

## Glamor, Fetish and Deconstruction

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### Abstract

The costume design as the main element in the construction of the character and characterization of the Burlesque feminine element, it's development being an integrated part of a process whose result is a significant translation of the artist's individual identity. The present study aims to understand the semiotic aspects in the aesthetic construction of the Burlesque figure, for that, the costume will be segmented into three categories - glamor, fetish, deconstruction - and analyzed according to Peircean semiotics in order to understand how does the Burlesque performance participates in the characterization of the feminine individuality.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Burlesque, Costume, Glamor, Fetish, Deconstruction

### Burlesque

Burlesque performance descends from the Italian Commedia dell'arte: a theatrical performance, which uses the body to illustrate a common social situation through satire or parody [1]. There are numerous ways to represent this political/social scenario, music, literature, singing, dancing, theater, circus and strip tease are some of the tools chosen for this representation that is usually performed by a group or troupe.

Supported by the signs that characterize the commedia dell'arte, the counterculture movement Neo Burlesque as we know today is a Strip Tease artistic performance that through comedy represents social criticism of relevant topics: In the beginning, it wasn't the striptease. Which means, those who performed in the genre called burlesque, Didn't take Their clothes off. But even without the strip, burlesque prehistory still has a transgressive component. if not openly erotic [2].

### The Strip Tease

If Burlesque is an artistic manifestation used as a tool to make a social political critique, when and how did the Strip tease become an identity element of the performance? It was Church the dominant force in the moral and spiritual life of people in the Middle Ages, who took the initiative to specify what sexual acts people could engage in, allow and regulate where, when and with whom sexual acts could take place [3].

It was in popular theaters where the Nobles and the Clergy were satirized, and, in order to demoralize those who dominated them, the artists turned the body into a sign of rebellion and approximation between the sacred and the profane. Today, the counterculture movement called Neo-Burlesque is a form of artistic expression that through satire represents a social and political scenery, using strip tease and sensuality as an identity sign of political, social and sexual transgression.

### Strip Tease and Female Empowerment

Due to its symbolic load of female submission perpetuated throughout history in misogynist men's clubs, it is difficult and even contradictory to see a strip act as a form of female empowerment. This perception changes when we see the body through burlesque optics, a safe space where the context allows the artist to have full control over the situation and their body; when Neo-burlesque artists put themselves in a situation of voluntary vulnerability, they use their body to tell a story, resignifying a dance that originally hypersexualized women.

In this context that accepts the body and allows the artist to express their sensuality and sexuality, nudity does not have the same role of pleasing and arousing desire in the male gaze, therefore, it doesn't have the same impact as before. In the Burlesque artistic scene, nudity has a much more subjective value: the body is a sign whose represented object is a narrative of individual struggle and empowerment; today, the performance has a role of allowing to create a safe space where the body in its particularities is celebrated.

## The Burlesque Alter-Ego

The Burlesque scene is a welcoming space for female multiplicities which gives the artists a chance for experimentation, making them feel safe to explore the different characters that inhabit their imagination. Based on this logic, from now on we will apply the concept of Burlesque alter-ego.

In the Burlesque art scene, as in Drag, the alter ego is understood as a stage personality of the artist; the creation of this stage personality is the result of an introspective and subjective process of self-knowledge. Mixing concepts that are the result of identity questions such as: “who the artist is” and “who they would like to be”, the Burlesque performer creates a personality that will be translated into aesthetic signs. Anything of any kind, imagined, dreamed, felt, experienced, thought of, desired... it can be a sign, provided that this “thing” is interpreted in terms of a foundation of its own, as being in place of any other thing [4].

These signs are key to the characterization of the Burlesque identity, and therefore the subjective conception of femininity. It is important to point out that in this universe, femininity is not a limiting stereotype of the female gender, but an inherent aspect of the human being, which embraces both, the feminine and the masculine side. In Burlesque art scene, femininity represents aspects socially associated with the feminine, such as: sensuality, artistic manifestations, the baroque, the erotic, creative power and the body itself; therefore, it will have particularities in its numerous conceptions, because there is not only one definition of feminine, and each artist, in their process, will come up with a definition that will correspond to their identity.

