Seductive Rhetoric and the Communicative Art of Neo-Burlesque

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Seduction as a communicative process presents an intriguing—though seemingly undervalued—alternative to the rational appeals of classical rhetoric (Baudrillard; Ballif; Erickson and Thomson). In seductive rhetoric, process—the pleasurable experience of being wooed—is purpose. The symbolic practices of seductive rhetoric oppose stable meanings and ultimate truths via strategies that highlight play and pleasure and indeterminacy in order to celebrate artifice and to dazzle audiences with dynamic and changing signs.1 In this essay, I analyze seductive strategies in the performance art of neo-burlesque, a genre of comedic, erotic dance that often showcases seductive rhetoric through its sensual and playful bodily displays. Performances communicate via multiple symbolic codes that frequently resist and disrupt stable meaning, illustrating that seductive strategies can move audiences pleasurably in the name of artifice, play, and entertainment. As scholars continue to expand rhetoric’s reach into new sites and to develop new purposes, the field may benefit from a wider array of theoretical perspectives and methodological options. Seductive rhetoric, which draws its persuasive power from pleasure, provides an alternative critical tool for analyzing rhetoric that operates outside of the realm of rational ends and logical means.

Seduction has long represented erotic persuasion, a type of intimate and strategic communication with sex as its ultimate goal (see Felman; Greene; Marlan). As it is popularly understood, seduction is the erotic conquest of innocents by coquettes and rakes, archetypal seducers whose strategies include flirtation, flattery, and deception to serve selfish needs for attention and sexual gratification. This popular version of seduction as sexual conquest—unethical, steeped in fakery and immorality, concerned only with achieving a goal by any means necessary—closely resembles philosophic critiques of rhetoric. According to William Kelley, Plato associates sophist rhetoric with seduction because both have the ability to impel listeners to act not on ethics or logic but on aesthetics and desire created through artifice. In this view, sophist rhetoric is seductive because it “seeks and creates the ephemeral and not that which endures” (Kelley 78-79). Thus, a Platonic view links rhetoric and seduction in the realm of artifice and aesthetics, where what excites people sensually can be persuasive.

Like Plato, Jean Baudrillard connects seduction and artifice, but Baudrillard does not see artifice as concealing any true nature of things (Baudrillard 2; Ballif 11). Baudrillard lays the groundwork for rethinking seduction’s relationship to rhetoric by theorizing it as a game of language, not of sex or deceit. He contrasts masculine cultural production, which attempts to “guarantee[e] identity, truth, and presence” through “fix[ing]... signs to... signifiers” with feminine seduction, which leaves
the real . . . unrepresented” with its complex systems of shifting signs (Ballif 11). While Baudrillard does not claim that seduction and production represent a binary, he does present seduction as an alternative to mechanistic production (6-7). In short, seduction offers different modes of communication, knowing, and being, delivered via strategies that present audiences with multiple meanings and dynamic representations.2

While some scholars, most notably Michelle Ballif, have drawn on Baudrillard’s Seduction to redefine rhetoric by unsettling notions of agency and mastery, others position seduction as a “type of rhetoric,” a “sensual rhetoric that sweeps the listener off his or her rational feet” (Villadsen 12; 38-39). Erickson and Thomson, for example, classify seductive strategies—including teasing and withdrawal—as rhetorical operations that create aesthetic appeals and “operat[e] in contradistinction to rationalism” (302; 306). Seductive rhetoric, therefore, provides a useful framework for analyzing bodily communication in neo-burlesque because performances centralize aesthetics, artifice, pleasure, and play.

Further, both seduction and neo-burlesque have been simultaneously denigrated as anti-feminist and recovered as feminist. Baudrillard raises feminist ire because of his misogynistic statements, indictments of feminism, and his sometimes troubling views of women and gender. Some feminists take issue with his apparent reliance on the same masculinist, positivistic categorization that he seeks to critique when he pits the feminine against feminism and lambastes the feminist movement (see Ahmed; Chaput; Gallop; Goshorn; Ross). Yet other scholars urge a second look at his theory of seduction, claiming that it challenges “phallocratic masculinity” even though Baudrillard presents himself as an adversary to feminists (Goshorn 272; see also Erickson and Thompson; Ross; Grace; Ballif).

