Performing in a Night-Time Leisure Venue: A Visual Analysis of Erotic Dance

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Abstract

This article analyses a range of different meanings attached to images of erotic dance, with a particular focus on the 'impression management' (Goffman 1959) enacted by dancers. It presents a visual analysis of the work of a female erotic performer in a lesbian erotic dance venue in the UK. Still photographs, along with observational data and interviews, convey the complexity and skill of an erotic dancer's diverse gendered and sexualised performances. The visual data highlights the extensive 'aesthetic labour' (Nickson et al. 2001) and 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983) the dancer must put in to constructing her work 'self'. However, a more ambitious use of the visual is identified: the dancer's own use of images of her work. This use of the visual by dancers themselves highlights a more complex 'impression management' strategy undertaken by a dancer and brings into question the separation of 'real' and 'work' 'selves' in erotic dance.

Keywords: *Photo-Elicitation; Visual Methods; Erotic Dance; Aesthetic Labour; Emotional Labour; Performance; Self*

Introduction

1.1 This article utilises visual, observational and interview data on a lesbian night-time leisure venue in Britain where women perform erotic dance for women customers. The article focuses largely upon data produced during a photo-elicitation interview with one performer, WORLDMISTRESS^[1], together with participant observation at the club and interviews with two other dancers. Theoretically, the analysis is informed by the concepts of aesthetic and emotional labour. This is because WORLDMISTRESS's discussion of the images I took of her performances revealed the extensive management of her appearance and 'feelings' required by her stage shows. The analysis has also been influenced by Butler (1990), whose work is useful for understanding how dancers' performances of gender articulate and play with wider constructions of gender binaries. The intention in this article is to use visual data to glean a richer picture of the types of work undertaken by dancers and the meanings dancers themselves attribute to their labour. How dancers seek to create particular impressions of themselves (Goffman 1959) through their gendered and sexualised performances onstage, in their social interactions with customers, management and co-dancers, and in their own investment (or not) in photographic depictions of their labour will also be analysed. WORLDMISTRESS not only constructed a very particular working 'self', but the stability of this working 'self' was contingent upon her also managing her personal 'self' and her second working role as a dominatrix. Tensions between the separation of a 'work' and a 'real' or 'authentic' self will be problematised in this paper, particularly in relation to WORLDMISTRESS's own use of the visual for constructing her workplace roles.

1.2 Strangleman (2004) has suggested that there has been a general 'blind spot' regarding the visual in academic depictions of work and labour. Visual depictions of erotic labour in academic contexts are also uncommon, at least until recently. This is somewhat surprising considering that stripping is such a visually provocative practice, and further, when there has been an explosion in sex-related businesses more generally. There are approximately 250-300 strip venues in the UK (Sanders and Hardy, forthcoming: 5); estimated to turnover £300 million annually, male and female strip shows, lapdancing clubs and sex cabaret make a large contribution to the UK leisure and tourist economy (Hubbard et al. 2008:370). In America there have been some visual depictions of erotic dance work, but used mainly as incidental illustrations. For instance Liepe-Levinson's (2002) photographs of erotic dance venues in North

America include multiple images of erotic labour, but dancers do not reflect on these photographs of themselves. Schwartz (2002) went further by utilising a hidden camera to take photographs of erotic dancers and their clients, supplementing her visual data with quotations from dancers and clientele. More recently, Sanders and Hardy's (2010-11) study of lapdancing in the UK includes visual data produced by a photographer working with dancers, while O'Neill (2010) has undertaken visual research in cooperation with sex workers in the form of collaborative art projects.

1.3 This article seeks to show the usefulness of visual images as a source of data for studying erotic dance, especially through photo-elicitation interviews. It also considers the ways in which the performer may utilise the visual not only in her research participation, but also as part of her work role. After outlining the advantages of utilising visual methods in this area of research, the article takes up two aspects of the dancer's work: firstly, the implications of the workplace's spatial arrangements for a dancer's successful 'impression management' and, secondly, the extensive reflexive labour, aesthetic and emotional, that the dancer undertakes in order to construct a particular work 'self'. These examples suggest both the constraints on, and the scope for, self-construction that the work entails. The final substantive section looks at how performers themselves may use photographs to manage perceptions of their working role. The article therefore advocates a more complex understanding of dancers' sophistication in the ways they use the visual so as to negotiate, and sometimes rework, negative definitions of their labour.

