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The new burlesque as an example of double-simulacrum

DOI: 10.19195/2083-7763.8.7

*It is always the goal of the ideological analysis
to restore the objective process,
it is always a false problem to wish
to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum*

(Baudrillard 1994, 27)

Introduction

The *burlesque* and especially the *new burlesque* are relatively new phenomena in North America, Australia, and Europe. In fact, we can find the origins of burlesque as early as in the 17th century, in the Italian parody theaters *commedia dell'arte* (the Italian *burla* means joke). During this time, *burlesque* meant the caricature of high society (Willson 2008). However, the current meaning of burlesque, which is connected with the erotic and the sexual, has developed much more recently. According to Agata Łuksza (2014, 2016, 243–302), we can find the origins of today's burlesque in Great Britain in the second half of the 19th century. Lydia Thompson was the first famous burlesque performer — her shows consistently sold out in London's small theaters in the 1850s and 1860s. She played with the common order of the high society of the Victorian period, but especially with the order of gender roles. It was quite shocking when she performed during this time, wearing male clothes such as shorts and showing her legs, but in a way that also underlined her femininity. As Łuksza has concluded, Thompson became — by using elements of male clothes — both the anti-woman and the “hyperfeminine” woman. This ambiguity would have been both very confusing and very fascinating, as it was a kind of rewriting of the common gender rules

through parody. What is to be especially emphasized is that the British as well as the French burlesque of the 19th century was dominated by women, whereas the burlesque in the USA was comparatively dominated by men and was meant more as comedy. This changed after Thompson and her group had successfully toured through the USA and started the trend of female burlesque there. This trend lasted in the USA until the 1930s; then it was banned to underground clubs and turned more and more into striptease. Nowadays, we have a new phenomenon of burlesque — the *new burlesque* — which began at the end of the 20th century and in the first years of the 21st century. According to Łuksza and Ferreday (2008), it was the popular movie *Moulin Rouge*, from 1994, that provided some impulses for this development. The new burlesque based its esthetics on elements of US-American striptease from the 1930s to the 1950s, with the so-called pin-up-girl-style, embodied especially in the cult figure of Bettie Page: *New burlesque* performers use the requisites of this time, like gloves, feathers, hats, or fans, which they see as *fetish* objects (Montgomery 2013, 70–77; Willson 2008, 150–153).¹ Jackie Willson has connected the development of the new burlesque with the phenomenon of post-feminism, which means to her the *third wave* of feminism — a feminism that claims the same aims as the *second wave*, but that is contrary to it, affirming pleasure and sexuality as well: “A young woman could wear a tutu and bovver boots, be ‘girlie’ and sexy, *and* be a feminist” (Willson 2008, 9).² The development of the *new burlesque* represents, in this case, a connection of the *old* burlesque tradition with the “awareness of feminism” (Ferreday 2008, 50).

The new burlesque is mostly divided into two types: so-called *aesthetic* (Montgomery 2013), *mainstream*, and *retrosexual* (Nally 2009) burlesque. The most famous representative of this kind of burlesque is the US-American performer Dita van Teese. “Mainstream” burlesque features a glamorous spectacle and successful marketing of mainstream femininity and beauty ideals (Willson 2008, 148) taking place in exclusive locations, but without an emphasis on irony or parody (like the well-known performance in the Martini glass by von Teese). The second type of new burlesque is *subcultural* (Nally 2009) or *underground* (Siebel 2014) burlesque, with an obvious parody of gender roles and heteronormativity and with a clear political message. In this kind of burlesque performance, mostly

¹ Grażyna Gajewska underlined the reflection of the concept of womanhood as a masquerade by Jean Riviere and the theory of performance by Judith Butler that the masquerade can be seen as a performance, which breaks the dualities and binaries between subjects/objects or human/non-human. She also emphasized the significant role of the objects playing the function of fetish connected with the sphere of fantasy and imagination. The fetish objects are not just functional, but they also have a surplus of meanings, interact with us, and thereby take active part in the performance (Gajewska 2016, 208).