In neo-burlesque, tension also exists between the feminine and the feminist. Often the same material practices are critiqued as both pro- and anti-feminist. Neo-burlesque centralizes strip tease, is performed primarily by women, and usually features highly feminine cosmetic and sartorial styles; thus it is “haunted by feminism” and by the “ever-present” “question of whether [it] is feminist or not” (Ferreday 51). While many neo-burlesque fans and performers claim it as feminist, it is also critiqued as oppressive and regressive (Siebler).3 Thus, not only does neo-burlesque communicate through seductive strategies, it shares a similarly contested cultural and scholarly history with seduction. In order to avoid reproducing these arguments about seduction and neo-burlesque here, however, I hope that focusing on seductive strategies can give rhetorical and feminist critics an expanded vocabulary for analyzing the ways that seductive rhetorics work through the body to reveal expansive definitions of rhetoric.

The Art of the Tease

Neo-burlesque is commonly understood to be a contemporary take on the classic burlesque of the mid-twentieth century, which was itself preceded by theatrical burlesque, minstrelsy, and vaudeville, and was followed by commercial stripping in clubs (Allen; Baldwin). Neo-burlesque blends elements from many traditions, with some performers preferring classic strip tease in the style of legends like Toni Elling, Gypsy Rose Lee, Tempest Storm, and Dixie Evans, with other performers drawing on burlesque’s older history as a bawdy, parodic
form of theatrical spectacle, and still others exploring edgy performance art. Consequently, neo-burlesque offers what performer Perle Noire refers to as “theatre gumbo,” blending dance, striptease, carnival acts, and bawdy comedy. Because of its unusual mixing of entertainment forms, neo-burlesque simultaneously appears to be nostalgic, futuristic, and contemporary, suggesting that its seductive appeal transcends any one cultural moment.

The seductive rhetoric of neo-burlesque exemplifies what Prelli calls “rhetorics of display,” a “dominant rhetoric of our time” in which meanings are “manifested” by way of the “dynamic between concealing and revealing” (2). Props—most notably the fan and the glove—attempt to seduce by concealing and revealing parts of the body, a tease that hints at an elusive “more.” That “more” is generally withheld, however, and it is the withholding that captivates audiences. The dynamic tension created by such seductive strategies can “incite the imagination” and “aesthetically enthrall” audiences (Erickson and Thomson 303). The performance is a tease, but it does not pretend to be more than the tease itself.

Seductive strategies are prevalent in neo-burlesque and commonly operate as types of teasing and withdrawal, which “stimulate desire and longing” (Erickson and Thompson 303). In neo-burlesque, two key ways that performers execute teasing and withdrawal strategies is by playing with signs and by enacting variations of covering and uncovering. Seductive rhetors use these strategies not to achieve a logically determined end as in rational argument, but to approach one ending and then take the audience in a new direction. Or they might just leave before the anticipated end is reached, because seductive rhetoric is typically more focused on process than result. For example, in strip tease, seduction is built around the reveal of the body. In the hands of a talented stripper, the more the reveal is withheld, the more the audience is invested, not in the naked body, but in the process of revealing it. Teasing strategies leave endings hinted at but left “in question” in order to “hol[d] out potential outcomes” (Erickson and Thomson 304). Withdrawal—whether physical or symbolic—temporarily suspends the possibility for outcomes, but because audiences are held in thrall by the teasing/withdrawal pairing, it too builds anticipation. A primary type of teasing/withdrawal strategy is that of sign play—shifting and reversing signifiers and signifieds to destabilize meaning. Personas and props appear, disappear, and change—keeping audiences from closing in on a particular reality and foreclosing other symbolic possibilities. Covering/uncovering operates much the same way. Audiences are teased with nudity, but often in ways that defy expectations, such as when a performer shifts focus to a part of the body that is not typically taboo, playfully contesting erotic expectations.