Methodology

2.1 What makes this project specifically 'feminist' is its stress on 'the necessity of continuously and reflexively attending to the significance of gender' (Reinharz 1992:46) in the research process, research design and data analysis. The adoption of visual methods shows a particular affinity with the feminist conception of research as a two-way, collaborative process in which the researcher reflexively recognises their own impact on the research. Yet there has been surprisingly little articulation of the potential coincidence between feminist and visual methodologies. As Strangleman (2004:187) points out in his discussion of visualising work, one of the key merits of visual methods 'is the way in which its subjects can be actively involved in the creation and ... analysis of the visual'. Specifically with regards to women erotic performers, utilising visual methods helps to create a more empowering research process for a community of workers who are often spoken *about*, rather than having the opportunity to voice their own experiences.

2.2 My visual project sought to bring 'about a research collaboration between the investigator and the subject' (Banks 2001:89), as WORLDmistress and I discussed the images I had taken of her performances via photographs viewed on my laptop. Some of these photographs also prompted WORLDmistress to seek out photographs to employ as part of the narratives that she was developing verbally (a process that Pink [2007:88] also comments on). These were pictures of WORLDmistress taken of her performance by her partner, Geisha. Looking at the images enabled us to 'try to figure out something together' in a collaborative way, as Harper (2002:23) puts it, in order 'to determine each other's views' (Pink 2007:84) and to work towards, in a limited way, what Humm (1995: 63) calls a 'partnership of co-research'. WORLDmistress was also able to utilise my photographs on her website to promote her professional career, therefore enabling an exchange to take place beyond that involved in conventional interview situations.

2.3 In order to minimise potential ethical problems, wherever possible participants were asked if they consented to photographs being used for academic research and publication purposes. WORLDmistress viewed every photograph that I took of her performances and she stipulated which images she did not want me to use. However, within a large social space in which the researcher is 'in constant interaction with a considerable number' of people (Punch 1986:36), such as the nightclub where I did fieldwork, it can sometimes be impossible to seek informed consent from everyone present. In such situations, consent was sought post hoc, although for some of the photos this was still not achievable. Careful consideration was given to whether their inclusion would cause the subjects 'future harm' (British Sociological Association's 2006:5). In this article I have therefore included mainly images in which those depicted gave their explicit consent, but where this was not possible I have rendered their faces indistinct.

Performing in a lesbian erotic dance venue

3.1 WORLDmistress's performances take place within a lesbian bar that provides erotic entertainment in the form of pole dances and erotic shows. Erotic dancers' work, in terms of what they are permitted to perform, what they decide to do, and what they are inhibited from doing, is highly dependent upon the particular venue in which the work takes place. Labour always takes place within particular workplaces and helps to constitute them. As Halford (2008:935) suggests, not only are working roles negotiated inside workplaces, but the workplace itself is 'implicated in the construction of work relations and work practices'. WORLDmistress's performances within her workplace, and her ability to control the 'impression' she wants to present, are affected by the spatial limits of the venue, such as the 'backstage' area in Image 1 below.

Image 1. Backstage (Photograph taken by Geisha)

3.2 This image portrays WORLDmistress standing in the club's backstage dressing room, holding her script for the auction to be held later that evening, when she planned to sell images of herself to raise money for charity. The dressing room is very small, little more than 7x5 feet in area, and contains a wall of lockers, a table, two chairs and a mirror; there is also a small adjoining toilet. There is very little space to prepare for a show, particularly when there are two dancers performing that night. The suitcases of costumes and props that dancers bring with them (pictured above) also take up a lot of space. WORLDmistress showed me this photograph to reflect upon her 'cramped' backstage working environment, where there was barely room to move around, get dressed in her costumes or apply make-up. Other dancers also complained that this backstage area was neither spacious nor aesthetically pleasing. For example, dancer Violet commented that the backstage area was 'too small and scabby'. As Liepe-Levinson (2002:51) argues, 'strip events for women are usually subset within places that feature other kinds of entertainment, not specifically dedicated to the sexual amusement of females' and therefore the interior designs of these venues 'typically reflect their larger purpose' rather than functioning mainly to provide sexual entertainment. This may explain why this venue has such a limited backstage area for the dancers, as the venue is not designed solely to provide erotic dance for women. But the effect was to make the dancers feel undervalued, since they were not being treated like workers who deserved a 'professional' working environment.