² Willson distinguished the term *post-feminism* from *postfeminism*, without a hyphen. Whereas *post-feminism* means the third wave of feminism with its affirmation of pleasure and sexuality, the term *postfeminism* stands for an anti-feminist *backlash*, which blames the achievements of the feminist movement (Willson 2008, 8–9).

taking place in queer-alternative bars, the performer subverts beauty and sex-appeal ideals within the “bawdy“ look: [...] excessive femininity or female-to-female drag, tattoos, bondage, SM, humour, cartoonish make-up and even acrobatics” (Willson 2008, 150). In the realm of the ironic subcultural burlesque, new types of burlesque have developed over the last years, such as *nerdlesque* or *queerlesque*, which I explain in detail later.

Empowerment, objectification, or... the matter of a wrong question?

Since 2000, many publications have been published, particularly in Anglophone countries, considering the topic of burlesque from a gender and queer studies point of view.³ Mostly discussed is whether the burlesque is feminist and empowers women. The conclusions on this question are various. According to the performativity theories of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the new burlesque can be seen as a camp, with performance transforming the meaning of stripping as the objectification of women (Harris 2015). The new burlesque can be also be considered as a hybrid “guerilla” theater, wherein femininity and women’s sexuality are exaggerated by the performers through mask-like make-up or oversexualized clothes and poses (Willson 2008). Willson also considers the role of new burlesque as a disruption of the cultural association and the binary Madonna/whore, where sexual visibility means being available, while invisibility stands for the sexually unavailable. The burlesque performer affirms their sexuality and handles the veiling in skillful way, knowing that nakedness and being sexual is both powerful and powerless.

Ferreday (2008, 61) speaks, according to Judith Butler’s theory of performance, about new burlesque as a “feminine performance” in the form of *female-to-female* drag. She criticizes Butler for concentrating on the *drag queen* as *male-to-female* performance, with its exaggeration of femininity as an example of possible subversion. However, according to Ferreday, “burlesquing the girl,” a *female-to-female* parody, also shows that femininity is a learnable construction. For Ferreday, asking for subversion in the burlesque is the wrong question in general:

“Rather than ask whether burlesque performances are subversive or not, it might be useful to think of burlesque as a critical reflection on gender identity: a move which disrupts the hierarchy between theory and practice that is implied in Butler’s account” (Ferreday 2008, 62).

³ As most articles concentrate on female burlesque, there is still a lack of male performance analysis. One to mention is the current Ph.D. project of Kalle Westerling at CUNY Graduate Center, New York City: “The Roots and Routes of Boylesque: Queering Male Striptease and Burlesque in New York City from 1930s Golden Age Burlesque to the New York Boylesque Festival in the 2010s,” stressing the history and the political dimension of burlesque. See: www.westerling.nyu/dissertation/ (access: 10.01.2017).

Regehr (2012, 155) has argued similarly regarding the US-American rise of the recreational burlesque classes and underlines that, instead of criticizing the sexual behavior of women for reproducing objectification, the contemporary feminist should “ensure sexual agency, sexual health, and the right to sexual exploration”.

The new burlesque performers represent and affirm the sexual pleasure of all types of bodies, often beyond the type of ideal beauty, and create a body-positive counter-narrative to the existing beauty standards (Asbill 2009). They are no longer playing according to male producers and directors, but are self-directed creative thinkers who use a mixture of comedy, art, *variété*, and cabaret to do their own show and find affirmation through it. They integrate into the performance their own fantasies of pleasure and the erotic as women who do not feel ashamed of their sexuality (Łuksza 2014). Both body-positivity and the responsibility for the arrangement of the burlesque performances are what differentiate burlesque from striptease, which aims to present the naked body to titillate the (mostly male) audience — the burlesque is more *tease* than *strip*.⁴ In contrast to this, the audience of new burlesque shows is women-dominated; women make up 70 percent of the viewers, while couples and people from the LGBTQ community also often visit new burlesque shows (Nally 2009).

