experience.*

Participants were given the choice of time and location for the interviews, with the aim that this would provide a place where they felt safe and comfortable, and some free time when they could relax. For busy working women, especially for those who are mothers, it was a necessity that I came to them, otherwise they would not have been able to be involved. With the research taking place in the participant's own space, and according to their own terms, the distance between the participant and the researcher is reduced, encouraging trust and openness.

Two friends requested they be interviewed together. The women sparked each other off into some in-depth discussions, which possibly would not have happened had they been interviewed alone. As Callahan (1983) claims, the group interview method 'facilitates women building on each other's ideas and augments the identification of patterns through their shared experiences'. However, on the down side, at times the presence of another person, even a friend, hindered open discussion. When talking about fantasies and relationships, there seemed to be an unwillingness on the part of both participants to say anything that contradicted the other. This could be because the topic was moving into areas previously unexplored in their friendship, and/or the desire to remain on common-ground

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within the friendship, compounded by the constraining social norms discussed above<sup>24</sup>.

For most of the interview time though, it appeared that all of those involved enjoyed the opportunity to talk about their experiences and pleasures, perhaps, as I have said, because of the silence in our society and culture surrounding these. Initially, my speculation was that those who agreed to be interviewed would be the more out-going and self-confident women among those at the strip shows. However, there are both quiet and reserved, as well as more assertive and chatty women participating in this research. The women’s willingness to talk to me could have been due to the novelty value of the research. Many were curious about how I could ‘get away with’ studying male strip shows at university. Perhaps also they participated for the chance to contribute their opinions to social research. Most of the women were not used to being consulted, and were unsure of how useful they could be: ‘Sure I’ll talk to you, but I don’t think I can tell you anything interesting’. This not only reflects the lack of opportunities for women’s voices to be heard and taken seriously, but the common-sense ideas of popular culture as trivial and trashy, and women audiences as being ‘dupes’. All of the participants found difficulty in identifying the pleasures they experienced at the show. As Dyer (1992:1-2) has observed, it is difficult to think about what entertainment means beyond just being ‘fun’ and a ‘good time’, because of the ‘comfortable taken-for-grantedness’ and the ‘anti-seriousness’ of entertainment. The women had to be reassured that their stories were valid and important, indeed they were central!

The interviews took from one and a half hours to three hours (with some talking afterwards) and were tape-recorded, to be transcribed later. The interviews were loosely structured around a list of themes and general questions, which guided my prompts and encouragements, rather than forming a strict structure (see Appendix

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<sup>24</sup> In future research I would consider using the ‘focus-group’ method of interviewing within groups or communities, so as to gain information from sharing ideas while promoting ‘research as empowerment’ (Ristock and Pennell, 1996:2). This would be complemented by individual interviews, where there is more space to feel comfortable about speaking openly.

4). I tried to let the participants guide the direction of the interview, important for allowing the diversity of women's realities to emerge. The interview schedule includes questions specifically about the experience of the strip show, looking at the various kinds of pleasures, displeasures and opinions on strip shows; and the role these play in their fantasy lives. There are also more general questions relating to the social expectations that impinge on their lives, as well as their ideals for, and realities of heterosexual relationships because the audiences' social and cultural worlds are central to understanding their various pleasures and meanings.

As mentioned above, the focus on pleasure in these interviews did not prohibit discussions of displeasure and pain. Alongside positive statements about entertainment, sex or relationships, and uplifting ideals of egalitarian relationships, there were sometimes anecdotes of worse times, bad memories and negative experiences. This was most marked in Yvonne's interview.

Prior to consenting to be involved, I had seen Yvonne at the strip show, being pulled up on stage to 'get sexy' with one of the strippers, where she appeared to enjoy herself. Yvonne was very keen when she was later approached about being involved in my research. We talked together at her house, while her three children were running around constantly demanding her attention, and her husband sat on the couch, 'high' on drugs, watching talk shows. While it was not the most conducive environment for an interview, Yvonne chose not to delay it or go anywhere else. When the conversation turned to relationships, Yvonne disclosed about her life full of horrific abuse. We talked for three hours about things she had told no-one before. We talked about options for her future, but she was adamant that if she tried to leave her abusive husband he would kill her. I left her with my phone number and Women's Refuge number telling her to call anytime. Two weeks later she called Refuge, and at the time of writing was still on our books as a community client.

As in Yeandle's (1984:46) study, the participants in this research were 'encouraged to "digress" into details of their personal histories'. Yvonne's openness was

enabled by the interview method, which as Reinharz (1992) points out, can allow safe and open spaces for women to talk to careful and empathetic listeners, who attempt to validate and respect women's experiences. I tried to adhere to this not only during the interviews, but in the process of analysing the interviews.

## **Analysing The Interviews.**

After the transcription of the interviews, all the material was coded according to themes. Part way through, I realised that some of the emerging themes corresponded closely to ones identified by Dyer (1992) in a textual analysis of the pleasures of Hollywood musicals (which he also related to other forms of entertainment: Westerns and the News). Dyer writes of five kinds of pleasures available, being **Abundance**, **Intensity**, **Energy**, **Transparency** and **Community**. These are explained below in Table 1., along with the two themes of **Specialness** and **Looking**, which developed from my analysis of the interview material.

As outlined in chapter three, Dyer regards these pleasures that are available to audiences as 'utopian pleasures': they are about escapism and wish-fulfilment. Entertainment, such as musicals, offers hopes and fantasies of something better, showing us what an alternative world would *feel* like, through emotional and sensual pleasures. These 'utopian solutions' are not in a separate world though, they speak to real social needs. Thus, entertainment refers to the real social problems of scarcity, dreariness, exhaustion, manipulation and fragmentation, and proceeds to satisfy these with the pleasures of 'abundance', 'intensity', 'energy', 'transparency' and 'community' (Dyer, 1992).

**Table 1. Types of Pleasures Experienced By Women Audiences At Male Strip Shows.**

<p><b>Abundance*</b></p> <p><i>Distribution of wealth, elimination of poverty, enjoyment of sensuous material reality, excess, luxury.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-lots of men; men as commodities (window shopping)</li> <li>-richness of lights, costumes, sets etc.</li> <li>-variety of routines</li> </ul>	<p><b>Intensity*</b></p> <p><i>Uncomplicated, direct vivid feelings, excitement, drama.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-feeling high/pumped up/ hyped up</li> <li>-going wild/getting loose</li> <li>-being turned on</li> <li>-intense desires</li> </ul>
<p><b>Energy*</b></p> <p><i>Activity, power, vigorous actions.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-dancing</li> <li>-music</li> <li>-audience participation</li> <li>-going out afterwards</li> </ul>	<p><b>Transparency*</b></p> <p><i>Authenticity, verisimilitudinous, sincerity, open spontaneous relationships, meaningfulness.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-feeling outgoing, overcoming embarrassment</li> <li>-realness/genuineness of men</li> <li>-identification with strippers</li> </ul>
<p><b>Community*</b></p> <p><i>Togetherness, belongingness, sharing, camaraderie, consensus, understanding, collective activity.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-women only audiences- no men</li> <li>-comfort, safety</li> <li>-speaking openly/ gossiping</li> <li>-celebrating friendships</li> <li>-less criticism (of other women) and competition</li> </ul>	<p><b>Specialness</b></p> <p><i>Feeling special, being the centre of attention, being in control of the situation.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-being the paying customer</li> <li>-feeling like the only or the chosen one</li> <li>-going on stage</li> </ul>
<p><b>Looking</b></p> <p><i>Enjoying 'perving', being a voyeur, owning the gaze, not being the object of it.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-looking at male bodies</li> <li>-not being the object of gaze</li> <li>-'just looking' with no emotions attached</li> <li>-self surveillance</li> </ul>	<p><b>KEY.</b></p> <p><b>Bold-</b> name of the type of pleasure.  <i>Italics-</i> explanation of the specific kind of pleasure.            Lists- examples of this pleasure as seen in women's experiences of male strip shows.            * from Richard Dyer, (1992).</p>

Dyer's (ibid.) analysis of popular cultural pleasures fits into the post-modern feminist framework of this research then, because it is concerned with power and pleasures. Dyer argues that pleasures are socially produced, both being constructed by power and containing the potential for resistance. Dyer's concerns for workers within capitalist domination, relates to feminist concerns for women within systems of male power and privilege (as well as within capitalism). As Williams (1990) shows, his theories adapt well to feminist analysis.

While Dyer (1992:18) sees these pleasures as existing in the representational (images) and non-representational elements (colour texture, movement, rhythm, sound) of the film, I have considered how they emerge also from the experiences and contexts of real audiences. Thus the pleasures I describe are related to going out, being in the pub/club, interacting with the audience, and talking and having fun with friends. With this focus beyond the text to the context, I was able to identify another two kinds of pleasure in my analysis: 'looking' and 'specialness'. Pleasures of 'looking' are something rather taken-for-granted in a textual analysis which does not consider differences between, and activities of, audience members. I highlighted the visual aspects of the show in my prompts/questions because, as demonstrated in chapter three, visual pleasures have been problematic for women (women have not had the opportunities to look, and have been regarded as emotional not visual creatures). The pleasure of 'specialness', are similarly gendered pleasures, that perhaps emerge only from a specific consideration of socially-situated *women* audiences. It relates to a lack of opportunities for some women to feel important and the centre of attention.

In the analysis that follows, I outline the participants' pleasures from going to male strip shows and provide a discussion which reflects on whether these pleasures can be seen to be contained within systems of male power and privilege or whether there are any 'illegitimate' or unruly pleasures which are not anticipated and 'managed'. I also draw out the motif of 'freedoms', running through the various pleasures which holds the potential for 'fuelling the fire' of feminist empowerments.

## **CHAPTER FIVE.**

### **The Pleasures Of Male Strip Shows: An Analysis of Women's Interviews.**

This chapter outlines the pleasures of male strip shows as derived from my interpretations of both the in-depth interviews conducted with eight women, and the informal discussions held with many others, as well as my observations at some shows. The true multiplicity and diversity of women's pleasures and displeasures, those that were spoken about and those remain unsaid or unnamed, are constrained by my (necessary) organisation of these pleasures into seven general groups of related pleasures: 'abundance', 'intensity', 'energy', 'transparency', 'community', 'specialness' and 'looking'. Not all women experienced each of these pleasures; often one or two pleasures were more prevalent than the others; some pleasures were connected with displeasures. In no way do I want to claim that these are pleasures available to all women all of the time, but they are important for understanding some women's participation in a form of popular entertainment that can be said to go against the traditional forms available for women audiences.

These pleasures are not only given by the show or the strippers, but emerge from the diverse life experiences, subjectivities and knowledges that women bring with them, and the way these interact with the show, audience members and environment.

It must be remembered that talking about the nature of pleasures is not a common practice in our society, usually to say it is 'fun' or 'enjoyable' will suffice. The women in this study found it difficult at first, to remember and talk about the feelings, emotions, thoughts, and actions that make up 'pleasure'. However, understanding pleasures as pleasures, provides informative insights to the way that audiences interact with popular culture. It does, as I

demonstrate in this chapter, furnish an understanding of how pleasures can both encourage our inscription into and acceptance of the dominant culture, as well as provide the space for reworking, redefining, and creating or promoting alternative ways of being and doing.

This chapter begins by considering the fantasy or utopian aspect of pleasures, and then is organised around the seven kinds of pleasures, as outlined in the previous chapter. I describe these, providing examples from the women's interviews and my observations, before moving on to link my understanding of these with theories about culture, women's lives and politics along with post-modern feminist understandings. In conclusion, I trace the motif of 'freedom from social constraint', a thread that runs through many of the different pleasures, arguing that this points to the 'politics of pleasure'.

### **Popular Pleasures as Fantasy.**

As Dyer (1992) claims, the pleasures of popular culture are related to a fantasy or utopian element. Pleasures are about 'unknown possibilities', escape and danger, 'naughtiness', 'loss of control', dreams of eroticism and desire, and the excitement of difference, all involving stepping beyond the usual territory to a unreal fantasy world (Gotfrit, 1988).

Fantasies that are central to the 'entertainment value' of the shows are not completely outside our everyday lives, because they have a necessary relation to 'reality'. We draw our fantasies from shared ideas of pleasure, eroticism and desire, and add to these our own experiences and ideas (Leroy, 1993). They also sustain out everyday lives, through adding spice and thrills, giving temporary escape and suspension of real consequences, playing around with possibilities, and providing pleasure, comfort and hopes.

As Butler (1990a:105) argues, fantasy is about 'what is not yet real, what is possible or futural, or what belongs to a different version of the real'. Most of

the women in the study explicitly recognised the strip show as a fantasy world, that had links to their lives and identities, in the form of possibilities and dreams.

What follows then, is the analysis of specific pleasures women gained from the male strip shows, demonstrating what fantasies or 'utopian solutions' these have to offer women and the links they have to their lives.

### **'He's Everything': The Pleasures of Abundance.**

The pleasures of 'abundance' were discussed by most women, in terms of enjoying the show for its rich spectacle. There are sensual pleasures which come from a combination of the music (hard and heavy 'cock rock' contrasted to romantic ballads but both appealing to the body); the lighting; the set and props; the luxurious and exotic costumes; and the texture of the performance, with its comedy, romanticism, sexiness, and "character acting" (many of the women talked about enjoying non-stripping performances and the different historical or mythical figures portrayed in the shows). It is the sense of luxury and fulfilment that comes from the professionalism and the richness of the show which enables the free play of fantasy and pleasures.

The strip shows are also pleasurable for some women as they provide an abundance of men to look at and fantasise about. Finally, women's experiences of (temporary) wealth are included in the pleasures of 'abundance', as they are able to afford to pay quite high prices to get into the show (\$15-25), buy drinks (often bottles of sparkling wine in chillers) and sometimes go out on the town afterwards.