Image 2. Horizontal Pole

3.3 The dancers' concerns with their workspace extended to the front stage area and specifically the positioning of props in places they felt hindered their work. The horizontal pole visible towards the top of Image 2, above, was considered by dancers to limit their performances. WORLDMISTRESS says that 'I didn't like that pole, because it just got in the way, and every time you had to go under it you had to duck, especially in high heels'. Other dancers also reported that in this venue the ceiling was 'too low' and that the poles were 'too short' for them to perform some of the routines and moves they usually would attempt. This suggests that even areas within the club that were designed to cater for the provision of erotic labour were still felt by the dancers to hinder their physical labour, through restricting the variety of dance moves that they could perform.

Gendered Presentations of 'Aesthetic Labour'

4.1 Visualising the workplace not only allowed for a vivid documentation of the dancers' physical labour and its spatial limitations, but talking with WORLDMISTRESS about images of her work also enabled her to describe in great detail the way she constructs her work appearance. Such appearance management can be conceptualised as 'aesthetic labour', entailing 'the mobilisation, development and commodification of the embodied capacities and attributes of employees to produce a favourable interaction with the customer' (Nickson et al. 2001:176). A focus on aesthetic labour thus brings to the fore the highly 'embodied character' of interactive labour (Witz et al. 2003:33).

4.2 Nickson et al. claim that in order to fulfil the demand for aesthetic labour successfully, workers must possess 'faces (and voices) that fit', 'literally embodying the image of the company', with employees themselves increasingly 'regarded by employers as part of the service product' (Nickson *et al.* 2001:176-179). Aesthetic labour is performed according to the imperatives of employers, which links the performance directly to the drive for profit. However, the way that erotic dancers' aesthetic labour is shaped is distinctive. At least in this club, women erotic dancers are not only formally self-employed but are also required to develop their own routines and styles of appeal to the customer: their performances are not scripted by the employer, nor do they style themselves according to corporate imperatives. This is not always the case. As Sanders (2011) highlights, some strip venues in the UK require dancers to present a very specific 'look', even supplying gowns and other clothes for them to wear. WORLDMISTRESS and the other dancers in this venue have more flexibility and control over the direction of their aesthetic labour than this, and I did not encounter any examples of management telling dancers what to wear. However, dancers still need to perform aesthetic labour as part of their bodily performance,

to ensure that their appearance is one that customers will enjoy enough to want to return to the venue on other occasions and so maximise profits for management.

4.3 Some writers on aesthetic labour have suggested that it is not a gendered form of labour, simply by virtue of the fact that both men and women perform it (Nickson *et al.* 2001). However, as Wolkowitz (2006: 88) argues, even if both genders perform aesthetic labour, 'to say the work is not confined to either men or women *is not to say it is not gendered*'^[2]. Both men and women may be employed, but this ignores the fact that particular ideals of masculinity and femininity will be selected for different working roles. Certainly, as Image 3 below depicts, the worker has to produce a gendered body in order to actually 'do' this work correctly. More than that, however, the particular audience of this lesbian club means that the range of gendered performances which can be performed is wider than what might be expected in a heterosexual club, and the audience may be more aware of the sexual politics of performing gender. As Butler (1990) suggests is the case for drag performances, in this venue gender performances are self-conscious and often involve parody.

Image 3. 'Loving Spree'

4.4 A good example of this is WORLDmistress's 'Loving Spree' performance as a 1950s domestic housewife. She describes in great detail the way in which she constructs this traditional 'feminine' look through her choice of costume:

My sister made it, yeah, erm, this apron was an old dress of mine, my sister kind of, I dunno, worked magic on it, erm ... I bought the material and my sister, the top was an old shirt she had and she kind of cut it and put Velcro on it 'cos the sleeves were really big so she put Velcro on it so they'd stick to my little skinny arms, and just tied it up, she put the little pink buttons on it.

4.5 A number of significant insights emerge from WORLDmistress's comments. She highlights the level of detail required to create this particular 'feminine' appearance and how the labour of another person, her sister, is also necessary to support the dancer's own aesthetic labour. Her remarks also suggest that her aesthetic labour extends to spaces *outside* the workplace, as the labour required by her costume takes place outside of the immediate workplace. Furthermore, she highlights her attempts to reduce the cost of her aesthetic labour, by getting a family member to make her costume from second-hand garments.

4.6 Discussion of the image also revealed a further temporal dimension to her work. When viewing the image, WORLDmistress commented that she originally wore stockings for this performance, but had subsequently changed her mind. The socks she is wearing here, she points out, were intended not only to contribute to the particular femininity she performs in this act, but were also less time-consuming to put on than stockings: 'You only had 2 songs to get dressed into your next outfit, so it was all about timing as

well'. What is on show here is the aesthetic skill and planning required to successfully manage her transition between acts.