This aesthetic that carries the definition of individual femininity is composed of sound elements (genre of music), gestural/behavioral (movements, dance steps, intention, expression, etc.) and, obviously, costumes (wardrobe, accessories, makeup and hairstyle).

## Costume and the Characterization of the Burlesque Femininity

Costume is a language composed of signs whose object is the personality of the character, the environment, social context of the work and the scene. The costume designer manipulates the signs presented through visual stimulation and directs them according to the effect of meaning intended to provoke in the spectator, even if this initial idea is perpetuated or deconstructed throughout the number. Clothing is capable of transmitting not only the manifest content, but rather latent aspects of the person's personality, inferred according to your presentation. These signs are responsible for the adequate delineation of the psychological profile of the character – whether this is arrogant, simple-minded, narcissistic, aggressive etc [5].

The character's psychological profile is translated into signs that are incorporated into the costume; in other words, the person responsible for doing this translation is someone familiar with this logic, or semiotics [6]. In general the dynamics of production is a division of tasks, where the costume designer, with a specific repertoire and training, uses this knowledge to build the stage costume for a third person to interpret it in the intended way - object, sign, interpretant [6].

Burlesque performance is a choreographed strip tease, therefore, the clothes, zippers, buttons and volumes interfere with the timing, movement intentions and music interpretation; with these practical implications, it is impossible to outsource the creative development of the costume without getting involved in the process, which makes the artist, as the creator of the number, also their own choreographer and costume designer.

Without the task division, the creative process becomes very introspective and subjective, regardless of the different themes addressed in the numbers, there is always a personal language of the artist that connects the stories, those are signs of the individuality conception that appear in the aesthetic language. The Burlesque artist, due to their proximity to creation, leaves traces of personality in the costumes, using clothes and “attitude” to represent not only a character, but different aspects of the Burlesque “alter ego” She/He/They created.

Despite being a fundamental element of individual characterization, the costume is still part of a context. In order to adapt to this context, it will use signs from the collective to relocate them and contribute to the artist's narrative. The signs of the Burlesque collectivity are: Glamor, Fetish and Deconstruction.

## Glamor

The burlesque aesthetic perpetuates a fantasy on stage, with the aim of lulling the audience into a fantastic, luxurious dream; therefore, the concept of Glamor is linked to the idealization of a fantasy adding value and wealth to the visual characterization of the artist and the number. The word “Glamor” has Scottish etymology dating back to the 16th century, a context in which it was applied to writing: a technique that, despite arousing fascination, was also associated with the fear that knowledge awakened in those who benefited from the ignorance of the people [7].

Although today the concept of Glamor is commonly associated with opulence and abundance, it was born in language, specifically in the paper's monks wrote in convents during the Middle Ages. Since writing was a knowledge restricted to a religious group, people who had the necessary technical wisdom to perform this practice not only felt close to the divine, but were also seen by the common men as instruments of the sacred [7].

The “divine”, the “fascination” and the “fear”, concepts linked to the origin of the word Glamor that help us understand it as: sumptuousness, distinction, power, abundance and wealth. Those aspects that are symbiotically attached to the Burlesque luxury, are translated into costume visual signs; these signs appropriate certain textures, brightnesses and volumes, with the aim of making the public associate the artist to a figure that is both royalty and divinity.

## Glamor and Fetish

Glamor is sacred, Burlesque is profane; Glamor is divine, Burlesque is carnal, human; Glamor alienate, Burlesque approaches. Metaphorizing in a poetic way the union of the signs of Glamor and Fetish, Burlesque art is the perfect marriage between two antagonistic ideas in a performance; It all begins with Glamor, which, when read through sensuality, inezia, satire and comedy, ends up stripped of all its abundance and wealth. The body is what it's left.