It was clear that the pleasures of 'abundance' are central to the enjoyment of the show when several women, like Jody, remarked that the highly polished and well-financed Manpower performance was much more entertaining than that of Playgirl International. With its lack of variety of costumes and lighting,

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sound problems, mistakes in choreography, and times when the strippers did not seem to know what they were doing, Playgirl International's amateurishness detracted from the world of fantasy. Jody claims to get more pleasure from the show where there was an integration of set, lights, sound, performance, and costumes.

Jody: 'I had been to Manpower beforehand, and they had such an awesome set-up [but] these guys [Playgirl International] had nothing. They were *just* strippers. There was no act to it. Like when I go to see a strip show, I expect to see entertainment. I mean, I go for the bodies, sure, but you also expect entertainment and a bit of fantasy behind it, and they had nothing. There was nothing, they came out from the doors, and there was music playing and they proceeded to strip. I sort of want a bit more than that'.

As well as the richness of the performance, most of the women liked having a host of men on display to 'choose' from. Melissa and Karina saw this as an answer to a common complaint (and joke) among young women today that good men are scarce: 'the good ones are all either married or gay'. Contrasting to this perceived scarcity, the men in the show directed their attention to the women in the audience (i.e. flirting, touching, kissing) and did not have their girlfriends or boyfriends hanging around.

There was also the opportunity to enjoy the perfect sculptured sameness and abundance of the idealised male bodies. Several of the women talked about this in terms of 'men-as-commodities' using the metaphor of 'window shopping'. This pleasure of 'abundance' meant for Yvonne and Ellie, that they had the opportunity to browse over a variety of male bodies, to compare and to decide what they like, without having to 'buy' (I say more about 'just enjoying looking' and the purely 'physical thing' in a later theme).

Yvonne: 'I'm just checking them out. Like window shopping. It's a physical thing. I just look if they take my fancy. I don't think about it'.

Ellie: '[I] think like I am walking in to a shop and see a dress and think "oh that's nice". I walk into the pub and see a guy and think "he's nice" or "he's interesting". I was still looking at him like I was looking at a dress, you know "that's a really nice

dress. It would suit me, but I don't need a dress". It's just looking, it's totally different'.

Most of the women thought that the compere added to this delightful overload of men, making the night for some women by being everything they wanted, as Karina enthuses.

Karina: '[He] jokes around. He's romantic when he wants to be. He's fun. He's everything. He was amazing. And he sort of teases the audience as well, a lot...He gets everyone going sort of thing'.

The atmosphere created by the physical arrangement of the venue also was important for some women to be able to enjoy the abundance of men and the richness of the show. When the audience were seated in rows (as opposed to being at tables), the strippers could not get around to everyone, so the women could not see them and their costumes (or lack of costumes) up close, nor could they touch them. Being seated in rows also meant that women could not drink or chat to each other, which inhibited some of the pleasures of 'community' (see below). Being able to drink at the show, often more expensive drinks like bubbly and spirits, was a pleasure for many women, especially those for whom the show was a rare night out.

The music played a vital part in many women's enjoyment of the show, as it embodies a variety of contradictory feelings, such as romance, lust, energy, relaxation, exotic experiences, and familiarity, motivating them to sing, cry, smile, laugh, dance and remember. This adds to the sensual fulfilment, and experiences of richness and luxury.

### ***Discussion.***

Dyer (1992) argues that pleasures of 'abundance' are related to the real experiences of scarcity, poverty and hardships in our society, that is, 'stretched' emotions, a perceived scarcity of men, and lack of money. The shows provide the utopian solution of overcoming scarcity, having plenty to spare and the

'enjoyment of sensuous material wealth' (ibid.:20). For maximum enjoyment though, these pleasures must first invoke dissatisfaction before providing the solution. For example, in order to provide the pleasures of an abundance of men, it is necessary to make references to the lack of suitable and good men, real or in representations. It is here that political potential arises, for here the show is 'playing with fire' (ibid.:26).

Women who enjoy the abundance of men at the strip shows, relate to a common complaint, that 'good men are hard to find'. Faludi (1991) claims that the 'man shortage myth' is part of the conservative back-lash against feminism, which conceals the problems men are experiencing due to feminist criticism and women's changing social positions, at the same time as encouraging women into stable and monogamous heterosexual relationships (even when these might be abusive, limiting or boring). Some women see this 'myth' as a bit of humour, but it does also relate to their own experiences of having difficulty finding a good male partner. Most women in this research defined a 'good' man as being trustworthy, caring, understanding of women's feelings and needs, and able to talk about their emotions. Some thought men needed to be more passionate about sex, while others wanted more romance. All of the women in my interviews thought men needed to accept women as equal partners in the relationship, but many men had difficulty doing this. Despite the many problems they identified though, and despite some women being happily single, all of the women wanted some time in their lives to be in loving relationships with men.

Alongside the problems of finding a good partner, was the scarcity of opportunities just to enjoy looking at and fantasising about men. As I discussed in chapter three, there is a dearth of erotic material that takes into account women's (hetero, bi or lesbian) desires and pleasures (see Adamson, 1997).

In the many aspects of the pleasures of 'abundance' that I have identified, there is the enjoyment of luxury and the sensual richness of a fantasy world which

has a necessary relationship to women's real lives, temporarily overcoming women's experiences of emotional, sexual and financial poverty.

However, while it is possible to look at the idea of 'abundance of men' as involving conservative ideals, it can also hold positive political potential. When the strip show temporarily provides for some women's needs and desires for good (caring/affectionate/sexy/passionate/romantic/good-looking) men (needs which are often not fulfilled in real life), it highlights for some women real social problems. Scarcity is not 'solved', or erased, rather the issue comes to the fore and women are able to discuss it at the show and afterwards. Perhaps this is where feminists could work to link women into the critiques of masculinity and male-dominated culture which are behind the scarcity women *are* experiencing. That is, feminists can offer the understanding that the reason why there seems to be 'no good men' for partners is that, influenced by feminisms, women's expectations have changed, while men have been slower to alter from the traditional ideals of masculinity (Segal,1990). In fact, the feminist critique of masculinities has seen the rise of the 'hysterical male' (Kroker and Kroker,1991a), a kind of excessive 'macho-ness' that many women dislike (and fear). Furthermore, there have not even been many eroticised representations of men for heterosexual women to enjoy, because of the male control over the production and distribution of representations, and male attempts to preserve power by remaining outside the critical gaze. This involves a politicising of pleasures because to take pleasure in the abundance of men, can be seen as an act of resisting and critiquing male control of culture.

### **'It's better than being drunk': The Pleasures of Intensity.**

This theme of 'intensity' is concerned with the intense and vibrant emotions and feelings experienced by some women, which they believe contribute to the entertainment. Most of the women I spoke to, talked to some degree about the pleasures of 'letting go'; feeling excited, thrilled, 'loose' and wild; experiencing

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intense desires; and being turned on by the show. Many women also enjoy the strong sense of fun and humour of the occasion.

Karina, Melissa and Ellie all agree that going to the show provides intense and overwhelming feelings of excitement and involvement.

Karina: 'It is just excitement. It is really, really exciting'.

Melissa: 'It's better than being drunk. It is'.

Karina: 'It is!! It is just like a dream come true, because you never see guys like that around, and when you actually do see them it's just amazing'.

Ellie: 'It's something that occupies your mind. It's more dimensional than just looking. It was sexual and emotional, and it gets you going. It involves you...some things you can look away from, walk out of the room. Whereas with the show, if you went to the loo, you felt you were missing something'.

Sian talked in detail about the intense feelings and thoughts she experienced at the show.

Sian: 'When they are coming up to me it's racing through my mind, "what am I going to do? What if they take me up on stage? Will I go?" I know I will, but I have to think about it. And when they are coming towards you, I am thinking "this is my whole life. It's like here and now, they are fulfilling it". Because I kind of want them to come to me, but then I get really shy and nervous, and my hands go all sweaty and my heart just beats....[then] they're just there with me. I'm thinking "where can I touch?" And "am I allowed?" Then when they have left it's like "ohhh this was the greatest experience I have ever had in my life!"'

Some women like Sian, think it is the strippers' body language and looks that 'makes you feel really wild, and want to let your hair down', while others believe it is more the influence of the audiences. Being with friends with whom you can gossip and have a laugh, and the buzz from the crowd of women, gets some women 'hyped up'<sup>25</sup>.

The sexual enjoyments and 'turn-ons' women experience at the show are also part of the pleasures of 'intensity'. While sexual pleasures play a part in the

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<sup>25</sup> I examine the pleasures of being with other women further under the pleasures of 'community'.

entertainment value of the show, none of the women interviewed thought of it as the *only* pleasure available. Some women demonstrated a hesitancy to talk with me about their 'turn-ons', unsure how to say it or whether they should be explicit, but there were a few enthusiastic and open women, like Melissa, who proudly discussed their sexual pleasures and how these relate to their everyday sex and fantasy lives.

Melissa: 'Fuck you really do, aye. It actually does turn you on quite a bit. They do!! Yeah, definitely. I think, "lucky men who these women go home to..they're in for a hell of a night". (laughter). 'Cause you're just so full of energy. It's just...mmmm... I've always said that you can tell how good a guy is in bed by the way that they dance, and these guys are amazing dancers soooo... Because their dancing is so sexual you can't help it!'

These women saw the act of going to the show as a declaration and a celebration of their independent desires and sexual fantasies. For Yvonne, Ellie and Karina, going to the show spices up their sex lives. The desires they experience are linked to a man already in their lives, such as when they are 'turned-on' and want to go home to their partners to 'get a good bonk'.

Ellie: 'I can remember being in the pub [afterwards], and thinking I can't wait till I get back home 'cause I'm going to get a good one! (laughter) Actually, I said to him, [that] I was looking at them and yeah, they did have good bodies, but it was him that I wanted to go home to'.

Yvonne: 'Going to strip shows can give you different ideas about what you might like, or want to try with your partner. You might say to him "hey, do a strip for me". It can open your mind to different things'.

Karina: '[A]ll my mates, as soon as we walked out, they all had sex on their minds aye? They did!!! They either go home to their men, or they go out and drink like I do..to drown our sorrows (laughter)'.

Other times desires appear more nebulous, when for example, some women (like Karina) want to go out to pubs to perve at, flirt with, or fantasise about men while feeling sexy. Some sexual pleasures do not just stop with being turned on by the actual strippers, but go beyond the actual three hours or so spent in the venue.

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Although sexual pleasures are often thought to be the pivotal pleasures available to audiences of strip shows, not all the women centralised these. While Cath admits to being 'slightly turned on', she does not get to the point 'where I had to go and jump on the guys or any thing like that'. Some, like Cath, would rather picture the show as 'good clean fun' and talk about the men's dancing and beautiful bodies, than see it as overtly sexual, perhaps because they are not used to talking about sex and pleasures openly due to the social taboos and silences about women's active desires.

### ***Discussion.***

Dyer (1992) believes that the pleasures of 'intensity' provide escape from boredom, monotony, routine and predictability in real life. This is also articulated by some women in my research, for whom the show allows spontaneity, suspense, thrills, drama and excitement which can be all too rare in their everyday lives. They thought the show was more wild, exciting, and interesting than the usual experiences of going out. Some who were in paid work and/or were mothers said, like Ellie, that most of the time they had to be responsible (like not going out and getting drunk when you have work the next day) thus their life was very structured. As Ellie says, 'because I have a kid, I don't just decide to have a night off and say "what should we do?" It's got to be planned'. In fact, for working mothers it is probably essential that life is *not* always intense and spontaneous. For most women there are also considerations of safety and social norms which mean they cannot 'give into the emotion' and take pleasure from the intensity of experiences.

The male strip shows allow one cultural and physical space to experience and talk about sexual pleasures in ways that go against traditional notions of feminine sexuality, which are still powerful social influences on women's lives (Hawkes, 1996). Women in male strip shows are the *subjects* of desires, while the objects of desire are both men and other women. To some degree, this subverts cultural conventions in which women are more often the focus of male heterosexual desires. Furthermore women's active desiring position is not so

easily recuperated back into male culture within the male strip show, as it would be in places like pubs and night-clubs, because there are no (or few) men there to look back at women; to make unwanted advances; to call them 'sluts' or 'teases'; to remind women of the threats of violence that regulate women's sexualities.

Budge (1988:104) believes that popular cultural practices which encourage the wilder side of women should be promoted by feminists as they engender 'a fantasy that re-introduces into our vocabulary the notion of the *erotic* for women' (original emphasis). Women could find it empowering to get in touch with the erotic, because:

'by allowing desire, the control of passion and the self-regulation that is oppressive to women is subverted and the power of the erotic is accessed instead' (Gotfrit, 1988:129).

Gotfrit refers to the power that comes from learning new ways of speaking about sex and pleasures, exploring new and diverse 'turn-ons', wants, fantasies and behaviours, sharing experiences of desire with other women, which all go against commonly-accepted ideas of what (hetero)sexuality is for women. For women from some age groups, ethnic communities and religious groups this empowerment could come from just 'being sexual', whereas for others it might mean expressing desire and sexualities in different ways than those that are socially 'acceptable'.

### **'You feel like you've got so much': The Pleasures of Energy.**

Many of the women in this study, gained pleasures from the energy of the strippers' performances, as well as from their own energetic participation, putting their intense feelings into action. Some women enjoy the apparent "bubbly" and outgoing personalities of the strippers, their powerful dancing and movements, accompanied by energetic music. The strippers are not the only ones getting energetic though. Most audience members do not sit passively but are participating in the show themselves by dancing; yelling; jumping up and down; jostling in the crowd of women; grabbing the guys as they go past; talking to the strippers after the show; getting kisses and autographs from

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them; and going out afterwards with their friends. This is the scene of carnival where audiences become part of the spectacle, breaking down distances between the audience and the performance.