Image 4. Styling the flesh

4.7 Our discussion of Image 4 further illuminated the bodily techniques that her gendered aesthetic labour requires. When I asked WORLDMISTRESS why she posed in this way, she proceeded to discuss her aesthetic management techniques by saying, 'It's good to have your arms up because when you put your arms up, it kind of brings your boobs up' [Katy: Oh right, I didn't realise that]. 'Yeah 'cos ... when you put your arms up it actually makes them look kind of fake'. During our conversation, WORLDMISTRESS demonstrated how she performs this manoeuvre and encouraged me to perform it myself, so that I could appreciate firsthand the bodily strategies dancers use to construct the particular aesthetic appearance they are trying to achieve. In a similar vein, Frank (2002) documents the meticulous attention to bodily appearance required by erotic dance work:

You can't miss a stray hair on an ankle or thigh. Pubic hair must be carefully tended...Razor burn looks awful... Bruises and veins show up mercilessly, as do scars...Eye makeup also needs to be perfect. Chipped toe nail polish, gray hairs, and fine lines around the eyes - every detail must be tended diligently (Frank 2002:172).

4.8 What both Frank's and WORLDMISTRESS's descriptions portray is the extensive attention to aesthetic detail that they have to undertake for the effective performance of a sexualised and gendered embodiment. Their accounts illustrate Witz et al.'s (2003:37) argument that aesthetic labour involves the production of distinctive styles which 'depend as much upon manufactured and performative "styles of the flesh" ... as they do upon the manufacture of "feeling"'. The management of customers' 'feelings' by dancers via 'emotional labour' has been much discussed in the erotic dance literature, and will be discussed below. Yet what this 'styling' of the 'flesh' by WORLDMISTRESS demonstrates is that simply displaying the female body in minimal clothing is not enough for her performance to be effective, but that she also has to frame her breasts in a particular fashion to produce the 'right' aesthetic appearance. Similarly, Frank documents how a naked body is not enough to produce an effective portrayal of a woman erotic dancer. As Gill et al. (2005:40) argue, even female bodies that are already heavily worked upon require continual and scrupulous management to maintain their appearance of 'natural' femininity. In this sense, the feminine body is never a 'finished' project.

Visualising Emotional Labour

5.1 So far I have considered how the erotic dancer labours to construct her body as a costume, a gendered costume that is developed through the worker's management of their flesh as well as their clothes. Visualising WORLDMISTRESS's performances also gives a rich insight into the emotional management that she undertakes as part of her work role. Emotional labour, in its original conception, refers to the effort and imagination that workers are required to exercise in order to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind' in customers (Hochschild 1983:7). Hochschild goes on to argue that workers interacting with customers are required to manage their 'feelings' in order to perform a 'publicly observable facial and bodily display' (1983:7) in return for a wage. Studies have shown that the emotional labour required by workers in the sex industry is particularly intense. Törnqvist and Hardy (2010:144), for instance, have documented how the emotional labour that 'taxi dancers'^[3] perform 'is not only about producing feelings in their clients (reliance, intimacy, sensuality)' but is also primarily about the management of the dancer's *own* feelings 'in order to produce a romantic or sexualized experience for the client'. Talking to WORLDMISTRESS about pictures of her performances enabled me to understand the complexity of her emotional labour, her satisfaction in successful emotional displays, and her resentment when her autonomy was curtailed or her performances were not appreciated. This suggested a high degree of involvement of her 'self' in her work role.

5.2 On the face of it, visual images are not very well suited to demonstrating the performance of emotional labour. The effort that emotional labour involves is rarely visible to customers (or in a photograph) since if successful it masks both the worker's true feelings and the effort she puts in to disguising them. However, my discussion with WORLDMISTRESS about her images revealed that even the display of her 'true' feelings may be the result of considerable effort. She used the images to reflect on the effort her interactions with the audience require, even when her facial expression, far from being 'fake', mirrors her actual feelings.

