

Katarzyna Ewa Stojičić

Faculty of Dramatic Arts, University of Arts in Belgrade, Belgrade, Serbia

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7748-1200>

The Aesthetics of Glamour in the Subversive Art of Burlesque¹

Abstract: This article explores glamour as a complex and contested cultural phenomenon situated at the intersection of aesthetics, gender politics, and feminist critique. While glamour has traditionally been associated with the spectacle of the female body and framed as a patriarchal tool of control, contemporary feminist and queer theories highlight its disruptive potential. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Laura Mulvey, Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, Naomi Wolf, Deborah Ferreday, and Angela McRobbie, the article examines how glamour operates as a visual code that oscillates between accessibility and unattainability, discipline and emancipation. Special attention is given to the performative practices of neo-burlesque, which reappropriate glamour through parody, exaggeration, and camp aesthetics. Performances by troupes such as The Velvet Hammer, queer reinterpretations of Cabaret, and artists including Perle Noire, Dirty Martini, and Moira Finucane illustrate how glamour becomes a site of negotiation between patriarchal beauty norms and feminist reclamation. In contrast, the highly stylized burlesque of Dita Von Teese highlights the persistence of the traditional glamour aligned with the heterosexual male gaze. By analyzing the inclusivity, gender fluidity, and political agency of neo-burlesque, this study argues that glamour should not be understood as either purely oppressive nor liberating, but as an ambivalent and dynamic practice that continues to evolve in dialogue with feminism, queer theory, and contemporary performance culture.

Keywords: glamour; burlesque; feminism; camp aesthetics; gender identities.

Introduction

When telling the story of glamour and the so-called goddesses, it is difficult to escape the metaphor of a butterfly: although it pertains to the sensual, alluring, and eroticized female body, paradoxically, what comes to mind is the image of a colorful, delicate creature hovering above the ground. Glamour is not merely an aesthetic category, but a concept imbued with symbolic meanings, deeply rooted in social norms, feminist redefinitions cultural representations, and mechanisms of power. By feminist reclamation of glamour, I mean the conscious reappropriation of visual codes historically tied to the patriarchal control – such as makeup, costuming, and stylized performance – and their redeployment as strategies of parody, critique, and empowerment.

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In the neo-burlesque and queer performance, glamour is not used to reinforce normative ideals of femininity but rather to destabilize them, making the glamorous body a site of irony, resistance, and agency. Glamour functions as a dynamic visual code, shaped through historical, economic, and artistic processes, simultaneously seductive and unattainable. From the early days of Hollywood to contemporary performances such as the neo-burlesque and digital aesthetics, glamour has been a subject of fascination as well as controversy. Its allure lies not only in external beauty but also in its ability to create an illusion – an illusion of luxury, power, and perfection. However, much like the figure of a butterfly, glamour carries an inherent ambiguity: on the one hand, it acts as an empowering feminist narrative (for instance in queer or neo-burlesque reinterpretations), while on the other, it often becomes a patriarchal tool of control and a mechanism enforcing normative of femininity. As a phenomenon inseparable from the representation of the body, glamour has long been tied to the ideas of desirability and spectacle. Depending on the historical and cultural context, it has served either as a form of feminist reclamation or strategy of subjugation. It is precisely in this contradiction, and in its ongoing negotiation between patriarchal and feminist perspectives, that the reason for its enduring presence in various artistic and media forms lies. Contemporary culture continues to reshape the meaning of glamour, raising new questions about its role in identity construction, female subjectivity, and the visual economy of desire.

This paper analyzes glamour as a complex aesthetic and cultural phenomenon, exploring its symbolism, historical evolution, and significance in the contemporary social context. Rather than treating it as a stable category, I approach glamour as an unstable and contested concept, constantly negotiated between patriarchal constructions of desirability and feminist attempts at reclamation. To outline a framework for interpretation, I propose between two interwoven variants of glamour. First, glamour can be understood as a costume and aesthetic style that relies on artificiality and exaggeration to create an impression of refined feminine allure. Its attributes include distinctive makeup, a carefully styled hairstyle, a feminine costume such as a tight dress, and a series of behaviors interpreted as seductive - traits which, as feminist critics have pointed out, are themselves shaped by patriarchal norms that position femininity as passive, ornamental, and sexually available. Second, and of primary importance to my analysis, glamour as a visual code that emerges in media and performance contexts and governs spectators' desires through a dialectic of accessibility and unattainability. As Kay Siebler² observes in her study of neo-burlesque, performances that exaggerate or parody the codes of glamour may simultaneously reproduce and subvert patriarchal expectations, exposing the fragility of the illusion. Glamour, therefore, enhances the appeal of an object by operating paradoxically: it simultaneously suggests accessibility to the viewer while emphasizing the unbridgeable distance between the observer and the observed object. The glamourized female body becomes not only an object