Sian passionately describes how her enjoyment of the strip-tease and the stripper's movements, translates into her body's desire to be energetic.

Sian: 'The way of the actual movements, it just makes you... You don't know what they are going to do. Then all of a sudden it's just like one movement. It just hits you! When they take it off and it's AAAHHH!!'

According to Ellie, the strippers' energy triggers women to get moving and get involved, forming a chain reaction among the audience, sparking new pleasures of participation.

→ Ellie: 'I think everyone in the audience wound up really quickly. They were a little bit reserved to start with, but as soon as that first guy came out and started to take his clothes off, they were just all in there, hands flying, yelling and screaming. I just can't get that chick out of my mind. "Come here baby, give it to me!" (laughter). She was amazing...I was actually surprised that I wasn't as reserved about it as I thought I would be. I remember saying to my friend before-hand, "the male form is not that impressive", but when we saw them it was "phooarr!!! I want that!" '

The energy spills over into women's lives outside the show, as Melissa and Karina recount.

Melissa: 'When you come out of Manpower, you are on such a big high, eh?'

Karina: 'You've got to go back out eh?'

Melissa: 'Yeah, you're on a high for hours! You just don't come out and go home sort of thing...'

Karina: 'It is just from watching them dance around.. It's just amazing. That is what does it. There is just a high from waiting for them. It's all exciting and when they come out...'

→ Melissa: 'You are not let down when they come out any-way....You feel like you've got so much. You're full of energy when you walk out that you just...that's why nobody goes home, unless you've got to work'.

All of those who participate by going on stage think of it as a great pleasure, one Melissa believes every women at the show looks forward to. While there is generally the freedom for any one to participate, the actions of a few women are

policed by others, who think they are 'too active', i.e. dancing around when others are not, grabbing at the men too often. The example I witnessed involved a drunk woman, 'dirty dancing' in front of the strippers, grabbing at them, while every one else was seated. Although no women in the audience actually stopped her, some did yell at her to get out of the way, and some felt very annoyed that this woman had gone 'over the top', as Yvonne and Ellie discuss. Yvonne was critical to the point that she said she could be violent towards the women who got too 'loose'!

Ellie: 'I felt quite embarrassed for her. That she was going to wake up the next day and think "oh my god, did I really do that?". I saw that she was like trying to score one of them, instead of it just being a show, and enjoying that, she wanted more.'

Yvonne: 'I didn't like a couple of the women who were sitting in front of me, because I just got that real slut feeling off them. That they were there, and they were going to get laid before they went home, and I don't like that. I don't like it, and I can't handle it. That's why I don't drink, 'cause I'd end up attacking her. I just don't like it. Not that it should ever bother me, it's none of my business, but it does. Because I think we are here to have a good time, not get laid'.

### *Discussion.*

The women they discuss transgressed the line between fantasy and reality. According to the women who were critical of her, she did not seem to realise that the show is a fantasy world, that the men are just performers, and you don't 'hit on them'. The woman did not have the distance from the strippers that other women do. This is strangely contradictory, as the same women who were critical of her also talked to the strippers during the interval as though they were 'real men'. Perhaps, it was also that the woman attempting to pick-up the strippers was acting too much 'like men', something that others had hoped to avoid while at the show.

Women's experiences of the pleasures of 'energy' at the show, pleasures which involve the expressions of feelings and desires through activity and movement, relate to exhaustion and inactivity in their daily lives. Dancing, grabbing the men, yelling, getting on stage, jumping up and down, etc. are

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mobilisations of feelings of lust, desire, and romance, of the sensual delights of looking, of the fun, excitement and intensity of the situation, and of the experiences of freedoms. It can be deduced from the women’s comments that they often feel like their movements and actions are constrained and limited, either by outside forces or by self-regulation because of the awareness of what happens when women do not conform to social norms. Most women also do not get a chance to kiss, touch, rub and pinch men like they do in the show. It is not only because women’s actions are constrained, but also that many have been on the receiving end of those actions and know how it feels. Here though is the chance to dance with a guy without him thinking you want sex with him, and to feel up a guy without worrying that you are exploiting him (which was what Ellie was worried about).

The interviews highlight the fact that this is a popular cultural *practice* where audiences are actively involved in negotiating and creating pleasures and meanings. While it is possible to (wrongly) picture cinema audiences as passive and isolated subjects, there is no way that women at strip shows can be regarded as such<sup>26</sup>. As I discuss under the pleasures of ‘community’, perhaps being involved bodily, emotionally, intellectually, and communally in the energy, offers women more opportunities to negotiate, resist, and reconstruct their own pleasures, than practices that are less ‘involving’.

Ideas about women’s passivity and calmness (which are obviously not true for most women at male strip shows), are used to exclude, marginalise and discourage women from participation in male-dominated culture, while blaming them for their positions of disempowerment (i.e. ‘no erotica for women exists because women don’t want it, or if they did, they would go out there and make it’). Enjoying the pleasures of ‘energy’ in most urban leisure spaces, would

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<sup>26</sup> Strangely enough, while men are seen in our culture to be more active, it is actually women audiences at male strip shows that, according to the strippers themselves, are more ‘wild’, energetic and ‘hands-on’ than men at female strip shows (both have ‘bouncers’ to manage the audience members who get too ‘active’).

open women up to the critical and controlling masculine heterosexual gaze, yet in the space of the male strip shows women experience some freedom from this. However, as shown in the example of the 'too active' woman, it is not only men, but other women, who through their policing, surveillance and disapproval cause women to limit their own social activities. Nevertheless, women who 'dirty dance' in a pub are in danger of harassment, even rape (as in the movie *The Accused*), not just snide comments from other women.

At points, women's energetic pleasures embody a conscious resistance to norms of behaviours for women: a refusal to 'act like a lady', instead wanting to have part of the action that men have had for so long. As Chesler (1978:229) notes, women's sexual assertiveness or aggression toward men is largely taboo in our society.

Dance and music are mediums through which sexualities and desires are learnt, expressed, and negotiated, and are a 'vital feature of leisure culture, entertainment and sexuality' for women where they can take pleasures in sensuality, 'bodily self-expression', power, and fantasies (McRobbie, 1984:132-3). At the show women enjoy dancing and energy for the sake of it, without it appearing to be solely directed at any men. Gotfrit (1988:125) claims that her own pleasures from dancing allow her to 'be somewhat more intimate with women I care for by sharing our playfulness, laughter, creativity, as well as a physical nearness'. McRobbie (ibid:134) believes this is positive for women, as it sustains a 'shared and nebulous eroticism' between women, which is not 'straightforwardly romantic, heavily heterosexual [nor] 'goal oriented''.

The show provides significantly less opportunities for the realisation of women's heterosexual desires than exist in the pub or night-club, for example. Thus, there is the freedom to enter fantasy worlds, enjoying energetic pleasures without concern for real implications. Gotfrit (1988:125) believes that the dance floor 'is a rare public space where letting go of the tight rein women often keep on their sexuality is possible, where the pleasures of the body are

embraced and privileged'. According to McRobbie (1984), the experiences of abandon and being temporarily 'out of control' involve everyday evasions and resistances which point to areas not totally colonised by dominant cultures.

The idea of women's disruptive and unruly desire, their 'susceptibility to passion, the emotions and sentiment' especially the corporeality of these pleasures (closeness to the body), has historically been used to justify women's containment in private spaces and their unsuitableness for public, civic life (Swanson, 1995:81; also Pateman, 1989). This historically links women with popular culture: the corrupting degraded forms of (popular) cultural activity available in urban spaces, threaten to unleash wild feminine sensuality and uncontrollable passion that would disrupt civil public life (Swanson, 1995). Getting 'wild' and 'out of control' are often seen within dominant masculine culture as indicators of women's inherent triviality, childishness, and untrustworthiness. This means that women's energetic pleasures do hold the potential for the disruption of male-dominated spaces.

When women experience the pleasures of 'energy' at the shows, some may be reminded that there are many places where it is not possible for them to enjoy these pleasures. If women are able to have this freedom of movement and agency in one urban space (at male strip shows), they might expect to be able to have this in other places where they go to socialise, in their homes, or other places where their actions are constrained. It may promote an awareness of, and resistance to, the norms of 'acting like a lady' and female passivity<sup>27</sup>. Feminists need to highlight women's agency that exists here, as in many other popular cultural practices, in order to counter sexist practices and assumptions, and encourage more women to get involved (i.e. play in bands, write poems, make and use erotica).

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<sup>27</sup> I do not suggest that there is some natural and wild women's sexuality and pleasure waiting to be released through pleasure, nor that the body is 'less colonised' by dominant culture and thus the route to women's empowerment. Women's minds and bodies are inscribed in dominant cultures, but spaces for resistance or refusal always exist.

## **'They weren't untouchable, they were more real': The Pleasures of Transparency.**

The pleasures of 'transparency' involve perceptions of authenticity, sincerity, openness and honesty, which emerge either from the strippers' performances or from the being in the audience<sup>28</sup>. This was commonly expressed as being able to derive more pleasure from the show when the strippers appeared to have genuine, nice, caring, humble and happy natures and be truly enjoying themselves. Strippers who were grumpy, uncaring, distanced, or egotistical detracted from the pleasures. Sian and Melissa find it hard to enjoy the performances of strippers who seem to be 'just doing their jobs to get money', and those who appear to be in love with themselves.

Sian: 'Walking around at the intermission, in the crowd...That was kind of important for the show, that they [strippers] weren't just there for entertainment...It showed they weren't stuck up. They weren't like, "oh, I'm better. I can't do this. I can't mingle". They just came out and they are just like regular guys. You stopped and had a talk to them, and they would stand there and talk...They feel like friends when you are talking to them, like you have known them for a while'.

Melissa: 'I can always tell if they are really up themselves or if they have a nice personality. [One of the strippers] came up to me and actually spoke to me and said "how are you?" and "what do you do?", and this is while the routine is going on. I thought that was really good. He actually took time out to say things. All the others were so up themselves that they couldn't really give a shit, and they just sort of come up and dance by you and walk off...Like that guy isn't particularly nice looking, but because of his personality, it shows out'.

For Yvonne, seeing strippers outside of their job acting arrogant and stupid, meant that she was unsure she would be able to enjoy seeing them perform.

Yvonne: 'I saw them at a restaurant. They were a bunch of bloody dipsticks. That had put me off ever going to a strip show. They were idiots. The mentality of ten

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<sup>28</sup> The pleasures of 'transparency' that come from other women in the audience are dealt with under the theme of 'community'.

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year olds! They were really poncy, with all these women all over them. They really loved themselves'.

Ellie explains that this (appearance of) realness and sincerity is opposed to macho and staunch male posturing, which many women dislike. Thus the men are more 'feminised' and women in the audience are able to 'connect' or identify with them.

Ellie: '[It] felt like they were able to take the mickey out of themselves. They weren't staunch. They were able to laugh at themselves, and were enjoying it. I think it made them seem more genuine actually. The masculine side was taken out of it..... I thought it was really cool how they came round and talked in the break...It sort of made it less exploitative from their side. That they weren't just there to take our money and run...They weren't untouchable, they were more real'.

***Discussion.***

These women show that they want to be able to have some equality with, or even some power over, the male strippers. For many it is not pleasurable when the strippers, through macho staunchness or aloofness, try to assert their power over women audiences. Kent (1985:88) argues that (hegemonic) masculinity as dominance, assertiveness and self-sufficiency, is challenged when men strip-off for women, so for strippers, the issue becomes how to strip 'while apparently retaining those qualities which construct his sexual identity and constitute his personal dignity'. When strippers try to maintain an active position of power, Kent believes women's fantasies are obstructed. Looking at Playgirl pinups, for example, she claims to:

'recognise that self-conscious exertion to achieve a macho image, which I find laughable; I read the models' faces which I find arrogant, smug or stupid, and I know with certainty that I would want no contact with any of them' (ibid:92).

In order for fantasies to be activated, women need to gain some distance by eliminating the strippers' personality, enabling women to:

'act selfishly and without fear of ridicule or censure...[The stripper] must be transformed into an object that does not make judgements, has no independent desires and whose life beyond the present moment is held in abeyance' (ibid.).

Kent believes that much erotica for women, produced by men is closed to imaginative and explorative erotic possibilities because of the representations which maintain male power. However, many women that I talked to were able to make the show work for their desires and fantasies. They actively resist these constructions of male dominance by either fancying only those men who do not take on these recuperative strategies, or else by projecting onto the stripper the kind of personality they need to activate their fantasies. Being able to do this is, according to Kent (ibid.):

‘highly subversive since it would encourage them [women] to identify their sexual proclivities beyond the parameters of masculine requirements and projections’.

### **‘No bitchiness. No guys. No husbands or boyfriends’: The Pleasures Of Community.**

All the women interviewed talked about the pleasures of ‘community’: that is, togetherness, sharing, and camaraderie. These pleasures are derived from the atmosphere of the show and the audience’s actions, being almost irrespective of the strippers’ performances. Participants expressed pleasure from having no men around (the strippers are distanced and/or not ‘real’ men, existing in a fantasy world), enabling them to feel comfortable and safe; speak openly about sex and desires; enjoy gossip; celebrate friendships; and be less critical of, or competitive with, other women. This was one of the strongest pleasures I experienced at the shows: the enjoyable, and not common-enough experience of being in a space with a large group of women, who were loud, energetic, drinking, laughing, talking and really enjoying themselves.

Nearly all the women mentioned that the atmosphere felt very different when men were absent from the audience. As Karina discusses, men limit women’s actions, speech, and so their pleasures, but at the show, women can share ideas, be loud, and enjoy each others company.