There are also clear critical voices in the feminist discussion about burlesque, denying its empowering and feminist character. So argues the Canadian feminist and journalist Bianca Pench (2012), based on an interview with an ex-burlesque dancer, that there is nothing feminist in the burlesque: “The burlesque striptease makes explicit what push-up-bras and sticky lip gloss only promise: a passive, faux-naive, peek-a-boo sexuality that has little to do with real female pleasure and everything to do with mimicking whatever we are told is ‘sexy’”. This means that burlesque still uses the oppressive imagination of women’s sexuality as conjured by the patriarchy. Problematic is the question of the business as well; burlesque performers are dependent on show business, which defines the market value of the performances. There are still traditional ideals of women’s sexuality and current beauty standards that are in demand. Within that context, the performers can try to be body-positive, but showbusiness still prefers women with ideal body masses, and burlesque shows performed by these women are

⁴ The *Berlin Burlesque Academy* describes on its webpage the burlesque as “a classy stripping with character, charm and glamour.” See: <http://berlin-burlesque-academy.com> (access: 9.01.2017). However, burlesque research also discusses the supposed hierarchy between burlesque and striptease. Kay Siebler (2014, 8) has criticized this “classism” by emphasizing the burlesque as high-class stripping. She also faults the conclusion of the “intellectual” character of burlesque just because some burlesque performers have doctorates. Geraldine Harris (2015) has also drawn on class and race factors in burlesque performances, as most performers are white, Western, middle-class women. Otherwise, as Katherine Liepe-Levison (2003) has shown, the problem of hierarchy is in the stripper scene as well; some of the strippers she interviewed distanced themselves from other strippers working in the worst clubs.

economically more successful. Kay Siebler (2014) has also underscored that it is not enough for burlesque dancers to declare themselves as feminists in order to transform the new burlesque into a feminist performance. Political statements are necessary, which should be a visible part of the show. She recalls an example of a feminist burlesque show when the performance stopped shortly before the dancer unveiled her breasts, to make a statement and talk with the audience about the problem of sexual harassment. She believes that the feminist show should be controversial, challenging, and provocative, and not just a kind of artistic and aesthetic play with women's sexuality.

My reading of burlesque covers the conclusions emphasizing the ambivalent and complex character of burlesque. As Meghann Yavanna Montgomery, also known as the Australian burlesque performer *Lola The Vamp*, wrote in her dissertation about the ambiguity of the burlesque, which could be both feminist and anti-feminist: "A performer may choose to imbue a performance with an empowering message, but the act of performing burlesque is a tightrope walk between submission to traditional ideals of femininity and feminist empowerment" (Montgomery 2013, 21). Montgomery emphasizes that, even if women could be objectified by burlesque, they still have control over the degree of their own objectification; therefore, burlesque is too complex for one singular explanation. The conscious objectification of a burlesque performer is intriguing and "remains unsettling and disturbing", whether or not every representation of the female is connected with objectification (2013, 32). Montgomery's understanding of objectification differs from the meaning of this term in gender politics — for her, the objectified body is a part of a spectacle using other objects, like costumes, to create an interplay between body and object and a body as an object (2013, 36). Reflecting Elizabeth Grosz's theory of body, Montgomery emphasizes that every body is a written story, an "inscriptive surface" and an "inscription of lifestyle, tastes, and aesthetics", and the burlesque performance unveils this constructed character of bodies (Montgomery 2013, 37).

Regarding the aforementioned distinction between the *subcultural* burlesque with a clear political (feminist) message and the *aesthetic* burlesque, Montgomery underlines that, even if the latter does not subvert cultural ideals of femininity, the performance of these ideals is already an act of revealing its historical and constructive character. Therefore, the clear distinction between types of burlesque is questionable due to the aspect of possible subversion, as she concludes that "[...] any enactment of femininity, however subtle, can be innately parodic" (2013, 27).