² Kay Siebler, "What's So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers? Neo-burlesque as Post-Feminist Sexual Liberation," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 54–68.

of desire but also a subject of controlled visual consumption and a carrier of social aspirations – a spectacle and a commodity that represents the dream of a better life and the contradictions of gendered representation. Research on actresses subjected to glamourization, positioned within the tension between desirability and propriety, shows that while glamourization aims to produce an attractive yet “safe” femininity, achieving this effect requires decontextualization, which in turn results in the ambiguity of the glamourized woman’s position – at once celebrated and constrained.

Reducing glamour to a mere tool used for disciplining, exploiting, and taming the natural corporeality and sexuality of women would be an oversimplification. This perspective disregards the complex and contradictory role of the glamorous body in the history of women’s emancipation. At the same time, I acknowledge that glamour cannot be regarded as a universal means of emancipation, as it carries dark aspects and an undeniably oppressive dimension within itself. Women who have “voluntarily subjected themselves to glamourization” have often sought to harness the emancipatory potential of this aesthetic. A similar process is evident today in the performative genre of the neo-burlesque, where glamour takes the form of gender excess – an open and defiant illusion that deconstructs the socially normalized stereotype of the “attractive woman”. As Siebler³ notes, neo-burlesque performers navigate the tension between reproducing patriarchal scripts and subverting them, highlighting how glamour can simultaneously serve as spectacle and critique. The history of glamorous women, therefore, is not only a history of containment but also one of expanding the definitions of femininity and female agency, often operating in spaces that patriarchal culture sought to marginalize.

The exclusion from the category of the so-called respectable women widened the sphere of influence for glamorous women, allowing them to transcend the cultural limitations imposed on their gender. The public visibility of glamorous women also ensured that their transgressions would be noticed by other women, thus fostering emancipatory aspirations. In the case of a phenomenon that is, by definition, relational and spectacular, its potential to either disrupt the existing order or, conversely, reinforce disciplinary involvement in a dominant, gender-oriented ideology is always determined by the context of a specific performance. The meaning and tone of performing glamour can shift radically depending on the medium used – this is often seen in the neo-burlesque performances, where the emancipatory power of glamour is primarily shaped by the theatrical situation. Glamour can amplify neoliberal discourse with sexist undertones, but it can also disarm it – raising the question of whether simply exposing rigid and “established” norms is already a step toward their re-evaluation.

The feminist perspective on glamour has evolved in response to the political and social conditions of women and the dominant concept of female subjectivity within the feminist movement. The first wave of feminism’s struggle against actresses and dancers who employed glamour on stage perfectly reflects the early emancipators’

³ Ibidem.

distrust of the subversive and liberating potential of the female body – historically perceived as a factor preventing women from participating in public life. Thus, the goal was to render the female body transparent, erasing the stigma of Otherness, so that women could achieve equal social and political rights alongside men. From the suffragette perspective – who did not shy away from acts of aggression in their fight for equality – the ideal of beautiful femininity was effectively dehumanized, infantilized, and viewed as a tool of female incapacitation, reducing women to helpless and mindless bodies. The second-wave radical feminism discredited glamorous femininity as a form of false female consciousness that conceals and oppresses the true female identity, which was defined by biological specificity. Further emancipation, in this view, depended on women's internal transformation and the cultural reevaluation of what truly constitutes male and female characteristics. Here, glamour appears solely as an oppressive strategy that traps the authentic and militant female subject beneath the glassy surface of perfection. In this case, the apotheosis of the female body was highly selective – simplicity of appearance was interpreted as a natural state, a source of truth and liberation. In contrast, the third-wave feminism rejected previous theories and, in doing so, recognized the disruptive dimension of glamour. Feminist perspectives on glamour have shifted in response to changing political and social conditions, as well as to debates about female subjectivity within the movement. Early suffrage activists, for example, often expressed suspicion toward actresses and dancers who employed glamour on stage. They feared that the eroticized female body, long framed by patriarchal culture as an obstacle to women's public participation, would undermine the seriousness of women's demands for equal rights. As a result, many activists aimed to render the female body politically "transparent," stripping it of its glamorous associations so that women could more easily claim recognition as citizens. It is worth noting that the term *suffragette* – still sometimes used in cultural memory – was originally coined by patriarchal media to belittle these activists; they themselves identified as *suffragists* or *suffrage activists*.