Karina: ‘[I]t’s all females too aye? It’s good. It’s good to go out and have a good time without a male, ...because males usually restrict you. When they’re not there

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no-one really cares. You can do what ever you want, you know...I mean you are with males all the time. You go to a pub and it's full of males. It's good to go out with just a group of females, have a few drinks and you are all interested in the same thing..if you had a male there it restricts you. You won't be able to scream and yell. You couldn't talk about the show to a male because they wouldn't understand what you are feeling or anything'.

Cath also agrees that the environment of the show allows women to 'let go', to relax, without having to constantly check their behaviour and speech, which many tend to when they are around their partners.

Cath: 'Going out to the shows is more relaxing. You can just let go, you're not worrying what your partner is thinking about and all that. It's the conversations you have as well. There are things that you can talk about more with women, than you can with a partner or with a male'.

Trudi also experienced some freedom to 'let go', and while Cath found it easy to talk about different things with friends at the show, Trudi thought the 'women-only' environment allowed women to talk more freely with women who were strangers.

Trudi: '[Y]ou could just sit there and scream or whatever. If you go to a bar you can't really do that. But there you can, and everyone was really friendly and you meet heaps of people, other women that were there. They were really friendly... Everyone is very friendly. Normally if you go out and there's just women there, you think twice about saying hullo, or anything to them. But there everyone smiles. You can go up to them and make conversation'.

Me: 'Why do you think that is?'

Trudi: 'Because it was mostly women there! And everyone's husbands or boyfriends aren't there'.

In two different shows that I attended, emphasis was placed on the fact that men were not present in the audience. Manpower's compere claims: 'There are two things you won't find here tonight, husbands and boyfriends'. Playgirl International's compere constantly hassled one man who came in later to meet his partner, with jokes about him having 'homosexual tendencies'. The point was made most powerfully though, in a story he told about a woman who had a photo taken of herself in a 'compromising position' with a stripper. According to his story, the

woman's partner found the photo and 'beat her up'. He was taken to court (big cheers from the audience) but because of this, the Police asked Playgirl International not to allow any photography at the show! Yvonne refers to this story when she talks of her experiences of the pleasures of being in the 'women-only' audience.

Yvonne: 'There was no other men there. There was no competition or any thing like that. No bitchiness. No guys, no boyfriends or husbands. Like that guy [compere] said, 'no photos, cause that chick's husband put her in hospital, so I know he's a bit of a wanker, but that's why I can't let you take photos'. There was none of that there [no abuse]'

Like Yvonne, Ellie was also felt more comfortable with friends and other women, when men were absent from the audience. For many it meant women did not have to compete for the attention of men, and they were released from the judgement and surveillance of themselves and others (the critical gaze that was discussed earlier).

Ellie: 'It was generally a really good atmosphere. Being amongst a group of women, letting their hair down, no guys to sort of...no one was acting up, putting on airs and graces to attract a guy. There was no competition. *There was no competition!* There was no judging either. Like nobody amongst the audience was judgmental of themselves...Like if there had been guys there, a lot of the women would have been more conscious about the way they were acting, and behaving and looking. The way they were appearing, because there's always that set-up. When you put guys in any room, there's always some women who are acting up to it. Who are aware of it, and checking their behaviour because of it'.

Ellie talked in-depth about feeling safe and feeling some freedom from social repercussions. For her, sexual pleasures, voyeuristic and energetic pleasures, were all enhanced through being in a 'woman-only' audience.

Ellie: 'I think it was good. It felt really safe to be sexual. To just be...I wouldn't call it animal instincts, but that's probably the best word to describe it. To just be sexual without being held back. Like they didn't have to be female and feminine about it...You get to let down some of your facades and your barriers...I felt safe because there weren't men there. You could let rip. You could feel sexual, you could enjoy the sexual side of it, but you didn't feel like you were being taken advantage of for showing that side. Like the classic scenario of 'you asked for it'. You could feel that

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way and show that women are as much sexual as men, and it wasn't going to be used against you'.

Initially many women approach the show with trepidation and nervous laughter, sitting quietly in close groups around the room. However, when those who have attended the shows before begin to 'get loose' and really enjoy themselves, this encourages others to do the same, as Jody and Sian note. Audience members gradually get louder and more active, dancing around, spreading out so as to get access to the strippers, outstretching arms to get a 'feel' of the men as they come by, laughing and talking louder and less self-consciously.

Jody: '[T]he audience participation, they were really into it. You weren't embarrassed to get into it as well. I mean, if I had been with a more subdued crowd, I probably would not have got... I mean I would have enjoyed it but not to the same extent, because I would not have been able to yell and scream, which I did. A lot!!'

Sian: 'The people make it entertaining...you see a chain reaction. It's like you're in one big party, and they don't know each other but they're all there for the same reason... I mean you are going to scream louder if somebody is screaming, and you are going to try and keep up with them. It really gets you going what they do and you just do it, and it's just an awesome experience. It really is...With Auntie Sally. Seeing her enjoying herself, it just carries on to me, 'cause I see her and I think 'I can do that'. That really gets me into it'.

***Discussion.***

What emerges from the interviews is that the pleasures of 'community' (friendship, sharing, and consensus), do not derive from the performance but are directly related to the actions and attitudes of the audience, and the spaces they occupy. The absence of men means that physical (and cultural) spaces are taken over by women and their pleasures. This contrasts to the male-dominated spaces where most popular cultural activities take place, such as pubs, night-clubs, streets, concert venues, gyms etc.

'Taking over' space is usually a masculine activity. In western cultures, Best (1995) argues space is conceived as feminine and passive, there for active

men to dominate, controlling the space for their own pleasures, comforts and exploits. This 'feminisation of space', has been a means for displacing women from public spaces. As some of the women interviewed point out, men's actions, speech and looks, work to confine women to certain places and to constrain women's movements (enforced through convention or violence), which relates to limitations put on women's identities and sexualities (Massey,1994). Women have long been perceived as 'disorderly', a threat within the public, urban society where there are opportunities for them to move beyond rigid social norms of femininity and heterosexuality (Best,1995).

In the urban spaces of pubs, clubs and dance halls, there are particular norms and constructions of femininity which women are expected to live up to. The lucid point made by Ellie was that most women are aware of the repercussions and problems for those who reject, or fail the 'careful negotiation of the invisible and easily transgressed "good girl" line' (Gotfrit,1988:122). Some of the young women spoke about the restrictive and isolated environment of the pubs, where it feels unsafe to approach either men or women, and where the dangers of getting drunk, 'getting loose' and having a good time are very real. There is, for example, a naturalisation of harassment and violence in these places (Gofrit,1988).

Even though the show purports to be a fantasy world, it provides warnings about the real world of 'fateful pleasures' (Wilson,1991:1). The story about the women who was physically abused after her husband discovered a photograph of her taken with a stripper, reminds women that the pleasures within the city culture are dangerous: they render women vulnerable to abuse and control by men. 'For their own good', women should limit their pleasures. The temporariness of the safety and freedoms available to women is stressed, reminding them not to forget their husbands and boyfriends (who might feel threatened by women's independent desires); the realities of male violence; and the necessity to act with caution and constraint.

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Despite these efforts to constrain women's pleasures and actions though, I believe the pleasures women experience do hold the possibility of moving beyond the limits set by the text of the show and the social norms they reflect. Central to the potential for empowerment, are women's experiences of the 'women-only' environment of male strip shows. As a feminist activist, I have had many experiences with 'women-only' spaces and gatherings, but most of the women I spoke to had never experienced this, even two of the women who would call themselves feminist! (One woman spoke about play-centre meetings, but said there the children are the centre of attention, the women do not talk about themselves.)

Gotfrit (1988:131) claims that 'the appropriation of space exclusively for women's pleasure, control, and solidarity is radical'. This is especially so when women do this collectively, in night-time urban spaces where groups of men or heterosexual couples are the usual social units encountered. At male strip shows women audiences are able to, and do, commandeer spaces that are traditionally associated with male pleasures.

I related this to my experiences of *Take Back The Night* marches organised by feminists to assert women's right to move safely around the city. Attending male strip shows appears to be motivated by pleasure and the marches fuelled by anger, but both groups of women are claiming the right for women to socialise safely in urban spaces which have previously been unsafe, unpleasant or off-limits to women, centralising various pleasures for men at women's expense. The marches may appear to be public actions while the shows are more privatised, but as I have said, political action can take place at many different levels. Pleasures are a site of political importance, and in this case, they probably reach a wider audience than the marches do. The difference is perhaps that the marches are consciously organised communities of women working for social change, while the strip shows provide a more spontaneous and less directed group of women. However, this is where feminist analysis and

interventions can work to make sure there are more accessible safe places, and that women are aware of these.

Grosz (1995:55-7), following Irigaray, claims that we need to redefine spaces (both cultural and physical) where women can be as *women*, because:

'the ways in which space has been historically conceived have always functioned either to contain women or obliterate them...[Feminists need to] return women to those places from which they have been dis- or replaced or expelled, to occupy those positions-especially those which are not acknowledged as positions-partly in order to show men's invasion and occupancy of the whole of space, of space as their own and thus the constriction of spaces available to women, and partly in order to be able to experiment with and produce the possibility of occupying, dwelling, or living in new spaces, which in their turn help generate new perspectives, new bodies, new ways of thinking'.

While there is a history of attempts by capitalist and patriarchal systems to regulate women within the urban environment, these spaces also have historically meant new freedoms for women, according to Wilson (1995)<sup>29</sup>. The city offers freedoms to women in that it 'normalises the carnivalesque aspects of life' (ibid,1991:7), presenting 'pleasure, deviation and disruption' alongside conformity, discipline and danger. Wilson claims that feminist attention should not focus purely on women's victimisation, passivity, and vulnerability, but rather highlight spaces where women are active, resistive and breaking down the gendered public/private divide (ibid.). Feminists need to 'insist on women's rights to the carnival, intensity and even the risks of the city', for without these there can not be imaginings or explorations of new ways of being and doing, or of women's empowerment (ibid.:7,10).

Women's pleasures of 'community', hold political potential for feminists also because they bring into focus times when men dominate cultural practices, and marginalise women's pleasures, desires and sexualities. When the shows

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<sup>29</sup> Within the public and urban sphere, it has been increasingly difficult to contain women within the institution of heterosexuality, and within the domestic realm of unpaid work.

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provide a comparison between spaces dominated by women and by men, women may become aware of the conditions behind ‘horizontal violence’ (the criticism and harassment of other women who are in similar positions). This could also point women towards alternative cultural practices where they can develop knowledges and pleasures in communities of women, such as within feminist organisations and groups. The shows in some ways allow for an experience of a ‘feminist utopia’ where cultural and physical spaces abound for women to safely pursue their pleasures, share knowledges, and work together to empower themselves.

The sharing of pleasures in communities then, holds potential for political and individual empowerment of women. As Stam (1989:186) notes, the potential in carnival lies in

‘an eroticism founded not on the individual gaze but on a shared experience, the possibility of desire experienced not as the pursuit of a fading object but as a communal current passing between persons’.

### **‘It feels like you’re in control’: The Pleasures Of Specialness.**

The theme of ‘specialness’ encompasses pleasures which give women a sense of being the only or the chosen one, of being the centre of attention, and/or being in a position of power. Some of the women feel like the strippers are performing just for them. Those that go on stage often feel special to be picked out of the crowd, as Trudi verifies.

Trudi: ‘A lot of women, well, guys wouldn’t come up to them a lot, so [at the show] they [strippers] go around everybody, so that everybody feels good about themselves...They kind of make you feel special’.

Sian’s voice is full of excitement as she discusses feeling special at the show, which is one of the most important pleasures for her. This involves experiencing power, attractiveness, assertiveness, agency, uniqueness, respect, and intense almost ecstatic enjoyment.

Sian: 'The very first guy that came over to me, he got down on his knees and he was just talking to me, whispering in my ear. I didn't hear much, 'cause he was just there and he gave me a kiss. I thought "people have never done that to me before in a show". That was the first time they had actually come to me! That just blew me away. It makes you feel like they're doing it for you. That there's nobody else there. It makes me feel like I am the only one in the room, like when I make eye contact with them if I can. It makes me feel kind of special. Like the chosen. It feels like you're in control. You're doing something that's making them come to you. Even though you might not be, it makes me think that way. Like holding my hands, the way I do it. I may be doing something that is drawing them to me. I've continually got a smile on my face when I'm there. Right from when the compere comes out to the very last thing when they leave, the smile is just there on my face the whole time. When they get closer I start really screaming and yelling. I end up getting hoarse at the end'.

Even though both Sian and Melissa are conscious that the strippers are probably not noticing the differences between women, they are flattered by being singled out for attention.

Melissa: 'You see what the other girls are like on stage. They just have so much fun. You know it will just make your night: top it off!...It really is flattering too, if one of those guys pulls you up. They probably don't even see who they are grabbing, they are just so worried about their routine, but you have this thing in your mind that "oohh, they picked me for some reason"...Its just fun I suppose, because when you get picked up out of all the other girls to go on stage, they all say "oh you lucky bitch!!"'

Feeling in control, as expressed by Sian, is also important for Yvonne's pleasures from the show. This involves being in the powerful position of the paying customer and thus have to have things done to their liking. While she might have insolence and constant attention-seeking from others at home, Yvonne expects the show to be a place where she can be free of this.

Yvonne: 'Well it was so different. I had never been to anything like that before. There was all these male strippers, getting their gear off for me...I felt like it was really personal. I know I had to pay to get into to see, but it felt like they were there to entertain me. I thought it was great.[When I went up on stage] I liked all the attention being on me...I didn't like the new guy who was full of himself, and loved himself. I didn't like him. He put me off. He was there to make us happy. We don't have to do anything for him. I had to pay to see him. I don't want to see his attitude. I have enough attitude here [at home]'.