Image 5. 'Mistress Show' (Photograph taken by Geisha)

5.3 For instance, in Image 5, WORLDMISTRESS is pulling the customer along by a rope tied to the customer's neck. As WORLDMISTRESS explains, this enacts a 'mistress scene' in which the 'bad' or 'naughty' customer is humiliated by being dragged along by the annoyed 'mistress' to 'punish' her. The scene requires considerable emotional labour to display a convincing dominating role. The dancer has to talk, act, and produce facial expressions that make the audience think that the customer is being dominated, or that she has been 'bad' or 'naughty', in order for the performance to be successful. Somewhat ironically, because the customer was not co-operating WORLDMISTRESS actually felt the annoyance that she displays in her facial expression. WORLDMISTRESS had to exert herself more than usual to try to bring the customer into line. For example, she states that:

I said 'you know, just have fun with me'. For god's sake, she just kept talking and talking to me and I'm like, for god's sake, I'm like yeah whatever, I was just trying to do the show and I was so annoyed with her, like god.

5.4 Looking at this photograph together enabled WORLDMISTRESS to share with me the mundane workplace frustration that she remembered feeling during this encounter, and also her satisfaction in the emotion that she managed to project to the audience. Her pleasure is in the ironic coincidence between the facial expression required by the act and her own feelings. This could also suggest more permeable,

fluid boundaries between the allegedly 'authentic', 'private' self, and the 'acted', workplace 'self' than Hochschild (1983) allowed for.

5.5 Again in our discussion of Image 6, below, a rather complex link between WORLDMISTRESS's aesthetic labour and her emotional labour, and what this meant for both her work role and her own 'feelings', became evident. Contrary to some accounts that suggest that performing emotional and aesthetic labour is disempowering for the worker, in so far as it is embedded in the subordination the employment contract requires, it was clear that WORLDMISTRESS's performance enabled her to feel powerful.

Image 6. Dominatrix Show

5.6 In this image, the aesthetic labour required by WORLDMISTRESS's hairstyle, the leather dress that she is wearing, and the way she holds a leather whip enable her to portray herself as the dominating party in dancer-customer interactions. WORLDMISTRESS explains that 'with dominatrix work I like to have my hair up in a ponytail ... So for me, when my hair is up I feel more in control, whereas when it's down I feel not so in control'. She is 'deep acting', in Hochschild's terms, as her hairstyle helps her establish the emotional mood that is required for this role. Yet this quotation also suggests that WORLDMISTRESS not only presents herself as 'in control' via her hairstyle, facial expression, props and clothing, but also that she feels powerful or 'in control' even when performing certain routines that require intense aesthetic and emotional labour.

5.7 This again contrasts with the idea that performing emotional labour is necessarily alienating for workers, and further sheds doubt on the idea that the workplace 'self' that is acted and performed is entirely separable from the worker's 'own' sense of 'self'. Rambo-Ronai and Ellis (1989: 296) suggest that erotic dance is an occupation that 'pays well, but costs dearly'. Dancers are said to experience what Hochschild (1983:186) terms a 'transmutation of self' as a dancer's constant performance of a specific sexual self can hinder their ability to experience 'an authentic sexual self' outside of the club (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006:234). However, WORLDMISTRESS's performance suggests that emotional performances do not necessarily involve negative consequences. She mentioned the 'pleasure' she gained from dancing for an audience on stage in this and other clubs and, as this example highlights, some of her performances do actually make her feel more powerful. WORLDMISTRESS shows how she is enabled to feel powerful, even while exerting the emotional and aesthetic labour that goes into a successful performance of the dominating role the scenario requires. This supports Noon and Blyton's (2002:198) argument that 'emotional display does not render women powerless'. In a Foucauldian sense, the dancer is not entirely disempowered through her performance of emotional and aesthetic labour; rather a more complex power relation is in play. At the same time that she is required to perform very particular gendered and sexualised roles, she does have agency to resist these, or create different meanings of

those performances. Further, performing these particular roles does not mean that a worker cannot feel 'in control' of, rather than alienated from, her 'self'. WORLDMISTRESS's discussion of images of her acts demonstrates that she has quite a degree of autonomy in her choices of the roles she creates through her emotional and aesthetic labour. Further, the fact that she personally reports sometimes feeling powerful during her performances suggests that although a workplace role is carefully constructed it is not necessarily entirely separate from the worker's own sense of 'self'. Were WORLDMISTRESS to be performing in a heterosexual club where her act required subordination or deference to male customers, however, it might be a different story.

5.8 In fact, there are limits to WORLDMISTRESS's autonomy or power even in her stage performances at this lesbian club. Management at the venue require dancers to perform a 'double show', where two women dance together on stage at the end of the show. WORLDMISTRESS complained that this significantly inhibited her ability to present herself as a unique performer, and thus required additional emotional and aesthetic labour, labour that was much less enjoyable or empowering than she usually experienced it. Her labour in this act was less autonomous than in her other performances, as she was constrained both by the requirement to perform a 'double show' and by her own judgement that the act would fail to convince unless she matched the other performer's bodily presentation.