Certain strands of radical feminist thought, such as those articulated by Andrea Dworkin⁴ and Catherine MacKinnon,⁵ later positioned glamorous femininity as a form of "false consciousness" that masked women's oppression by presenting ornamental beauty as empowerment. In their view, glamour operated as an oppressive strategy, concealing the authentic, militant female subject beneath a glossy surface of perfection. Within this framework, simplicity of appearance was interpreted as a natural state and as a source of truth and liberation.

By contrast, more recent feminist and queer perspectives recognize the disruptive potential of glamour. Neo-burlesque, as discussed by Siebler,⁶ exemplifies this shift: performances that exaggerate glamour's codes can destabilize patriarchal expectations of femininity, demonstrating how the very aesthetic once condemned as

⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Perigee Books, 1981).

⁵ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁶ Siebler, "What's So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?"

oppressive may be reappropriated to challenge gender norms. Instead of being treated as a linear progression of “waves,” these divergent feminist voices show that debates about glamour and female sexuality have always been plural and contested, ranging from rejection to strategic reclamation.

Theoretical frameworks

The aesthetics of glamour is a multilayered phenomenon that can be analyzed through various theoretical perspectives, including feminist theory, performance theory, visual culture, and camp aesthetics. To fully grasp its dimensions – from its subversive potential to its role in the reproduction of patriarchal gender norms – it is essential to rely on key concepts offered by contemporary theoretical frameworks. One of the fundamental premises in the study of glamour is its function as a visual code that governs the desires of spectators through the dialectic of accessibility and unattainability. Laura Mulvey, in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,⁷ analyzes the ways in which the female body is glamourized within patriarchal visual culture and popular media, simultaneously becoming an object of desire and control. This ambiguity makes glamour an ideal field for examining power relations in the context of gender representation.

When talking about the framework of the gender performativity theory, Judith Butler emphasizes that gender is not an essential category but is produced through a series of repeated acts.⁸ In this sense, glamour can be understood as a gendered practice – a visual and aesthetic construct that allows for the reconstruction and redefinition of femininity. The performative nature of glamour is particularly evident in phenomena such as neo-burlesque and drag culture, where glamour is used as a tool for parodying and deconstructing gender norms⁹.

The concept of camp aesthetics, first theoretically articulated by Susan Sontag in her essay *Notes on Camp*,¹⁰ is crucial for understanding glamour in the context of exaggeration and stylization. Camp aesthetics prioritize form over content, irony, theatricality, and deliberate artificiality – all characteristics that make glamour a distinctive visual phenomenon. According to Sontag, camp disrupts patriarchal mandates by reassigning traits culturally coded as “feminine” – such as passivity, softness, or ornamentality – to unexpected bodies and contexts. Within this framework, glamour within camp aesthetics functions as a subversive tool, allowing women to play with stereotypes of femininity in a way that both affirms and parodies them. The neo-burlesque, as an example of camp aesthetics, employs exaggerated representations of femininity

⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

⁹ Siebler, “What’s So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?”

¹⁰ Susan Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 275–92.

to undermine the norms that dictate what constitutes “true” female beauty.¹¹ This artistic performance of femininity not only expands the boundaries of gender expression but also creates a space for a feminist reappropriation of glamour. Glamour is often viewed as a tool of objectification and sexualization of women, particularly in the context of popular culture and the fashion industry. Naomi Wolf, in *The Beauty Myth*, argues that women, through idealized images of beauty, are subjected to aesthetic norms that simultaneously constrain and appear to liberate.¹² This ambivalent status of glamour reflects an internal tension within the feminist theory – while some see it as a strategy of discipline and control, others interpret it as a form of resistance and female empowerment.