Seductive strategies are common in various forms of erotic dance, but they serve different purposes depending on the genre. While it is certainly seductive, club stripping operates transactionally, whereby artifice is the means to a financial end. In neo-burlesque artifice is the end. There is never a definitive reality that is being mimicked; rather everything is “makeup, theatre, and production” and sex is made into a “total, gestural, sensual, and ritual game, an ironic invocation” (Baudrillard 13). Performances reveal seductive strategies that centralize the means of persuasion, rather than focusing on outcomes. Through the strategy of sign play, performers can draw out the rhetorical process
through constantly shifting who they are and what they are communicating. For example, in *Miss Indigo Blue*’s iconic act “Amazon Damsels in Bondage,” she appears as Diana Prince, who is also Wonder Woman, who is also a lesbian stripper (see Figs. 1-3).⁶

Fig. 1. Indigo Blue as Diana Prince.  
*Photo by Chris Blakeley.*

The performance stacks signs on top of one another: Diana Prince, Wonder Woman, Miss Indigo Blue, lesbian desire, bondage, and pasties are revealed in layers as Blue strips down to end with the uniquely burlesque art of tassel twirling.⁷ It is a quintessential neo-burlesque performance blending the absurd and the sexy, not seeking truth but irony, not promising sexual fulfillment, but encouraging—and simultaneously mocking—sexual desire.

In addition to sign play, neo-burlesque also uses covering and uncovering—the presentation and withholding of signs—as seductive strategies of teasing and withdrawal, again emphasizing rhetorical process over closure. Neo-burlesque’s commitment to the partial nudity of classic burlesque, keeping the nipples and pelvis covered, “remov[es them] from the order of the visible” and creates a “a secret, ambivalent referent” (Baudrillard 34; 32). The glove peel, a signature burlesque move, often fascinates and enthralls via veiled nudity: “Even though all members of the audience are sitting there with naked hands, a well-executed glove peel will drive them wild, proving that the process of the
reveal creates the excitement about what is revealed” (Weldon 43). Performers execute glove peels in endless ways that reference and manipulate strategies of covering and uncovering. In “Blue Gloves,” Indigo Blue peels off one glove after another, each time revealing another underneath (see Figs. 4 and 5).

Blue stays dressed for much of the performance and never reveals her hands, which gain the symbolic power usually reserved for breasts and genitalia. Thus, in both classic and re-visioned glove peels, the performer makes the hands a secret, and the process, rather than the thing to be revealed, generates seductive appeal.

Controlling audience focus through covering and uncovering, whether it is via gloved hands, pastie-covered nipples, or the peek-a-boo display of a fan dance, is a seductive strategy that many neo-burlesque performers cultivate. Whatever is hidden by props or careful covering becomes a focal point of the act providing both a “narrative tool” and a rhetorical strategy (Dame Cuchifrita). In “Untitled with Mask,” Dame Cuchifrita dances with her face covered (See Figs. 6-8).

Fig. 4. Indigo Blue- “Blue Gloves.”
Photo by Chris Blakeley.

Fig. 5. Indigo Blue- “Blue Gloves.”
Photo by Chris Blakeley.

Fig. 6. Dame Cuchifrita. Photo by John Goddard – Courtesy of The Slipper Room.
coverage versus nudity to define women’s morality. I use my body to either demystify nudity, and therefore the idea of sexiness or the other way around, whereby an individual does not necessarily need to be naked to be seductive and/or sexual.” Similarly, Legs Malone “the Girl with the Thirty-Four and a Half Inch Inseam” also showcases teasing and withdrawal deployed both through sign play and through covering/uncovering in her Bettie Page tribute (Fig. 9).

Fig. 9. Legs Malone as Bettie Page. Photo by Bruno O’Hara. Used with permission.

She starts the act with a vampy dance in a gown and feather boa, cultivating an image of classic burlesque. Malone then abruptly shifts personas; she strips without ceremony and redresses in fetish wear. The core of the performance is not stripping, but dressing. In becoming Bettie, complete with whip cracks at the audience, Malone demonstrates both sign play and covering/uncovering as seductive strategies that refocus audience attention and revise common expectations of strip tease.