*Discussion.*

As Yvonne's comments show, the pleasures of 'specialness' are important for some women, because they answer the needs created in a life when other people always come first. This is a common experience for women. All of the women who were mothers, talked about how their children's needs come first, meaning they rarely have the time to go out and have fun without their children. Similarly, some women put their partner's needs and desires before their own, which also limited their chances to go out. Even for those who do socialise a lot, the pleasures of 'specialness' can be rare. Some women who socialise with their partners, found they often ended up in a group of mostly men, feeling marginalised by men's talk about male culture, unable to centralise their own desires and pleasures, and having to think about what 'he' wants. For many women in paid or unpaid work there are similarly few chances to feel special and unique, with little recognition and praise.

The specialness women experience at the show then, in some ways subverts norms of women's selflessness and deference to others. This is one night when women themselves matter, when they are central, and not defined or constrained by their relationships to others and their work. The strip show directly addresses them as important, discerning and active consumers. In other words, women can experience what an equalitarian utopia would feel like, where they are self-determining and important individuals, and where their needs and desires are catered for as much as men's are.

An extreme example of this is the case of Yvonne, for whom the pleasures of 'specialness' were central. At the show, she made a point of yelling loudly so that she would be chosen to go on stage, and once there, seemed to really be enjoying herself, dancing around and touching the stripper. Perhaps her pleasures relate to the fact that her life is always being over-determined by that of her partner and her children. She said she had not been out without her partner and children for two years before going to the strip show with a family

friend. This was for her, one step in the journey she was beginning, trying to claim some time and space for herself, perhaps desiring to feel important and know that she mattered.

On one hand we can say that this pleasure is a temporary and individualised one, contained within dominant cultures of capitalism and male power. The women are addressed as sovereign and similar individuals, and the pleasures are only available to those women who can afford the entrance. On the other hand though, the pleasures could be resistive. The pleasures from feeling special are different at male strip shows, than in much of the social world, because they do not involve women as the object of desire. Feeling special here is not based on women's looks, dress, femininity, sexual availability or body. Nor does it require women to have any outstanding skills or knowledge to feel special. Women only need to be there and be themselves, to be able to feel this.

This pleasure may appear to fit neatly within the boundaries of heterosexual romance where women get pleasure from waiting for men to 'choose' them. Although many women say these pleasures involve strippers singling them out, and paying attention to them, it is not only the attention from the men that is enjoyable, but what other women say and do. Some find a kind of pleasure when other women get playfully jealous ("oh you lucky bitch"); when their friends feel proud of and happy for them; and when their friends question and tease them about their experiences. For some then, this pleasure confirms friendships among women.

Radway (1987) in her study of women who read romance novels, found that some women saw the act of reading as a challenge to their disapproving partners. They found meanings in the books which supported women's self-determinations, cultures and values, and which criticised male culture. In her conclusions though, Radway claims that inevitably, reading romance novels reconciles women with patriarchy, as their resistance never leaves the kitchen.

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In the case of this strip show though, more radical possibilities are perhaps enabled by the fact that these readings and pleasures occur where women are physically present together in a public space marked out for and by them, where they can share their thoughts and experiences and nurture the feelings of self-esteem and confidence which emerge from the pleasures of 'specialness'. Gaining some self-esteem and self-acceptance are necessary elements for women who want to build equalitarian heterosexual relationships (as all of the women in my study said they did), and to gain self-determination. Furthermore, when at the strip show, men are in supportive, pleasing and servicing roles, while women are strong, active and in control, thus alternative ways of being men and women, and of organising heterosexuality are illuminated. Feminist political work could be done here to articulate these experiences with feminist understandings.

### **'Having a good perve': The Pleasures Of Looking.**

The pleasures of 'looking' involve the pleasures of gazing upon eroticised representations of male bodies and upon the spectacle of women audiences enjoying themselves, as well as the freedoms from being looked at, and the self-surveillance this engenders. For all of the women interviewed, the pleasures of 'looking' at the strip shows, were different than those in other areas of their lives. The opportunity to look at men, to have the strippers' bodies there *just* for women's visual pleasures is not a usual occurrence, as Yvonne notes:

Yvonne: 'They're [men in the pub] there to have a good time, maybe to try and get laid, but not for you just to look at'.

Thus, for some women the strip shows are a rare and enjoyable chance to see men as sex objects. Cath and Ellie enjoyed this novelty.

Cath: '[I] liked just seeing what nice bods they have. A bit of a sexual thrill. Your boyfriend doesn't always do a strip routine for you (laughter)'.

Ellie: 'I liked seeing the sexual side right in your face, things that you don't normally see in the street, just right in your face'.

Several of the women discussed deriving pleasure from this 'freedom to look', being in a situation where women are not scorned, hassled, made vulnerable or embarrassed when they are 'caught staring'. Most were aware that looking at men is constrained by social norms which say women should not or do not enjoy looking. At the strip show though, some felt they could look without embarrassment, as Trudi explains,

Trudi: 'Well if you were somewhere and you saw a good looking guy you wouldn't really say anything to them, but there, you would see them, and you would "OOOhhh" and you don't feel stink about doing it'.

Like Ellie, some enjoyed gazing at the strippers directly, making eye contact without having to look away or suffer any of the repercussions that are there in everyday life.

Ellie: 'I liked the chance to be voyeuristic without voyeuristic being bad. Having a good perve without any negative connotations to perverting...It's just something that's normally viewed as being negative for females to perve like that. We probably want to do it anyway, just as much as men do, but it's perceived that we don't. So it was a chance to be able to do what comes naturally, without anyone frowning upon it, or feeling like you were somewhere you shouldn't be...It felt quite liberating. That you could do it, and get away with it, and that nobody was going to bat an eyelid about it...I felt quite at ease, that I could appreciate the aesthetic value. Like appreciate a good 'bod'. Here was the freedom to do it. There was no connotations on it'.

Sian also found the freedom at the show to take pleasure from looking because it was at an impersonal and anonymous level.

Sian: 'Sometimes you can kind of tell if you are being looked at. You can feel eyes on you. In the show, you can look at the guys, but you've got none of the women looking at you...Nobody knows if you're looking at him, or somebody else. There's no embarrassment if you are looking at them [strippers] in the show and get caught, either. Whereas, on the street if you look at someone and they catch you, you duck and dive just to get out of their way...I usually try to make eye contact as well, just to catch them [strippers]...It's a controlled atmosphere in the show. You know what you can get away with...But out on the street, it's fair game. It's not so controlled because you've got everyone around. There's also other males around. Whereas in that show, because it's all females, it makes things a lot easier to look at them [strippers]'.

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For some the pleasures that come from the chance to 'look-for-the-sake-of-looking' were distanced, and felt purely physical (not emotional). They did not want it to go any further than the aesthetic pleasures of the moment. As Ellie says,

Ellie: 'You could just appreciate the physical body for that exactly, without any emotion attached to it. It was quite separate. It was segregated into...yeah, just a sexual thing. It was a physical sexual thing, not emotional...I was actually quite surprised at how much I did like looking...I just wanted to rub my hands down them, to appreciate the beauty...It was like a piece of art because they did have bloody good bods!'

Like Ellie, Cath didn't want to have to think about the strippers as real men, as potential lovers, friends or partners, but just to be able to appreciate looking at a 'good bod'.

Cath: 'When you go to the strip shows it's a different atmosphere. You go in there just to look at them strip, whereas if you are going out for drinks, and relaxing, you're not looking at them [men] in the same light. At strip shows you're looking at their bods specifically...Like I am committed in a relationship, but it's just nice to see what else is out and about'.

Some women, like Yvonne and Ellie, found it easier to maintain this pleasurable distanced looking, when there was a sense of fantasy, mystery and tease that activated the imagination.

Yvonne: 'I looked at all of the guys. I was interested in how they did the stripping...It was just as much fun them getting their gear off as when they had it off'.

Ellie: 'I liked it when they were more teasing than blatant. Like when they had their g-strings on and pulled the sides of them down. I thought it was quite teasing. It's that anticipation. I think it would have been an anticlimax if they had taken it all off. I saw one stripper, and it was quite good until he took it all off, then it was just normal...when he takes it all off it becomes real'.

The blatant sexual display of exposed male bodies was thought by some to destroy this fantasy, being either too confrontational or just plain ugly. When women talked about what they did and did not want to see, the discussion often came down to attractiveness of penises and whether these should be displayed, as Jody's discussion demonstrates.

Jody: 'The ones we went to see at the Fat Lady's Arms, that really sucked. They stripped right down! One of these guys had his penis in my friend's face! He was standing like this, and she went "Is that it"? Which didn't do much for him! But I think also, with Manpower, there was a lot left to the imagination. They never lost their g-strings, I don't think, not when we saw it. One guy brought it right down and then pulled it up again, so they actually kept that little bit of mystery. Even though everyone was dying to see it come off! That was part of the act. But these guys [at the Fat Ladies Arms] stripped right down, and to me a penis is not attractive anyway. A penis does nothing for me, it just ... a lot of women love looking at a penis. Well, none of my friends do, and I don't'.

Me: 'Do you think it's different though, if it is just a shrivelled up thing or if it is an erect penis?'

Jody: 'I don't know, even an erect penis doesn't make me think "oh god!!" (laughter) No that's a lie, that's a lie!! 'Cause I have watched one and thought "phowar..lets go!!!'

Jody did not want to see a flaccid penis but got pleasure from looking at an erect penis. Some women though, like Sian, were sure they wanted explicit views and realism, and they complained when the show did not give that to them.

Sian: 'I'd like to see males go down further. But I know it's not going to happen. it might be considered tasteless, but it's the same for females as well'.

The other side of the pleasures of 'looking', is the enjoyable freedom from being *looked at*. Men's gaze often feels controlling, constraining and uncomfortable as Ellie points out.

Ellie: 'I try not to let them affect me, but you can see they are out there. Like when I went into the shop with Karl to look at pornos. There was a guy in there and I felt that it wasn't the place that I should be. Especially since my baby was out in the play area. It's not the kind of things that Mums should do.'

Women felt they were surveyed by men (and sometimes other women) and these gazes made them either change their behaviour, or think they *should* do this. Surveillance by others, especially men, inhibits pleasures by making some feel embarrassed, guilty, worried, self-conscious, concerned they are going to be called names and/or subject to unwanted attention. Several women mentioned the fact that women's looking challenges men, but women take the blame if any harassment or abuse happens.

*Discussion.*

Kent (1985:55) claims that looking and staring are male prerogatives. 'Men are free to watch women and to pass judgement', while women usually 'lower their eyes in embarrassment'. Women who do look are threatening to this subject/object (viewer and the viewed) dichotomy. Underneath what appears to be 'trivial social limitations' on women's looking, Kent (ibid:57) reminds us, there are

'profound restrictions on looking and enquiry...A woman who refuses to avert her eyes in the social or academic worlds and insists on speaking out risks ridicule or violence even today'.

Looking is privileged in western society as the way to gain and possess knowledge. Truths are gathered through observations, other senses and emotions are not taken as fact so easily (Lalvani,1993). It is no wonder then, that the visual has been claimed for, and colonised by, white heterosexual men who are in positions of power and privilege.

This leads to the common-sense assumptions that men are 'visual creatures', while women only get pleasure from emotional attachments. However, there is nothing inherent in women's nature that means they are not 'visual', although it can be said that the social and cultural environment does not favour opportunities for women's diverse visual pleasures and the desires related to these (Segal,1994; Leroy,1993). The social power of heterosexual men means that cultural representations favour this group, leaving few spaces for other's pleasures. We are constantly confronted with eroticised women's bodies and our desire for them is constructed through their commodified links to status, wealth and health, while men's bodies have been hidden from any critical and controlling gazes.

It is often thought that women at male strip shows are there just for 'harmless fun' and that they are not turned on by looking as men are. As this research demonstrates, this is not true for all women, but it does serve to 'desexualise' and 'neutralise' women's gazes, reassuring men who would be threatened by

the knowledge that women do judge, criticise and desire men on the basis of looks.

Eroticised representations of male bodies are a recent phenomenon, and so women and men are still getting used to the idea of looking at men as beautiful and sexy. Coward (1985) and Leroy (1993) believe that due to the lack of opportunities to look at, and desire men and male bodies, even women who enjoy sex with men have trouble thinking of them as attractive<sup>30</sup>. Some women in this study confirmed this when they talked about the penis as an ugly and unappealing thing to look at<sup>31</sup>. Nevertheless, some do claim men's bodies (especially penises) as symbols of female heterosexual desires, pleasures and humour, which 'deflates phallic mythology' (Kent, 1985:69) and the male power surrounding this.

Can enjoying looking at male bodies be a route for women to explore heterosexual pleasures, individually and collectively? Can looking be a route to women's empowerment? Doane (1982:77) argues that women looking at men is merely a reversal of the male gaze which

'remains locked within the same logic. The male striptease, the gigolo-both inevitably signify the mechanism of reversal itself, constituting themselves as aberrations whose acknowledgement simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy'.

Most of the women in my study were aware that the opportunities for 'perving' at men are restricted in our culture, and of the punishments and problems which exist for women who refuse, or are unable, to fit into the norms of

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<sup>30</sup> Leroy (1993) claims that women's first public encounters with male nudity are often surrounded by fear and abuse, such as seeing a 'flasher', while men's encounters are more likely to be pleasurable ones associated with a stripper or nude model.

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps, as Jody's story suggests, some women do not find penises attractive because they can not be shown in a state of sexual excitement, thus women can not fantasise that the stripper is interested in them personally (Leroy, 1993).

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women's looking. Women's active looking is often constrained by being 'looked at', being under surveillance. Foucault (1981) argues that surveillance is a form of social control which influences people to conform and behave in certain socially-approved ways. Being constantly subject to surveillance from other people and institutions, leads to 'self-surveillance' where we keep our own behaviour in check automatically. Bordo (1992) insists that women have been particularly subject to this form of control, as men and patriarchal institutions are constantly using their positions of social power through the mechanism of 'the gaze', to keep women 'in their place' of disempowerment. It is 'the look' that many women who are abused and harassed know.