Deborah Ferreday offers a different perspective on glamour, suggesting that it can also function as a tool of feminist subversion.¹³ Neo-burlesque and glamourized performative practices provide women with opportunities to reclaim control over their bodies and the ways they are represented in the public sphere. This opens up a space for empowerment through aesthetics, where glamour becomes a means of expressing individual identity rather than merely an instrument of social control. In this context, Diana Crane’s work *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* is particularly relevant. Crane examines fashion as a mechanism of social differentiation, shaping identities through class, gender, and cultural codes.¹⁴ When applied to glamour and burlesque, her analysis becomes especially useful in understanding the relationship between aesthetics and power, as well as how clothing and bodily stylization can serve as tools of both emancipation and control. Crane emphasizes that fashion cannot be seen purely as an aesthetic practice but rather as a complex social phenomenon that simultaneously reflects and reproduces power hierarchies. In this sense, burlesque as a performance art can be interpreted as a playful engagement with fashion codes, where glamourized bodies take control over how they are displayed and perceived. By doing so, burlesque not only employs aesthetic patterns of glamour but also deconstructs them, creating new possibilities for identity expression beyond the dominant norms often present in fashion and visual cultures.

The feminist understanding of glamour has developed and transformed in response to shifting historical and cultural contexts. Many early feminist voices – especially those aligned with suffrage activism and strands of radical feminism, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon,¹⁵ largely rejected glamour as a patriarchal strategy that reduces women to objects of desire. Radical critiques emphasized that glamourized femininity functioned as a mask concealing women’s oppression

¹¹ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (SAGE Publications, 2009).

¹² Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (William Morrow and Company, 1991).

¹³ Deborah Ferreday, *Online Belongings: Fantasy, Affect and Web Communities* (Peter Lang, 2008).

¹⁴ Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (Perigee Books, 1981) and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989).

by idealizing ornamental beauty as empowerment. However, with later feminist debates, glamour began to be reinterpreted as a potential tool for empowerment. Angela McRobbie argues that contemporary feminists have recognized how glamour can serve as a means of redefining female subjectivity and autonomy.¹⁶ In this view, glamour is no longer seen solely as a mechanism of oppression but also as a potential instrument of feminist reclamation. The neo-burlesque, which reinterprets traditional gender roles through conscious exaggeration and humor, has become a symbol of this shift. These performances simultaneously parody and destabilize patriarchal codes of femininity, demonstrating how glamour can function as a platform for exploring identity, sexuality, and power. The aesthetics of glamour is therefore a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be reduced to either an instrument of oppression or emancipation. Its analysis requires an interdisciplinary approach, incorporating feminist critique, performance theory, visual culture, and camp aesthetics. While glamour can operate as a tool of social control, it simultaneously allows for subversive reinterpretations of femininity and creates space for new forms of gender expression. In this regard, the study of glamour extends beyond its aesthetic dimension to encompass its political, cultural, and social implications.

Burlesque between subversion and the reproduction of gender norms

How does the trajectory of neo-burlesque and striptease intersect with emancipatory processes that have been unfolding since the second half of the 19th century? Can burlesque be considered a feminist genre? Or, conversely, does it reinforce traditional gender paradigms by objectifying the female body—perhaps even more so in the case of striptease?

The trajectory of burlesque and neo-burlesque must be considered in relation to both historical and contemporary emancipatory processes. While striptease has often been criticized for reinforcing patriarchal paradigms by presenting the female body as an object of consumption, feminist and queer reinterpretations of burlesque complicate this picture. As Siebler¹⁷ argues, neo-burlesque performers use parody, excess, and irony to destabilize conventional notions of “female beauty” and to reclaim control over how femininity is displayed. Groups such as *The Velvet Hammer* in Los Angeles, as well as queer re-stagings of *Cabaret* on Broadway, exemplify how glamour can be reappropriated as a feminist and queer strategy of resistance. These performances highlight the tension between spectacle and critique: while they borrow from the vocabulary of striptease, they transform it into a space where marginalized identities articulate alternative forms of subjectivity. In this sense, neo-burlesque does not resolve the ambiguity of glamour but makes that ambiguity visible, turning it into a site of political and aesthetic negotiation.

¹⁶ McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*.

¹⁷ Siebler, “What’s So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?”