5.9 Image 7 depicts WORLDMISTRESS performing a 'double show' on stage with another dancer. The foot and leg of this co-performer is visible in the right-hand side of the photograph, but the rest of the image has been cropped to ensure anonymity. In a 'double show' dancers not only have to manage their own emotions and appearance, but also have to mediate or 'read' how the other dancer is performing and moderate their performance accordingly.

Image 7. Double Show

5.10 Upon seeing Image 7, WORLDMISTRESS stated that it was 'obvious' that the 'double show' was an aspect of her work that she did not like, as in the photograph she and the other dancer are quite far apart. WORLDMISTRESS's explicit dislike for the 'double show' is due to the fact that it required her to work with dancers whose performances she perceives as different from hers, particularly in terms of their choice of roles and image. WORLDMISTRESS notes that in Image 7 she has changed her costume from what she wears in some of her individual stage dances: 'because I was doing it with another pole dancer ... I wanted us to look the same'. She also points out that she wears what she calls 'stripper shoes', having changed her aesthetic appearance to 'fit in' more with what she perceives pole dancers usually look and dress like. Both dancers wear the same black dress, g-strings, and high heels, because WORLDMISTRESS thought their performance together would not work if they were not similarly styled. This, however, was an aspect of the double show that she did not like, as it contrasted with her desire to become known as a 'queer femme kink performer' rather than a pole dancer *per se*. She states,

I just, I didn't wanna be there as a pole dancer, and the other girl was a pole dancer, so I thought she's obviously not gonna work with me so I had to kind of work with her and try

and make us *both* look like a pole dancer.

5.11 Interestingly, although WORLDMISTRESS quite vehemently discusses her dislike for the aesthetic and emotional labour that is required to perform a 'double show', as she wants to present her work 'self' as 'unique' and different from stereotypes of pole dancers, her opinion is not echoed by other dancers' interpretations of her work. Another dancer from the same venue, Naomi, commented to me that she thinks WORLDMISTRESS 'loves the double show', which suggests that WORLDMISTRESS's 'impression management' is successful. However, by the end of my fieldwork WORLDMISTRESS no longer performed 'double shows' on stage, she performed solo acts only. This suggests that she had been able to create a relationship with management that enabled her to negotiate over an area of her labour where she felt she had too little autonomy in her working role.

Dancers managing the visual: displaying the work 'self'

6.1 The images so far highlight the way in which WORLDMISTRESS's emotional and aesthetic labour is devoted partly to distinguishing herself as an individual performer whose work 'self' is different from her counterparts. What is also interesting, however, is the way in which WORLDMISTRESS herself utilises visual media as part of the 'impression management' of her workplace 'self'. In the context of my fieldwork she did this in two ways: firstly, by utilising the images I took of her performances to promote her career on her public website and, secondly, by using the visual to put me as the researcher 'in the frame'.

6.2 Which performances a dancer allows us to photograph and which photographs they utilise to promote their careers (for example on personal websites) can tell us a lot substantively. They can indicate what WORLDMISTRESS wishes to reveal about her working identity; what we 'see' about it is carefully constructed, or managed, by her. This use of the visual by WORLDMISTRESS emerged after she invited me to take photographs of her performances for her to use on her own website, as well as to help with my research. She pays a lot of attention to her website, which she considers her 'CV'. It is her 'public face', and she spends time most days updating it with different photographs and text.

6.3 Why and how WORLDMISTRESS utilises photographs can be usefully analysed in relation to Pink's (2007:94) suggestion that 'absent photographs', and the reasons for their absence, may be 'of equal interest' to those which are shown. I questioned WORLDMISTRESS about why she rejected particular images. WORLDMISTRESS's reply was that, 'I think [it's] my facial expression. I'm very critical of myself'. The absence of these photographs is thus explained by the ways in which WORLDMISTRESS is continually engaged in 'impression management' (Goffman 1959). WORLDMISTRESS says that she interprets an image not only from the way she herself would 'read' it, but also from how she feels others might view it. This is evident from WORLDMISTRESS's comment on Image 5, above, when she tells me,

I mean if I were to look at that from an outsider's point of view ... the look on my face, it's like I'm not satisfied or something, I'm just not impressed or something which is not the impression I wanna give out.