As surveillance works through institutions, social norms and organisations, it is not only men who control women through looking. Other women also use this look to constrain and contain women's behaviour, to let them know they are getting beyond what is acceptable behaviour for women in a male-dominated society. If women look different, or if they look back, they are blamed for any abuse, hostility or disfavour heaped upon them. As some women in this study mentioned, women in our society generally learn to be self-conscious and overly concerned how they look, and what they look at.

Being seen and 'looking good', are unfortunately central to many popular cultural practices in which women participate: dancing, fashion, shopping, aerobics etc.. However, because of the safer (women-only) environment of the strip show, the gaze upon women's bodies is minimised, and women reverse the look by gazing on men's bodies. Self-surveillance and critical gaze upon other women was still detectable, but many women felt significantly freed from this.

The physical and social environment of the strip shows enhances women's visual pleasures by providing the opportunity to enjoy these collectively and actively. When some women are so clearly getting enjoyment from looking, talking about it, touching and grabbing the strippers, yelling and screaming at

the sight of their bodies, others said they felt encouraged to do this (also see pleasures of 'community').

The essentialist notion that women do not enjoy looking (which also pervades some feminist theory) does not account for the diversity of pleasures women in this study experience, especially those visual pleasures which are linked to a fantasy world where 'all the emotion' could be taken out to enjoy the 'physical thing'. While the pleasures of 'looking' sometimes involve identification, closeness and emotion (such as when the shows refer to shows romance, love and relationships), for some women looking can be distanced: just physical, voyeuristic and sexual<sup>32</sup>. They gain pleasures from eroticised bodies by 'cancelling out the personality' (Kent, 1985:92) of the strippers, while the mind, eye and hand are free to wander without self-consciousness, guilt, or fear of ridicule. Kent (ibid.:82) claims that this 'absence of a will or personality are key factors in imagined erotic pleasure'. Even though women may want a loving partnership in real life, this is not what many women want in their fantasy lives.

The world of fantasy and mystery helps keep the social and cultural realities out of women's thoughts, so that they can enjoy 'looking with lust' without having to worry about real implications. These popular visual pleasures though were not confined to the show. A couple of women defy social norms of femininity and actively take pleasure in watching and desiring men's bodies: watching pornography; getting turned on by men's sport on TV; going to pubs to perve at men. Many of the other women *wanted* to be able to enjoy looking more often in everyday life, like getting their partners to strip for them; and looking at men in the pub/sports-field/street. They wanted to be able to enjoy erotic representations of men with out coming to any harm or embarrassment themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> By contrast, when women look at men, on the street and in pubs for example, they often have to think about many other factors besides his looks.

I argue then, that male strip shows do not provide a mere 'reversal of the male gaze', as Doane (1982) claims. The shows prove that women:

*'can and do look actively and erotically at images of men...[which] disrupts the stifling categories of a theory which assumes that such a look is somehow always bound to be male' (Moore, 1988:49).*

When women and men become both subjects and objects of the gaze, this breaks down the associations of men/active/subject and women/passive/object. There has not been a simple reversal because women are not in the same positions of power that heterosexual men are, thus while their looking may open men up to criticism, it is not usually exploitative or oppressive to men. Perhaps it also frees some men to be able to enjoy pleasing women, to enjoy being an 'object of desire', without having to always 'take charge'.

Male strip shows are cultural practices where women feel they have some autonomy, safety and community, which gives them the freedom to look at, and how, they like. The shows help to overcome both the lack of erotic representations of male bodies created for women, and the lack of cultural and social understandings of women's active desiring sexualities (not only as reacting to men). Kent (1985:73) claims that,

*'through their own efforts in making, looking at and responding to images, women will establish clearer definitions of their own identities, will locate their own desires and learn to give them expression and will eventually act fearlessly as 'sovereign beings' with the ability and the right to look wherever they choose and to comment as they please'.*

### **Conclusions About Pleasures, and the Theme of Freedom.**

By way of a conclusion to my analysis of the pleasures that some women gain from male strip shows, in this section I draw out the motif of 'freedom from constraint', evident in the pleasures of 'abundance', 'intensity', 'energy', 'transparency', 'community', 'specialness' and 'looking', presented in this chapter. The pleasures of 'feeling free' appear to be central to the participant's discussions and are significant for a feminist 'politics of pleasure'. I have identified many aspects of pleasures that appear to be locked within the

dominant culture, tied to male power and traditional notions of femininity (such as the energetic pleasures which are constructed as a 'temporary' reprieve from male violence). However, the goal of this research was to consider the possibilities for women's resistance and empowerment, and thus this is the focus of this conclusion.

The pleasures of 'freedoms' are important for feminist politics because they involve the various enjoyments related to relaxed restrictions, and increased strength and agency for women. These involve *freedoms of self* (experiencing freedom from own expectations, morals fears, conventions), which are linked to *social and cultural freedoms* (experiencing freedom from constraining and controlling norms and ideals). They reflect the escapist and utopian notions within popular pleasures, but also have real social implications for women (that is, *feeling* free can relate to *being* free). The four main aspects of 'freedoms' detailed, include freedom from worry and guilt; freedom to gossip, freedom to feel sexy, and the freedom to take control.

### ***No Worries, No Guilt.***

Many women see the act of going to the show, as a form of relaxation and liberty from work. Active women are able to sit back and let others do the pleasing and the work in a safe and positive environment. For others a sense of freedom comes from opportunities to be active, 'loose' and energetic, beating feelings of exhaustion and monotony.

As discussed in the pleasures of 'community', 'specialness' and 'looking', women passionately enjoy feeling free to do and say what they wish, without having to consider their partner's opinions. Some say that at the strip shows they do not have to be so concerned about a partner getting jealous or feeling unwanted if they express desire for another man, or if they appear to be having more fun with their women friends than with their partner. This allows an

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unusual freedom of thoughts and actions, which also means less guilt and worry.

Segal (1994) claims that guilt, worry and self-doubt commonly surround heterosexual women's pleasures and longs for some celebration of active and independent heterosexual women's desire. Perhaps this celebration occurs at male strip shows where there are freedoms for women to publicly display active desires and be able to define what they want to happen, often without the usual stigma, reprisals and dangers.

***Gossip and Community.***

In the show, the pleasures of 'freedom' also involve the availability of spaces for women to talk, confide, and joke with each other without men around. There is a freedom to gossip here: a form of speech that is constantly disparaged in our society, even though it is important for maintaining communities of women (and men) and for legitimising their experiences and knowledges (Starhawk, 1987; Radway, 1987; Seiter, et.al. 1989).

As discussed in the pleasures of 'community', there are few spaces (feminist gatherings being one of these) where women do have the freedom to associate without being controlled by men and/or male-dominated culture. Often women are forced to be silent or self-deprecating about their pleasures in public, because they do not fit with accepted norms of women's behaviour and identity (Seiter et.al. 1989). However, most of the women I talked to, wanted the freedom to 'be themselves', and express their thoughts and desires openly.

Fiske (1987) believes that when women gossip about popular culture, they are turning popular cultural products into *practices*; through critiquing, negotiating and creating new meanings and pleasures, and by linking these to their own social positions, identities, and communities. Talking about popular culture 'works to activate and circulate meanings of the text that resonate with the

cultural needs of that particular talk community' (Fiske,1987:78). Tulloch and Moran (1986:247-8) claim that gossip can be empowering and subversive: through 'asserting the value of gossip, women are insisting on their own adequacy, their own personal and social space, in the face of male-dominated culture'. Gossip or 'watching aloud', links women together by enabling 'the viewer to go beyond his or her individuality and call on group reactions, group knowledge' (Tulloch and Moran,1987:244).

Segal (1994:305) claims that young women's empowerment requires 'the ability to talk about [heterosexual encounters and embodied pleasures] in the face of a general cultural silence, embarrassment or shame' surrounding them. Foucault (1978) maintains that speaking about pleasures opens us up to discipline and control, yet women in the consciousness-raising groups of the 70s, found empowerment through sharing their experiences of pleasures and displeasures. These experiences become validated, thus creating fertile soil for developing ways of resisting, negotiating, and reconstructing dominant cultures. In a study of adolescent girls' sexualities, Tolman (1994) asserts that speaking about pleasures and desires (as well as dangers) is an important way for girls to gain empowering knowledges and strategies.

Male strip shows can be one of these spaces where women have the freedom to talk openly. They allow not for the discovery of an 'authentic female experience', but for diverse ways of being women by challenging the singular prescriptions of women's sexualities and desires, within both masculinist traditions and dominant (anti-pornography) feminist thought.

### ***Being Sexy, Feeling Naughty.***

As discussed in the pleasures of 'intensity', 'energy' and 'community', many women at the show experience a 'freedom to let that sexual side dominate', as the physical/emotional dangers, stigmas and responsibilities are lessened

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within the environment of the male strip show. As Ellie says, it felt liberating to have 'a good perve without any negative connotations to perverting'.

The pleasures of what Gotfrit (1988) calls 'naughtiness' are evident here. Like Ellie, many of the women appreciate and enjoy the chance to be daring, 'wicked', or 'sleazy', to 'step outside the good girl territory' (ibid:127), by touching, 'perverting', flirting, yelling, getting 'sexy', getting drunk, and telling rude jokes. According to Gotfrit (ibid:133):

'There is a certain pleasure of subversion, of deviance, and of rejection. The refusal to be as others expect us, or as dominant images suggest women are supposed to behave, is the refusal to be determined'

It is for some an empowering rebellion, as the pleasures of 'freedom' can encourage confidence and strength. Not being traditionally feminine means some women feel less vulnerable to dangers as they refuse to act like victims. McRobbie (1984:149) for example, claims that girls who are punk rockers have less fear speaking out, walking the street alone and dancing as they want, because they have a 'lifestyle which adamantly refuses the strictures of traditional femininity'. Many women in the feminist movement experience, as I have, this sense of empowerment and freedom from social dangers, because we refuse to buy into notions that women need to be protected. While this does not mean we are immune to violence, our lives are less limited by the *fear* of it.

According to Gotfrit (1988:134), 'women often experience their own bodies with mistrust, their desires and passions as dangerous and their bodies and sexuality with shame and not pleasure' However, a sense of freedom, through the pleasures of self-expression, energy and abandon, allows some women to experience and understand their bodies, desires and fantasies in new ways. The male strip show allows women the chance to enjoy embodied pleasures distanced from emotions, fears, responsibilities etc. This differs from some more common forms of popular culture aimed at women audiences that could be said to reinforce a nurturing and self-less role for women in the 'private sphere' (see discussion on soap operas, Modleski,1982) and/or norms of

women's sexual passivity. While, for example, soap operas 'recognise and value the emotional work which women undertake in the personal sphere' (Geraghty, 1991:72)<sup>33</sup>, male strip shows do the opposite. There are the possibilities of pleasures similar to those that men appear to enjoy, even within culture still largely defined and produced by men. Perhaps this could help to develop and encourage diverse women's heterosexual desires and pleasures, by allowing women to, even briefly, get beyond dominant ideals of femininity and women's desire.

Valverde (1995) claims that women need to be able to play with power and desire to explore the possibilities of eroticised equality, through a fluidity of positions, of being active and passive (where passivity is not only powerless and weakness and activity is not only abuse), and object and subject. The male strip shows can perhaps help feminists to realise that erotic assertiveness and passivity are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor do they have to be gendered/sexed.

### ***Taking Control.***

The central question is whether the freedoms from personal and social constraints allow some women to feel in control and empowered, and act on this beyond the strip shows. Press (1991) argues that if empowerment remains only individualised and contained within the private realm, then it can not count as feminist resistance. In the concept of the 'politics of pleasure', popular cultural practices can only be seen as subversive if they link to collective understandings in women's real lives and are articulated with a wider political struggle (Segal, 1994). I want to end this chapter with a transcript of Sian's story about how the pleasures of 'freedoms' she experiences at the show cross over into

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<sup>33</sup> Geraghty (1991:72-3) claims that:

'[s]oaps rehearse to their female audience the process of handling personal relationships-the balancing of each individual's needs, the attention paid to every word and gesture so as to understand its emotional meaning, the recognition of competing demands for attention'.

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other areas of her life, empowering her to take actions and assert her ideas in ways that she normally would not.

Sian: '[The strip shows] bring my fantasies to life. You can mould them to what you want it to be. If you are thinking about them and what they are doing you can insert that into your life where it will fit, and just fantasise about it that way...It makes me not afraid to pursue a fantasy...You wouldn't be as embarrassed to ask for something to happen, to create it. It makes you more open, because you are willing to go and see the shows. It makes you open up in your daily life. I get a self esteem boost out of it. Because I actually have the courage to go to the show. I think that gives me.... I can just talk. Like when I went to the last show, the next day we were having a discussion in English, and I don't usually speak up at all. But because I had been to that show I just took control. It just gave me a lot more courage to do things. I'm not afraid to say what I want to say when I have been to a show like that...it definitely give me an encouragement boost'.

Sian's experience is one that points to the potential of the empowering and encouraging pleasures of 'freedom'. These can extend beyond the fantasy world of the show to have positive implications for women's lives and for feminist politics. While they may not be available to all women, those who experience these freedoms may want to search for or even create, further spaces where restrictions can be relaxed and there is the freedom to do, think and say new things as women.

In the conclusion that follows, I draw together theories about the political potential of pleasures (outlined in the introduction and first two chapters) with the conclusions of my analysis of the pleasures some women experience at male strip shows, pointing to ways that my research has contributed to this understanding of a feminist 'politics of pleasure'.