## Fetish

The concept of fetish, sexual and erotic as we know it today, has its origins in the definition of a divine object, which is something that arouses “sexual enchantment”, because of its charm, but also because of its mystery [8]. The definition of sexual enchantment explained by Sebeök applies to this specifically scene, for Burlesque is a cultural and artistic manifestation that has the body- a highly erotic component - represented in a way that provokes enchantment in the audience. Burlesque fetishism embraces the etymological origins of the word: charm and mystery, the visual signs of the fetish have the role of providing, through synesthesia and sign association, an immersive experience.

The body and the very aesthetic identity of the costume (bra, corset, pasties, garter belt, laces, tulle, leather, latex...) are a fetishistic representation of the burlesque female imagination, but, its fetishism is also present in the process, the movement, the dance, the strip, the ritual aspect of Fetish definition; therefore, the fetishist element of the Burlesque narrative belongs to the quality aspect of the sign, but also in its causal relationship with the object.

### Fetish: Aesthetic and the Ritual of Undressing

Following Sebeok's logic, we identified that Burlesque fetish present itself in the signic and symbolic potential in the costumes: each element of the clothing evokes a meaning, which contextualized through the number, will pass a message to the audience, thus characterizing the alter-ego and arousing enchantment in the spectator; but it's also represented by the index potencial, the action: the way the body reacts to the music, the artist's expression, intention and intensity, but, especially, the undressing ritual, therefore, the act of deconstructing the fantasy.

### Deconstruction

As a result of the ritual fetish, deconstruction is the act in which the artist discovers the body and shows their true self to the public. Burlesque is a choreographed strip tease, which uses sensuality and comedy elements to tell a story, allowing the audience to engage in a scene that is being (de)constructed on stage. Relying on the tease element, the burlesque artist removes the pieces of clothing, one by one, sometimes with grace and sweetness, or with strength and sensuality, other times with the intention of provoking a comic effect, but always generating commotion. Starting with trivial elements such as gloves, ties and hats, even though those elements don't reveal more desirable parts of the body- that are commonly involved in tabu - the simple act of taking them out, slowly, it's enough to awaken an erotic energy in the audience. Passing to the middle of the strip tease, the Burlesque performer takes the costume out- gown dress, shirt, skirt and etc - revealing the body inch by inch, as they pull out the zipper or take out the buttons, or, perhaps, slips a nightgown till it hits the floor, presenting itself in a beautiful glitter gemstone lingerie.

Lingerie, a saussy layer that can be composed by lace panties, embroidered bra, a delicious corset that will leave the waist with marks, garter belt and stockings; it doesn't matter, at the end of the show it will all fall into the ground, and the artist will leave the stage dressed with panties, pasties and a smile.

### Glamor, Fetish and Deconstruction

Burlesque is a performance that has its primary element the strip-tease, using the act of undressing to tell a story. By approaching the non-standard female semi-nudity of a body that brings to the stage all its complexity, peculiarities and exposing all the vulnerabilities, it becomes a symbol of resistance.

As the development of the Burlesque character is a process as subjective as female empowerment itself, this journey ends up reverberating in the characterization of the burlesque alter-ego, which includes characteristics of movements, expressions, styles, but also the costume design. Throughout the process of unraveling the burlesque femininity, we came to the conclusion that this characterization embraces three elements of the Burlesque collective: Glamor, Fetish and Deconstruction, that are interpreted and resignified in order to build an individual language.

Glamor is the wealth that symbolically represents social distancing, the richness that makes the artist feel powerful; Fetish is the sensuality that approaches and allows the artist to explore her/his/ their sexual energy; Deconstruction is the process of undressing and showing vulnerability, and in this vulnerability - finally applauded - nudity shows itself in a non-passive, weak or vulgar way, but strong and powerful.

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