The etymology of *burlesque* traces back to the Italian *burlesco*, meaning “playful, amusing,” derived from *burla* “joke, prank, absurdity, trifle.” According to *The Dictionary of the Theatre* by Patrice Pavis, burlesque is defined as: “A work that employs exaggerated forms of comedy, presenting elevated and noble themes in a direct, sometimes vulgar manner; a kind of grotesque pastiche that transforms serious genres into the mundane, rendering even the most solemn subjects bizarre and entertaining”¹⁸. Notably, the dictionary does not address the “gendered dimension” of burlesque – yet it is an explicitly feminine-coded performance form, with its femininity serving as the primary vehicle of its transgressive nature. It is worth noting that burlesque experienced significant revivals at key moments of societal crisis – first at the turn of the 1960s into the 1970s, and later in the second and third decades of the 21st century. These were historical moments marked by two major shifts: first, an increased presence of women in the labor market, leading to greater financial independence; and second, a growing awareness among women, particularly regarding their ability to influence their surroundings through appearance and bodily performance. Burlesque operates in a liminal space between subversion and complicity in traditional gender norms. On the one hand, its theatrical exaggeration of femininity, humor, and self-awareness allows for a playful deconstruction of patriarchal ideals of beauty and desirability. On the other hand, its reliance on the spectacle of the female body can be interpreted as reinforcing the very gendered expectations it seeks to challenge. This duality makes burlesque a particularly complex and ambiguous cultural practice, one that invites continuous reinterpretation through feminist discourse.

Stereotypical images of femininity form the foundation of neo-burlesque – they serve as the basis for performers’ stage identities. Scholars of neo-burlesque argue that it is possible to “use the oppressor’s logic to undermine his regime,” which is precisely the case in the neo-burlesque. By exploiting feminine clichés through tactics such as parody and hyperbole, the neo-burlesque challenges traditional gender norms while simultaneously reveling in them. It is essential to recognize the connections between the neo-burlesque, camp, queer identities, and critiques of heteronormativity. The category of camp proves particularly useful in capturing the interplay of femininity and glamour that is integral to neo-burlesque. However, camp remains an elusive and contested concept, subject to ongoing theoretical debates and competing claims over its ownership. Its inclusion within the framework of so-called women’s studies is still often regarded as a borrowed concept from queer studies.

Camp represents the triumph of the aesthetic over the moral, viewing the world exclusively as an aesthetic phenomenon – not in terms of beauty, but in terms of *technical execution* and stylization. In camp, style dominates over content. It is consciously superficial, and it is precisely this self-awareness that makes it glamorous, ironic, and deliberate. As Sontag¹⁹ observes, camp disrupts patriarchal mandates by reassigning culturally feminized traits – such as softness, ornamentality, or passivity – to unexpected bodies and contexts, thereby destabilizing conventional gender codes.

¹⁸ Parice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du Théâtre* (Éditions Sociales, 1980), 5.

¹⁹ Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”, 275–92.

When observing the neo-burlesque and, more broadly, glamour through the lens of camp aesthetics, we notice a highly self-aware performance that plays with existing conventions, gender stereotypes, and expectations. A particularly significant aspect of contemporary burlesque is that it is a genre dominated by women – not only on stage but also in the audience, where women typically make up around seventy percent of attendees. Moreover, the most engaged spectators actively participate in the performance, engaging in dress-up and following the *dress to impress* rule. This distinctly feminine nature of the performance, the active audience's role as co-conspirators, and the feedback loop of fantasy – where the aesthetics of the performers are mirrored in the audience and vice versa – are crucial to understanding the phenomenon of the neo-burlesque. Femininity in the neo-burlesque is performed and enacted according to the expectations of a female audience, which fundamentally shifts the meaning of gestures and stage actions inherited from the early 20th century *theatre of the absurd*. Performers of the neo-burlesque embody fantasies of women imagined by women, primarily for a female audience. Firstly, in creating their performances, neo-burlesque artists do not conform with the fantasies of male spectators. Instead, they draw upon their own imaginative projections and seek an *alternative* femininity. Secondly, their performances construct a kind of meta-fantasy – one of a woman fully aware of her worth, who embraces her body without shame and is unafraid of her own sexuality. In other words, she is not ashamed to *desire* or to *be desired*.