## CHAPTER SIX.

### **Conclusions: Male Strip Shows and A Feminist 'Politics Of Pleasure'.**

This research has explored pleasures experienced by some young women who attend male strip shows, seen in the context of their lives as women in 1990s Aotearoa/New Zealand. The thesis focused on identifying the various kinds of pleasures available and providing a feminist analysis of these, drawing upon post-modern perspectives. The aim was to develop a 'politics of pleasure', that is, an understanding of the political implications of these pleasures including the potential for empowerment and positive change for women. This chapter outlines conclusions related to a 'politics of pleasure', and points to the implications this holds for feminist understandings of popular culture, pleasures, women audiences and sexually-explicit material.

As discussed in the first two chapters, this research emerged from my critique of dominant contemporary feminist theories of pleasures and popular culture. Feminists have largely focused on popular culture which is sexually-explicit (e.g. anti-pornography feminists) or that which is aimed at women audiences (e.g. feminist film and cultural studies theorists). My research shares aspects of these approaches, however, it differs in that I firstly consider pleasures as *pleasures*, and secondly link these to a feminist political understanding which centralises women's empowerment and agency. Inequalities, dangers and constraints have not been forgotten but these are seen in the context of women's resistance and negotiation.

I argued that it is necessary to take a post-modern view of pleasures as socially-mediated, constructed within dominant cultures rather than individual, private and intrinsic. Popular cultural practices like male strip shows, do not allow women some free and natural expressions which contrast to social

regulation and repression. Pleasures are 'technologies of power' (Foucault,1981), helping to organise women's consent to dominant cultures. Popular culture 'mobilises, channels and manages' pleasures (and resistances): it 'responds to, reads, and maps collective fantasies' (Willis,1993:266) while pretending to be irresponsible and harmless.

From one perspective, forms of entertainment such as male strip shows can be regarded as having a 'safety valve' function for patriarchal society. Women have been demanding rights to sex and pleasures, so they are allowed a temporary safe place to 'let loose' while oppressive social conditions and norms remain in place. It becomes possible then, for dominant discourses to claim that women are now equal to, and have just as much freedom as men, even though this 'equality' occurs within a capitalist society which upholds systems of privilege and power for some groups of men. Only those women who have the money can enjoy this 'taste' of equality. As Dyer (1992) claims, the dominant culture offers popular pleasures as utopian solutions to real social needs, in the hope that the needs can be met within the system, thereby neutralising dissent.

Thus, some of the pleasures from male strip shows can be seen to constrain some women, encouraging conformity to already existing social norms and traditions. The carnivalesque pleasures of the show appear to be sanctioned by male-dominated culture, being socially acceptable (as 'harmless fun') and separated off in a private and temporary space. For example, in the pleasures of 'abundance', I suggested (following Faludi,1991), that the enjoyment of the 'abundance of men' to choose from can encourage women to seek out and remain within monogamous heterosexual relationships (which might be abusive, disempowering or just plain boring) because they fear never finding another partner.

As discussed in the pleasures of 'intensity' and 'energy', the freedoms to 'let loose' and 'go wild', to feel and act sexy, can mean women are regarded within

male-dominated culture as 'sluts' and 'teases' in line with the traditional Madonna/whore dichotomy and are subject to disciplining surveillance. Women's sexual assertiveness and rebellion could play into the hands of men who want sex and pleasure without any kind of respect or reciprocity.

In the pleasures of 'transparency', women gain enjoyment by 'rewriting' the personalities of the strippers, to make the men into their ideal fantasies and so disregard what could be real egotistical, unpleasant, or even abusive characteristics in men.

Through the pleasures of 'community', women are reminded that although this show allows and promotes women's pleasures, sexual agency and independence from men, they can be limited pleasures because violence and harassment still flourish in the 'real world'.

The enjoyments of being in control and feeling powerful, seen in the pleasures of 'specialness', are individualised, addressing women as sovereign and similar individuals, not recognising the diversity and differences between women.

Lastly, in the pleasures of 'looking', women are able to gain visual pleasures by being the subject (owner) of the gaze, without being the object, but the social power behind the male gaze is not easily reversed by women's looking. All the freedoms experienced are tenuous, uncertain, contradictory and available only to some women. These sanctioned pleasures are contained within the dominant system, allowing women temporary release as long as it is only within this particular physical and cultural space.

However, from a post-modern feminist perspective, I have criticised previous feminist research which is content to only describe women's victimisation and oppression. This concentration on dangers has been to the detriment of adequate understandings of the political implications of pleasures (Ryan, 1988). In contrast, my analysis also focuses on the possibilities for women's agency

and power, and times when women seem able to challenge, negotiate and/or  
→ reconstruct dominant culture in ways that improves their lives.

In order to locate women's agency and resistance within dominant culture, I suggested that the fantasy world of popular culture be thought of an alternative reality, not one that leads directly onto reality but one that exists in necessary relationship to real lives, sustaining us with dreams, hopes, possibilities. Popular culture, as Bakhtin (1984a,b) and Dyer (1992) show, provides a utopian world, that allows us to experience and imagine what empowerment and self-determination could be like. Bakhtin's theories of carnival enabled me to think about how male strip shows accessed a feminist utopia, being forms of entertainment where the roles seem to be reversed; where women are 'on top'; where women are 'acting like men' and 'refusing to be ladies'; where men are to a degree, feminised and made passive; where audiences 'make a spectacle of themselves'; and where some realities of violence and social stigma are in abeyance.

The ideas of carnival and of utopian solutions allow for pleasures to be seen as having viable potential for a feminist politics based on women's empowerment. As Lovell (1980:61) claims, the 'collective utopias, social wish fulfilments and social aspirations' which are part of popular pleasures hold radical possibilities. This is a 'politics of pleasure', a politics which does not give up on usual forms of political action (protests, campaigns, lobbying, marches, submissions) or on usual sites of political action (state, media, health, education). However, pleasures can not be separated off from the 'real issues' of economic inequalities, violence, environmental ruin etc. The disconnection of pleasures from politics,

'only reflect[s] our vast, collective separation from the body, from the earth and other life on it, and from the possibility of delight in ourselves and each other. [We can no longer continue] dividing what is "real" from what is only personal; what is public, from what is most deeply felt. We may finally be obliged, by the very threats we have created for ourselves, to rethink pleasure as a human goal and reclaim it as a human project' (Ehrenreich et.al., 1987:207-8).

Thus, the forms and sites of activism are expanded to include that which has previously been seen as outside the realm of the serious, the social, and the obviously political. Popular pleasures are important sites of cultural and social struggle, despite being uncertain and contradictory (as all sites are). As Gotfrit (1988:135) claims:

‘It is the contradiction of contesting hegemonic forms and practices on the very ground which contributes to their production and reproduction , that the root of the paradoxical nature of resistance lies’.

Moreover, the ‘politically active’ can also include those in subcultural groups, and loosely-formed ‘communities of interest’. Personal empowerment can be regarded as feminist resistance, even if it is not conscious or collective, if links can be made from the fantasy world of popular culture, to the real world of the social needs that pleasures attempt to satisfy.

While women’s pleasures and desires have been ‘vilified, abused and devalued’ within western societies, these *can* provide energy for change (Loude,1984:53). It is possible to identify pleasures which fuel resistance to dominant cultures, through providing a taste of a utopian world, alongside emphasising real social problems (Dyer,1992). Williams (1990) argues that sexually-explicit popular culture contains radical potential, as it highlights but fails to resolve, existing gender divisions and power relations, to an extent not seen in other forms of popular culture.

Enjoying pleasures can be political then, in that common-sense assumptions can be demystified, making visible the social constructions and power relations which appear to be natural and universal. ‘Self-consciously political’ (Dyer, 1992:165) actions can be encouraged in those who are ‘doing things differently’, challenging or negotiating the dominant culture, by linking individual resistances with collective actions and political agendas. Experiencing new and alternative embodied pleasures, fantasies and sexualities can also involve a ‘re-educating of desire’ (ibid.).

Gledhill (1988) claims that the site of greatest political potential in popular culture is that of cultural reception. While men and traditional norms may still dominate cultural production and distribution, the potential for change arises with the diverse ways that women audiences actively utilise and rework popular culture, moving beyond the constraints set by the text. For this reason, my research focused on women audiences' experiences. I demonstrated the importance of emphasising the diversity between women so as to counter silences surrounding women's pleasures (existing within dominant as well as feminist cultures) and be open to the innovative and alternative ways in which women gain pleasures and create meanings. Semi-structured interviews were utilised, so as to allow the participants space to speak as freely as possible of their experiences and pleasures.

In the discussion of the women's interviews, I maintained that some of the pleasures of male strip shows contain empowering possibilities, through a relation to an ideal world of female power, freedom and self-determination. For example, women's pleasures in the 'abundance of men', link into the fact that men have been resistant to social changes largely brought about by feminist activism. These pleasures also remind women of the marginalisation of women's (especially visual) pleasures, and dearth of material produced specifically for them. This could be the first step in motivating women to become involved as cultural producers (see Jenkins, 1992).

The intense sexual pleasures women experience can provide the opportunity to explore their sexualities and fantasies in safe and empowering ways. At the show, women are already assumed to be independently active and sexually assertive, while they are freed somewhat from being 'objects of desire'. This may enable women to explore different ways of living out heterosexual relationships, providing an 'erotic education' through a play with active/passive, and subject/object dichotomies.

Active and embodied pleasures, seen in the pleasures of 'energy', involve women in a critique of norms of feminine passivity. The shows provide one of very few spaces where women can experience wild energy and movement, and when these are compared to their usual self-regulating practices, the social constraints acting upon women's bodies become clear.

In the pleasures of 'transparency' I claimed that when women enjoy strippers who appear more 'real', caring and respectful, they actively reject constructions of dominating masculinities, along with male-definitions of women's pleasures. Distance between the audiences and the strippers is created, allowing women more space to determine the terms of their pleasures.

The pleasures with significant potential for women's empowerment are those of 'community'. Here active and non-traditional sexualities can be explored and validated by some women within a 'community of interest'. The pleasure of having no men around allows heterosexual women to seek independent enjoyment and satisfaction, without this always being tied to men. Male power more often becomes a source for jokes and criticism among the audience, not fear and isolation. The male strip shows provide a space, away from men's interventions and demands, where some women can celebrate and nurture their friendships and connections with other women. Women collectively (re)claim some safe and reasonably accessible physical space within the city that is devoted to women's pleasures, which disrupts men's colonisation of the red-light district, the pub, the rugby club-rooms etc. The pleasures of the 'women-only space', directly link into the pleasurable experiences of being involved in feminist groups.

The pleasures of 'specialness' involve the experience of having men conform to women's desires and wishes. At the show, some women have control and power (as consumers, as spectators, as desiring agents), and are liberated to a degree from their responsibilities to families and partners, as well as from concerns for their safety. This disrupts norms of women's selflessness and

deference to others and perhaps boosts women's self-confidence and self-esteem, which are necessary in order for women seek to improve their lives, personally and collectively.

Finally, the pleasures of looking provides an active position for women to watch without being watched. Women's voyeuristic pleasures are not denied, but encouraged, at the same time as women are freed from self-surveillance and pre-occupation with 'looks'. While men are 'objectified' in one sense, this can not be regarded as always negative or exploitative because women's looking does not directly link to power over men, but rather with empowerment for themselves. The show is one step in acknowledging and catering for women's diverse visual pleasures and points to the need for feminists to be involved in producing (and encouraging others to produce), entertainment which explores and allows for these.

The disruptions that women may be involved in at male strip shows then, firstly involve just claiming pleasure for themselves, when social norms and the organisation of women's lives means that pursuing pleasures is regarded as selfish and 'unwomanly'. Secondly, as I outlined above, there are some pleasures which appear to confront the inevitable power issues better than others. Those at strip shows in some way, are rejecting prescriptive feminine ideals of being firstly and only a mother/wife/'good girl'. When women enjoy pleasure with other women, and when they explore their sexualities, desires and pleasures in ways that are not directed at 'real' men (only fantasy figures who can be what ever women choose) as well as in ways that have traditionally been associated with men (i.e. public displays of pleasures and pleasures not directly linked to monogamous relationships and romance), heterosexual and gender norms are disrupted. Indeed, Diamond, (1985:57) argues that feminism and practices like male strip shows

'have something in common. Both insist that women are sexual beings. Both have made sex an experience open to public examination and...debate'.

The dominant polarisation of women's and men's sexualities (as seen in the 'women are from Venus, men are from Mars' thesis<sup>34</sup>), is disrupted. The heterosexual institution can be denaturalised as it becomes possible to imagine different ways of organising heterosexual relationships, while also to some degree, avoiding and/or flouting social sanctions put in place to punish those who refuse to regulate their behaviour and words. Within male strip shows, sex and pleasures are 'no longer a micro drama of male dominance and female passivity' (Ehrenreich, et.al., 1987:69). In the community of women, embarrassment, guilt, fear and isolation are reduced, meaning women are able to talk openly to other women about pleasures, desires and sexualities, where as 'keeping your mouth shut' maintains male power over women (Seiter et.al., 1989). Because women are encouraged and able to be active, autonomous, creative, desiring subjects, and because the silence and hypocrisy surrounding women's pleasures is rejected, it can be said that sexually-explicit material expresses a 'radical impulse' (Willis, 1986:56).

These disruptions and challenges are recognised by some of the women participating in the shows, but not all. The task for feminists is to be aware of, encourage, support, publicise and instigate these resistances and negotiations made (consciously or subconsciously) by women audiences. Ehrenreich, et.al. (1987:199) claim that women today, are drawn to the site of carnivals, as women have been through the ages, compelled by

'the possibility of celebrating our sexuality without the exclusive intensity of romantic love, without the inevitable disappointment of male-centred sex, and without the punitive consequences'.