6.4 WORLDMISTRESS thus points towards an awareness of how our 'visuality' (Rose 2001:6), of *what* can and cannot be seen in a photograph, is socially constructed. WORLDMISTRESS is a performer, engaged in work that requires the construction of a particular gendered, sexualised persona on stage, and images taken of these performances must, from her point of view, portray her in the 'right' way. Thus, the photographs that are 'absent' from her public expression of herself on her web site are equally significant in constructing the presentation of 'what' parts of herself that she wants us to see.

6.5 WORLDMISTRESS further spoke of images of shows that she had not displayed publically, such as performances that she had not enjoyed, or that did not go quite as planned. One example was an image of herself dressed as the pop singer Madonna; when viewing the photograph she remarked that, 'Ah that didn't go too well'. She said that the audience did not seem to 'get it' and that 'I think I did it twice, I just don't think it went that well', but she did not want to explain in detail why this performance was not successful. This demonstrates how discussion of 'absent' images can enable a worker to reflect upon when things 'go wrong', and can stimulate some discussion in research interviews about elements of their stage performances that performers would otherwise 'hide' from public view. For WORLDMISTRESS, to show this image on her website would only serve as a public reminder of a performance that 'didn't go too well', and thus through its absence she maintains the construction of her working identity as consistent and successful.

Dancers managing the visual: putting the researcher 'in the frame'

7.1 A second way in which WORLDMISTRESS utilised visual techniques as part of her work-self impression management was through arranging for photographs to be taken of one of our interviews. Upon arriving to interview WORLDMISTRESS for the first time, before I had photographed her myself, I was met by a professional photographer whom she had booked to take photographs of our interview (one of which is shown as Image 8).

Image 8. Research Interview

7.2 During this interview WORLDMISTRESS was keen to hold my dictaphone, to make it clear in the image that an interview was taking place and not just two people chatting in a nightclub. WORLDMISTRESS insisted on putting me 'in the frame' in order to visually document our interview, which could then be published on her website to show she had taken part in academic research. Her intention, it seemed, was to indicate that her performances were deemed meaningful in an academic, as well as a club world, context. This seems to be an exceptional example, since the objectification of the researcher in the use of the visual by research respondents is little documented in academic visual projects. It does, however, appear to be significant here, since it highlights how photography can be used by workers within a research situation to further construct their work 'self', even in a relationship in which the researcher is supposedly the main party benefiting from the interview situation.

Tensions between workplace 'selves' and the 'real' self

8.1 WORLDMISTRESS effectively uses the visual as part of her careful construction of her work as a dancer. Part of why WORLDMISTRESS appears very comfortable with having photographs taken of her performances is because they are exactly that: a *performance* of a particular working identity that does not necessarily have to portray 'who' she is on a personal level. As Thompson et al. (2003:553-4) note of erotic dancers, '[w]hen individuals are engaged in a stigmatized occupation that threatens to "spoil their identity" it becomes necessary for them to "control information" about their occupations and identities'. WORLDMISTRESS devotes considerable aesthetic and emotional labour to attempting to do this, and also to constructing herself as different from the other dancers in the venue. Further, in interviews WORLDMISTRESS talks about her stage routines in the third person, referring to her performing 'self' as a 'she': 'WORLDMISTRESS is a queer, femme, kink performer, she's not a burlesque performer'.

8.2 This is not to suggest, however, that the performer's 'self' can be separated entirely from their working performance. Researchers studying erotic dancers more widely have argued that the 'emotional labour' that dancers perform, and their presentation of a specific working identity that does not correlate to their 'true' self, can cause identity confusion and frustration (Deshotels and Forsyth 2006). Certainly with regards to WORLDMISTRESS's performance as a domestic housewife (Image 3), we can see a quite complex impression management process taking place in her description of the performance: 'Originally she makes, she's got this mixture and she makes, I've got all this mixture and I put it in the cupcakes'. The switching in the description of the activity from 'she' to 'I' illustrates that perhaps the two 'selves', the working self and describing what 'I' do/am, are inseparable or, alternatively, that trying to manage two separate selves is difficult for performers.