One influential example is *The Velvet Hammer*, a Los Angeles-based neo-burlesque troupe active since the 1990s. Their shows combine traditional burlesque aesthetics-corsets, feathers, high heels-with parody, humor, and irony, explicitly highlighting the artificiality of glamour. Unlike conventional striptease, these performances are designed for a predominantly female and queer audiences, turning spectators into collaborators who dress up, cheer, and often mimic the aesthetics of the performers. In this way, *The Velvet Hammer* creates a collective space where femininity is exaggerated to the point of absurdity, exposing its constructed nature while simultaneously reclaiming its pleasures.

A particularly striking case is the most recent revival of Cabaret (London 2021; Broadway transfer 2024), staged as an immersive Kit Kat Club experience. This production foregrounds the queer and neo-burlesque aesthetics, transforming glamour into a tool of solidarity among marginalized identities rather than a lure for the heterosexual male gaze. Here, glamour is no longer used to seduce an implied heterosexual male spectator but is instead mobilized to create solidarity among marginalized groups. Costuming, staging, and performance emphasize the performativity of gender and the instability of beauty norms, making the audiences acutely aware of how glamour can shift its meaning depending on the context. This re-staging highlights how glamour, when combined with the camp and queer politics, becomes a strategy of resistance rather than submission, offering new models of desire and subjectivity beyond the male gaze. The dual nature of glamour – as both a tool of control and a means of liberation – reflects and deepens divisions within the feminist thought. For

many, the glamorous woman is primarily a victim, a symbol of objectification and the exploitation of an exaggerated corporeality that serves patriarchal culture. However, with the emergence of the performative perspective within feminism,²⁰ this viewpoint began to shift, moving away from an exclusive focus on victimization. Glamorous femininity came to be understood as a performance of commentary on gender itself, revealing that femininity is not an essence but a series of stylized acts. While the public enactment of glamour may not necessarily be revolutionary in itself, it often challenges the supposed immutability and validity of dominant gender paradigms. The body of the glamourized actress, subjected to patriarchal power, simultaneously becomes a key site of resistance. The neo-burlesque explores the fluid meanings of femininity's ambivalent accessories-cosmetics, elegant lingerie, artifacts of seduction-striving to develop a new model of femininity with which contemporary women, familiar with feminist thought, can identify without guilt. This serves as a potential resolution to what may be an *apparent* contradiction inherent in contemporary womanhood, as expressed in the statement: "*I am a feminist, yet I love to feel beautiful*". The practice of fashion and beauty no longer disguises a "true" femininity but is instead used to construct and perform female identity. In this sense, the neo-burlesque can be seen as a form of practical exploration of female fantasy, where the role of *woman* is performed by *women* – similar to the drag queen phenomenon, but without cross-dressing. Glamour, within this framework, can be understood as a contested feminist strategy. This includes reclaiming the right to love, pleasure, and – on a linguistic level – the reclamation of language itself, particularly the *guerrilla reappropriation* of words once deemed vulgar when describing female corporeality.

Stage inclusion

Burlesque, as an artistic and performative form, is one of the rare spaces in contemporary visual culture where the body is not subjected to rigid patriarchal ideals of beauty, youth, or binary gender categories. While traditional models of glamour often function through exclusive aesthetic standards – shaping desirable, normative forms of femininity and masculinity – the neo-burlesque expands this definition, allowing diverse body types, sexualities, and gender identities to become part of the spectacle of glamour.²¹

One of the key aspects of the neo-burlesque is its inclusivity regarding age, body shape, and gender identities. On the burlesque stage, performers of various body types can be seen – from slender to fuller figures, from young to older performers – thus challenging the dominant notion that glamour is exclusively the privilege of young, highly stylized bodies that conform to conventional beauty standards.²² Burlesque celebrates bodily diversity not by concealing specificities but by elevating them

²⁰ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

²¹ Sherril Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

²² Michelle Baldwin, *Burlesque and the New Bump-n-Grind* (Speck Press, 2004).

through the aesthetics of exaggeration, irony, and deliberate theatricality. In this context, it functions as an artistic practice that affirms bodily diversity and rejects socially imposed standards of the “perfect” appearance.

Moreover, neo-burlesque has long been a space of gender fluidity and experimentation with identities. Cross-dressing performers, drag queens and kings, as well as individuals who do not conform to traditional gender categories, find their place on the burlesque stage, making it a site of subversion and deconstruction of heteronormativity.²³ In this sense, burlesque serves not only as a venue for artistic expression but also as a political space where gender identities are shaped and reinterpreted beyond rigid binary divisions²⁴.