The final reveal of her face challenges common notions of strip tease and of the sexualized body. Cuchi explains, “The norm of the striptease is to build tension to finally reveal what is the most taboo or sexualized part of the body. I chose the other way around.” But this act also presents a symbolic address to her cultural heritage through the covering and uncovering of her face: “I grew up in a mostly Muslim country and there’s always a discussion of

Fig. 8. Dame Cuchifita. Photo by John Goddard. Courtesy of The Slipper Room.
Strategies of teasing and withdrawal, such as the sign play and variations of covering/uncovering illustrated here, are central to neo-burlesque’s appeal, demonstrating that seductive rhetoric centralizes means over ends because seduction is an ongoing act. For seduction to accomplish its goal would signal its end. Part of the enduring appeal of strip tease is the ongoing play of the moments of pleasure cultivated between audiences and performers.

**Pleasures of Process**

Neo-burlesque performers deploy seductive strategies that never promise to fulfill audience desire. Performances generally end with a reveal, and then a performer withdraws, which is a critical part of the seductive process that “prolong[s] the *kairotic* moment,” thereby fulfilling the showbiz axiom to always leave them wanting more (Erickson and Thomson 303). Like all seductive rhetors, through these strategic processes, performers create in audiences “[t]he experience of being captivated” born from “the enabling tension between absence and presence, desire and fulfillment, as well as anticipation and closure” (Erickson and Thomson 303-04). This cultivation of pleasure in the communicative process is a hallmark of seductive rhetoric.

Much of the conversation about seduction concerns whether or not it is an oppressive or liberating concept for women and for feminized rhetorical practices. Yet, seduction has value to rhetorical studies beyond feminized modes of communication, women rhetors, or even the discursive category of woman. Seductive strategies offer rhetors more than alternative means of achieving a pre-determined goal (running for office, winning converts to a cause, arguing a case); seductive rhetoric encompasses communication that seeks no determined end but rather makes the act of pursuing the purpose—a pursuit that itself becomes a “pleasure-taking performance” (Felman 28). As disciplinary interest grows in rhetorics of the body, rhetoricians can look to cultural practices, like neo-burlesque, where the body is central. Central in form and function. Central in knowledge production. Central in communication. In neo-burlesque, bodies are not just in action; they are in conversation, a seductive non-rational conversation that privileges process, not as manipulation, but as pleasure. As a site of embodied communication, neo-burlesque revises seduction’s connection to rhetoric. Seductive rhetoric need not be reduced to immorality but can instead reflect the pleasures of persuasion, offering a critical orientation to a range of communicative practices for which logic and rationality have little persuasive power.
Endnotes

1. I intend “seductive rhetoric” to refer to those rhetorics that display features of seduction, rather than using “seductive” as a description of all rhetoric.
2. Ballif writes that seduction requires a “shift beyond epistemology” because seduction is not concerned with structuring and defining ways of knowing (11).
4. While distinction needs to be made between neo-burlesque and club stripping because they are different persuasive and performative arts, I find that stressing their differences risks pathologizing both strippers and their customers, and it is not my intent to romanticize neo-burlesque and degrade stripping.
5. Strippers frequently rely on artifice to develop the appearance of meaningful relationships with customers (see Egan; Erikson and Tewksbury; Frank; Hanna; Pasko; Wosick-Correa and Joseph).
6. I use still images here because existing online videos (of “Blue Gloves” and the Bettie Page tribute act) do not adequately showcase their seductive qualities. Neo-burlesque often doesn’t translate well to video. Recorded performances, often captured with a shaky cell phone, place the viewer as a voyeur, rather than as a participant in the show. They tend to just look “cheesy” instead of “cheesy, yet still enticing,” which is what good neo-burlesque cultivates.
7. See Weldon 57-60 for a brief history on pasties and tassel twirling in burlesque.
Works Cited


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