However, because women's refusals and subversions are often subsumed into the dominant culture by being ignored or 'turned-around', feminists need to support women who choose these pleasurable resistances, while making the most of those experiences of freedoms in order to create a world where these freedoms are common-place. As feminists, we can not:

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<sup>34</sup> A best-seller by Gray (1993) which relies on the popular myth that women and men come from vastly different worlds. All women are thought to have the same 'essential' characteristics, which are opposite to men's.

'leave the goal of expanding personal liberation to a commodity consumer culture eager to expand its markets, what ever its sometimes 'dissident', playful or progressive moments' (Segal,1994:312).

It was feminists who first promoted social and personal empowerment and change through women's pleasures, asserting women's rights to safe, comfortable and respectful desires, fantasies and sexualities (Ehrenreich et.al.,1987). Segal (1994:314-5) believes that feminists need to, once again, participate in the changes they initiated, because 'pleasure is far too significant in our lives and culture for women not to be seeking to express our agency through it.' Thus, feminists should not:

'be isolating ourselves from other women, nor decreasing the visibility of women who are, intentionally or not, contesting dominant practices in public spheres. Rather than be on the margins, we should be *both* organising and disorganising spaces in which... to engage our rightful desires and pleasures' (Gotfrit,1988:138).

This research then points to new ways for feminists to think about popular culture, pleasures and women audiences. Women can not be seen as a monolithic group, as passive consumers, or as having fixed or singular pleasures and desires. If women's resistance to, and disruption of, dominant culture is to be identified and encouraged, it is vital that feminists consider the differences between women and their diverse and changing pleasures.

One limitation with this research though, is that I did not consider different intensities of pleasures. There is no differentiation between passion and intense love for something, and just 'enjoying it' or thinking it is 'nice'. In future research I would recommend talking to women who call themselves 'fans' of a specific popular cultural practice like male strip shows, and contrast their experiences and pleasures with those who 'enjoyed it', as well as those who disliked it.

In regard to the sexualities of women audiences, feminists must begin to look at the various ways that women negotiate heterosexual relationships and fantasies. While heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality must be criticised and deconstructed, heterosexuality needs to be seen as a valid sexual preference for

women. Feminists need to locate and encourage ways for women to reconstruct and pluralise heterosexualities, empowering themselves within this identity and practice, rather than despite it.

This research also points to new ways for feminists to understand sexually-explicit material, like strip shows. Firstly, feminist acknowledgement of, and research into, women's use of pornography or erotica is severely lacking (see Adamson,1997). Feminists have sustained the denial of women's visual pleasures, through a focus on women's genres which emphasise emotions and narrative (like romance novels and soap operas). It has largely been left up to popular media to explore women's use of sexually-explicit popular culture (see Tisdale,1992), while feminists have concentrated on male pleasures and women's displeasure. Thus feminist interpretations of women's practices are sadly absent, while women who do enjoy such material are alienated by contemporary feminisms.

Secondly, when women's enjoyment of male strip shows is considered, as in this research, the questions are raised about men's enjoyment of female strip shows (and the like). I do not suggest that the findings of this research can be transferred to an understanding of male audiences, far from it, but I do think that it points to the need for feminists to reconsider the pleasures and meanings men gain from these forms of entertainment, seeing how these fit into men's lives and heterosexual relationships. This research especially challenges the implicit and explicit assumptions of anti-pornography feminists, and necessitates a critique of commonly-accepted ideas about 'objectification', the 'male gaze', the nature of fantasies, censorship, and women's and men's essential and opposing sexualities and pleasures.

In this research then,I have claimed that women need to be able to explore their pleasures, to speak about and imagine them, otherwise their sexualities, desires, fantasies and pleasures become 'not merely unspoken, but unspeakable' (Rich,1980:199). Male strip shows can provide for this, offering

some opportunities to 'safely to explore thoughts and feelings that transgress accepted norms of [women's] behaviour' (Kent,1985:77). Women need these chances to find out for themselves about their diverse pleasures, because:

'Without such knowledge [of ourselves] women live and have lived without context, vulnerable to the projections of male fantasy, male prescriptions for us, estranged from our own experience[s] (Rich,1980:240).

As feminists, we need to be encouraging and extending both cultural and physical spaces for women to safely experience pleasures, while also providing critique and deconstruction in order to connect these to the wider feminist agendas of women's empowerment and collective actions for social change.

## APPENDIX ONE.

### Poster and Flyer.

**I want to know what you think about**

# **MALE STRIP SHOWS**

- \*What do you like about them?
    - \*What don't you like?
      - \*What do you think about the men?
        - \*What do you think about the audience?
          - \*What turns you on?
            - \*What kind of things do you do at the show?
    - \*What do you and your friends talk about?
  - \*What other times do you watch men's bodies?
- \*What do you think about your relationships with men?

I am a masters student at Massey University, and I am interested in looking at what pleasures and meanings women get out of male strip shows.

I want to talk to young women (18- 30) about what they think.  
Confidentiality Assured !!!! You don't need to give me your last name.

Please contact me and I'll give you more information about the study.

Please phone Sheryl Hann at Massey University 356- 9099 ext. 8774. or  
write to her at:  
Sociology Department, Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston  
North.

# APPENDIX TWO.

## Information Sheet.

### For Her Eyes Only: A study of women audiences of male strip shows.

#### Information Sheet for Potential Participants.

My name is Sheryl Hann, and I am a masters student in the Sociology Department at Massey University, Palmerston North. The research I am conducting for my thesis, explores aspects of women's pleasures within popular culture.

Male strip shows are a new form of popular entertainment for women in New Zealand. I intend to interview 12 young women, to find out what women get out of attending these shows. From this study, I hope to consider women's experiences, pleasures and thoughts on male strip shows (and at looking at men in general), and how these relate to their own sexualities, desires and relationships.

If you would like to be involved and agree to be interviewed for my research, you will be asked to meet with me, Sheryl Hann, at a time and place convenient to you, for an interview which will last 1 to 2 hours. You will be asked questions about your experiences and opinions on the strip show(s) you have attended, and also questions about ideal and fantasy men; about your relationships, sexuality, and identity. If you agree, the interviews will be taped, to be transcribed later.

All the information you provide will be strictly confidential, only known to the researcher and the transcriber (who will sign an agreement of confidentiality). Your name and any personal details will be changed, so that you will not be able to be identified from any written texts. The tapes will be erased, once transcribed, or returned to you. Draft copies of the research will be available for you to make comments on, and a summary of the findings can be given to you. You may also keep a copy of the transcript of your interview, if you wish.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a Consent Form which details your rights as a participant. Participants have the right to:

- decline to participate;
- refuse to answer any particular questions;
- agree or disagree to the interviews being taped;
- ask for the tape to be turned off at any time;
- ask any questions about the study, at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that your name and any identifying details will not be used;
- negotiate the conditions of participation with the researcher at any time;
- withdraw from the research at any time;
- be given access to a summary of the findings of the research, when it is concluded.



**MASSEY  
UNIVERSITY**

Private Bag 11222  
Palmerston North  
New Zealand  
Telephone 0-6-356 9099  
Facsimile 0-6-350 5627

**FACULTY OF  
SOCIAL SCIENCES**

**DEPARTMENT OF  
SOCIOLOGY**

This research has been approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, and follows the ethical procedures of the Sociological Association of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

If you have read this information sheet, and would like to be involved in the research *please contact me* (see below).

Also if you have any further queries, do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor, **Allanah Ryan**.

Researcher: **Sheryl Hann**  
Sociology Department.  
Massey University.  
Palmerston North.  
Phone 356 9099 ext. 8774 (daytime)  
or 358 9984 (home)

Please leave a message if I am not there, and I'll contact you as soon as possible.

Supervisor: **Ms. Allanah Ryan**  
Sociology Department.  
Massey University.  
Palmerston North.  
Phone 350 4976.

## APPENDIX THREE.

### Consent Form For Research on Male Strip Shows.

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate and I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions.

I agree/do not agree [delete one] to the interview being audio taped. I understand that I have the right to ask for the tape to be turned off at any time during the interview.

I understand confidentiality will be maintained by;

- allowing only the researcher and the transcriber (who has signed a confidentiality agreement) to listen to the tapes.
- not making any copies of the tapes.
- erasing the tapes once they have been transcribed.
- changing any names and identifying personal details in the written text.

I agree to provide information to the researcher on the understanding that this confidentiality will be maintained.

I agree to allow the researcher, Sheryl Hann, to use this information in her thesis, and any other published and unpublished texts that may result from the research. If I wish, I understand I will be able to make comments on an initial draft, and can be provided with a final summary of the findings. I understand that at my request, the recorded tapes of the interview and/or a copy of the transcribed interview will also be given to me.

I agree to participate in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet. I understand I may also negotiate the term of this contract with the researcher at any time during my participation.

Signed:.....

Name:.....

Date:.....

## APPENDIX FOUR.

### Interview Guide.

#### The Experience of the Night.

1. Who did you go to the show with?  
What is your relationship with them?  
Do you normally go out with them?
2. Why did you go to the show?  
What did you hope to get out of it?
3. What are the general pleasures? What are the things you like about the show?  
[What makes you enjoy it?]  
[What does 'entertaining'/'fun' mean to you?]

*LOOK FOR:*

- looking
- sexual/erotic/turn on
- humour
- irony/laughing at others
- evaluating/critiquing men
- revenge
- novelty
- role reversal
- learning
- socialising with friends
- drinking
- sounds/music
- emotions/feelings
- atmosphere of the place/ pub culture
- being apart from men/family (independence)
- no worries/stress relief
- going out on the town

*PROMPTS:*

- What do you get out of going out with women friends that you don't get from going out with a mixed group? with your partner? or with a date?
- How was it a turn on? (for example)
- What made it a turn on?
- Can you tell me more about why you thought it was a turn on?
- What other things made it enjoyable/pleasurable?
- Can you tell me more about what made that enjoyable?

4. What about the displeasures/things you didn't like?  
What could be left out?
5. Are there any other things that you remember about the night?  
Is there anything about going to the show that stands out for you?  
-on stage  
-in the audience  
-among your friends  
-at the bar etc.
6. What else did you do on that night?  
Did you go out any where else on that night?
7. What did you do after the show?  
Did any thing happen to you because of going to the show?
8. Did going to the show(s) have any influence on your relationship with your partner/boyfriend/lover?
9. Did going to the show(s) change any of your ideas or thoughts about anything?
10. Who did you talk to about the show? What did you tell them about the show?  
-friends  
-family  
-flatmates  
-workmates  
-partners

### **Looking at/watching the men.**

11. What are the things you look at/look for in the men at the show?

*PROMPTS:* -specific body parts or shapes  
-specific personality traits  
-specific looks/actions/words

12. Thinking just about when you are watching the strippers, can you tell me how you feel or what you are thinking about?

*LOOK FOR:* -embarrassed  
-turned on/desirous  
-happy/jovial  
-relaxed  
-guilty  
-powerful/in control  
-enjoying just sitting there, being entertained  
-indulgent  
-escapist  
-hyper/energetic

- wild/free
- wanting to get involved
- wanting to leave
- hoping they don't pick on me
- wishing/fantasising

*PROMPT:* Can you tell me more about why you thought/felt that?  
What other kinds of feelings/thoughts did you have?

13. Are the strippers like the kinds of men you usually fancy? Why?
14. Have you thought/dreamt/ fantasised about any of the strippers?
15. Are they the kinds of the men you would want to go out with?  
Why? Why not?

### **Beyond The Specific Show**

16. Are there other times when you look at men/men's bodies in similar ways?

*LOOK FOR:* -sports  
-in the street  
-at pubs etc.  
-on TV

What do you look at?

What you like/dislike about those men.

What do you think/how do you feel about looking at men in those situations?

Is it the same as looking at the male strippers?

17. What's your general opinion on the male strip shows?
18. What do you think about female strip shows?  
Is there a difference? What? [Why?]
19. Have you been to similar shows to this?  
What were they?  
What did you think of them?
20. Would you like to see anything heavier/more explicit than these?  
Why/why not?
21. Do these play an important part in your sexuality/erotic life?

## **Identity: On being a woman in the 1990s.**

22. Thinking about sexuality and relationships, how do you think society expects you to be as a young woman in the 1990s.

*PROMPTS:* in relation to:  
-marriage, love,  
-relationships, friendships  
-family responsibilities- your present or future one  
-health  
-dress and looks  
-values/morals  
-sexuality and sex  
-social life/entertainment

23. Do you think you fit in with these expectations? and are they reasonable expectations?  
[Where do you differ?]

24. Do you think looking at men, like the strippers and other men we were talking about, has any influence on your sexual or erotic fantasies and desires?

*PROMPT:* -in what ways?  
-what kinds of things?

25. Are fantasies an important part of your sexuality/sexual identity?  
How important are they to you as a sexual person?

26. Do you talk to anyone about your fantasies?  
-your friends?  
-your partners/lovers?

27. How do you feel when you are not in a relationship?  
Are there advantages to being single or not? What?  
Is it better being single or with a partner or with multiple partners? Why?

28. What's an ideal relationship for you? and an ideal partner?  
[What are some important kinds of behaviour and attitudes that you expect from partners/lovers/friends?]

Think about behaviours like:  
-who asks who out  
-decision making in the relationship  
-paying when you go out  
-seeing your other friends, having time for yourself  
-monogamy or commitment  
-love and romance  
-making the first move sexually  
-talking about/practising safer sex and contraception

- talking about your sexual pleasure (what you want)
- getting what you want sexually/what is pleasurable to you
- talking about fantasies and desires
- being able to say if you don't want sex

29. Do these differ depending if it's a **casual or a serious** relationship?

30. These are what you would like to happen, but do you always feel as though you are able to put these into practice?

If you don't, what makes it hard to stick to them?

What would make it easier for you to do what you would like to?

31. Is there anything else you want to say about sexuality and relationships?

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