Performers such as Moira Finucane in Australia or Jett Adore from the Chicago-based troupe *The Stage Door Johnnies* exemplify how the neo-burlesque incorporates drag and gender fluid performance into its repertoire. Similarly, shows like *Dragula* – a competition celebrating drag, horror, and burlesque aesthetics – demonstrate how the stage becomes a platform for queer creativity that both parodies and redefines glamour. These examples illustrate how the neo-burlesque is not limited to reappropriating femininity but also destabilizes the very notion of gender itself, turning glamour into a shared language of experimentation across identities.

Katherine Liepe-Levinson highlights that burlesque and strip performances allow performers to take control over how their bodies are presented and perceived, positioning burlesque as a platform for reaffirming bodily autonomy.²⁵ This openness to diverse bodily, gender, and age identities points to burlesque’s potential *democratic* character. Unlike other forms of performing arts that often favor specific body types and normative aesthetic standards, burlesque creates space for expression for anyone willing to participate in its aesthetics of exaggeration and symbolic play. By doing so, burlesque not only pushes the boundaries of traditional glamour but also emphasizes its potential to become an inclusive, emancipatory, and liberating practice.²⁶

At its core, the (neo)burlesque is an artistic form that demonstrates that glamour is not reserved solely for those who fit conventional beauty ideals. Instead, it can serve as a powerful tool of expression and empowerment for anyone who steps onto the stage. Within its spectacle, *any* body can become a body of glamour. The burlesque stage, therefore, can be seen as a space where the exclusivity of visual desirability is dismantled, and glamour becomes an accessible and subversive art form for all.

In contrast to the inclusive and experimental practices of the contemporary neo-burlesque, the work of Dita Von Teese highlights how burlesque can also function as a celebration of traditional, highly stylized glamour. Drawing on the iconography of Old Hollywood, Von Teese performs a meticulously polished femininity

²³ Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

²⁴ Siebler, “What’s So Feminist about Garters and Bustiers?”

²⁵ Katherine Liepe-Levinson, *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (Routledge, 2002).

²⁶ Lara Nielsen, and Patricia Ybarra, eds., *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

centered on corsets, sequins, and fetish-inspired elegance—an aesthetic often aligned with the heterosexual male gaze. While she has framed her artistic control over staging and branding as a form of agency, her performances generally reproduce patriarchal beauty norms and exclude the bodily diversity embraced by queer and feminist burlesque communities. This juxtaposition underscores the ambivalence of glamour: it can serve as a mechanism of commercial spectacle rooted in normative ideals, or as a feminist and queer practice of subversion, where gender, body type, and modes of self-expression are radically expanded.

Glamour and feminism: between liberation and judgment

The history of glamour is inseparable from the history of feminism – at once excluded as a narrative of the ornamental female body and reclaimed as an alternative story of emancipation. In contemporary contexts, this relationship remains marked by ambivalence. Today's feminism is not a singular discourse but a plurality of feminisms, each offering different conceptualizations of agency, desire, and emancipation. Within the neo-burlesque, glamour is reimagined through parody, irony, and exaggeration, becoming a feminist and queer strategy of visibility, yet it remains haunted by the persistent suspicion that any cultural practice centered on female corporeality must inevitably reproduce patriarchal logic.

The examples of inclusive burlesque festivals, queer cabaret, or feminist performers such as Perle Noire and Dirty Martini demonstrate how glamour is being reshaped as a democratic and accessible aesthetic, no longer reserved for bodies conforming to narrow ideals of beauty. At the same time, figures like Dita Von Teese embody the continuity of traditional, highly stylized glamour – aligned with the heterosexual male gaze – reminding us that burlesque oscillates between reproduction and subversion of gender norms. This tension underscores the ambivalence of glamour: it destabilizes even as it seduces, it liberates even as it reproduces structures of power.

Rather than asking whether glamour is simply oppressive or emancipatory, it may be more productive to see it as a space of negotiation – between patriarchy and feminist reclamation, between commercial spectacle and queer resistance, between exclusion and inclusivity. The trajectory of the neo-burlesque suggests that glamour will continue to evolve in dialogue with shifting feminist and queer discourses, opening up new possibilities for agency, pleasure, and collective identity. What remains at stake is not whether emancipation can take place outside the body, but how bodies themselves – on stage and beyond – can become sites of reimagining desire, subjectivity, and power.

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