8.3 WORLDMISTRESS also works as a professional dominatrix, a work role that she says she has kept separate from both her work as a dancer and her private 'self' until very recently, when she stopped working at the lesbian venue following a change of management. She now includes a 'link' to her

dominatrix work on her dancing website as a means of marketing her diverse work skills to her potential client base. When talking about this decision to make her dominatrix role 'public' to those who have seen her dancing performances, we see again the conflation between the use of 'I' and her working role in her discussion:

Well, it's taken me a really long time to let everyone know that my other job is as a dominatrix ... I was just I was trying to keep them separate ... I'm a very private person, um, and I just didn't want other people knowing my private personal stuff, it's really weird, but it's taken me a really long time to go well, ok ... let's put them together.

8.4 Yet although she has seemingly now connected the two work roles, as both are publically visible on the internet, WORLDMISTRESS still engages in quite strict management of images of her dominatrix role. Whilst finding it acceptable for people who view her dancing website to look at her dominatrix site, she does not want her dominatrix clients, all men, to find out about her dancing for women customers. This is largely, she says, because 'they think I'm straight' and also because she does not want them 'finding out too much about me'. These examples therefore illustrate the impression management that the management of work 'selves' may require for dancers. Similar strategies adopted by other erotic dancers to separate their 'self' and 'work' roles have been much documented (Brewis and Linstead 2000). Reid et al. (1994), for example, suggest that erotic dancers usually do not feel that their work role reflects who they 'really' are on a 'personal' level. However, the idea that erotic dancers create workplace 'selves' that are entirely separate from their own 'selves' can also be problematised. WORLDMISTRESS's comments suggest that the extent to which erotic dancers allow their work and private 'selves' to meet can vary at different times, and in different contexts, even for the same dancer. There may therefore be greater fluidity than previously assumed between 'work' and 'private' selves for erotic dancers in different workplace contexts, and this may depend in part on how much control that they can exercise in their working role.

Conclusions

9.1 This paper has examined visually what it means to work in one erotic dance environment and how a dancer's management of photographs, along with the other forms of aesthetic and emotional labour required by the work, form part of her 'impression management'. Importantly, the paper has also brought to the fore the pleasures that workers can derive from their aesthetic and emotional labour, which is partly attributable in this case to the relative autonomy WORLDMISTRESS has in choosing what images and roles she wants to portray and perform, and partly to her satisfaction in getting her performances 'right'. We have witnessed her autonomy (and its limits) in creating the 'right' work 'self' for customers, through, for example, the discussion of customers who would not 'co-operate' when she wished them to participate on stage, or her resentment at the modification of her impression required by the 'double show'. It is particularly interesting that a visual project which has attempted to gain a better insight into dancers' 'impression management' strategies within their workplaces has brought to the fore how a dancer may also utilise photographs herself to manage her public persona. Using photography enables WORLDMISTRESS to exercise control over *what* people see and *how* they see it, as she self-consciously recognises how photography can be 'worked' to her advantage in managing her different 'self' constructions. Part of this construction of her work 'self' also involves managing how the researcher sees her work. Certainly, 'we can learn much by attending to how other people use photography to insert us into their categories, projects and agendas' (Pink 2007:82). WORLDMISTRESS's uses of the visual included not only accepting my offer to take photographs of her dancing, but she also adopted an active role in the making of images of me as a researcher to further her own work agenda and 'impression management'. This latter use also gave me, as a researcher, a small insight into how respondents feel when being photographed is subsumed under someone else's agenda.

9.2 As this photo-elicitation project with WORLDMISTRESS has highlighted, looking at photographs of her performances enabled discussion of very specific examples of when she experienced job dissatisfaction and also the pleasures of her work. People have particular narratives, sometimes much rehearsed, about their working roles and attempting to get through this can be difficult. Utilising photographs as a prompt makes discussing when things 'go wrong' in work situations easier. It gives the instances a context if they are visible in images, and people may feel *more* inclined to explain what happened than if a specific example was not presented in front of them. Photo-elicitation projects also offer a degree of control to the researched that is not always available in other methods as the respondent is a full participant in the narrative construction. However, due to the stigma associated with the labour of erotic dance, it is not a method appropriate for engaging with erotic dancers who do not want their work to be made visible in a public or academic context. Hence researchers need to be mindful of when visual methods may be inappropriate, as well as considering the potential the visual offers for enriching research.

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Notes

¹This is the performer's actual stage name, which she wanted to be used in this research.

²Italics, my emphasis.

³'Taxi dancers', as defined by Törnqvist and Hardy (2010:138), 'sell tango dance experiences to tourists in Buenos Aires, Argentina ... They are for the most part, male and Argentinean, selling dances to female tourists'.

⁴Geisha can be contacted regarding her photography at: Geishaeye@gmail.com

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