For Montgomery, the *aesthetic* burlesque (towards which she counted her performances) is a spectacle, a "theatrical mise-en-scene", where the performer's body, the requisites, and the costumes, as well as the dance choreography became fetish. She describes her own use of Venetian masks, which are for her, via their form and glitter, a display of femininity: "In my burlesque practice masks are involved in a play of signification. The burlesque mask is a mime, silent, referring

not to an original feminine, but to a series of historical representations of the feminine” (2013, 55). Montgomery’s statement calls up Baudrillard’s simulacrum, meant as an empty representation or as a copy of a copy without an original. Baudrillard (1994) used the example of Disneyland or a prison as simulacrum that we are all living in; it also can be said that burlesque, through the spectacle of femininity, reminds us that we are all are stuck in the hyperreality of femininity or sexuality as in the matrix of cultural constructions. In the opening quote of this paper, Baudrillard emphasizes the mistake of looking for truth beneath the copy. Because the burlesque is a copy of (an already always copied) femininity imaginings questioning its empowerment or objectification is as meaningless as looking for the “truth” in a copy, thereby overlooking the iterative character of the burlesque. Within the meaning of Derrida (1988), the burlesque is an iterability of gender constructions and a simulacrum — an ironic or even non-ironic simulation. As Montgomery (2013, 77) concluded about her experience of her own burlesque:

A process of rewriting the self beneath the stage light, where a new set of understandings come to light, imagination is fired and through the fantastical the showgirl creates and recreates, the real. How ironic that the fluff of feathers and feminine accoutrements is responsible. But also how very obvious.

Neo-burlesque as a simulacrum of gender and sexuality constructions and a simulacrum of local myths

In the following, I explain the new burlesque as a double-simulacrum: it is not only a simulacrum of gender or sexuality construction, but also a simulacrum of local myths, as I will show in an example of the burlesque scenes in New Orleans (USA), Berlin (Germany), and Warsaw (Poland). I see the new burlesque as an embodiment of the imaginings of gender roles, seduction, and local “authenticity.” Thereby, there is no original meaning, and, instead, there are only repetitions of imaginings and local as well as national myths.

The legend of New Orleans is summoned from the imagination as a “city of sin,” with its historic red-light district, Storyville, and as the birthplace of jazz music (Rose 1978). The special aura of New Orleans also exists because of its composition as a melting pot of Creole, American, and African culture, as well as different religions, e.g., Catholic, Protestant, and Voodoo.⁵ According to Barbara

⁵ The origins of the New Orleans Voodoo cult is based on Caribbean influence, refugees having fled to New Orleans from Haiti (Saint Domingue) during the Haitian War of Independence (1791–1804) revolution, as well as on the West and Central African roots of the African American population in New Orleans, because New Orleans was central in the dark history of the slave trade (Fandrich 2005). One legendary person of New Orleans is the voodoo priest Marie Laveau (1794–1881); she combined elements of voodoo with Catholicism in her cult. It is also worth

Eckstein (2005), New Orleans is a place of “living history,” filled with tales and legends that have become an inspiration for many literary works.⁶ In addition, Isabelle Anaya Gauthier pointed out in her compelling 2014 Bachelor’s thesis the aspect of local “authenticity” in the New Orleans burlesque scene. She described how the female burlesque performers play with the nostalgia of the old sinful New Orleans and the fantasy of Storyville and the burlesque of 1880s. Regarding the example of a burlesque performer who came to New Orleans from Portland, Gauthier shows how the myth of New Orleans has been adapted in the burlesque style to become a “grittier” New Orleanian “soiled charm” style (as dirty as Bourbon Street — a “fake” copy of New Orleans”), with phallic gesturing and motions like pulling a glove out of the performer’s crotch (Gauthier 2014, 41). The performances I could see in New Orleans playing with this myth were mostly done by “glamorous” female performers who matched today’s beauty ideals. This kind of burlesque is also often connected with the myth of New Orleans as a *creepy ghost city* with the commercial interpretation of voodoo elements by using the myth of female vampires and scary ghosts. An example of this kind of performance is the “Voodoo Burlesque,” a combination of eroticism, horror, and voodoo cult and one of the shows regularly performed at one of the clubs on the famous Bourbon Street (Raymond 2014).

Another local (or more countrywide) aspect of the New Orleanian burlesque is the simulacrum of US-American pop culture in the phenomenon of *nerdlesque*. This type of burlesque plays with its name, using the term *nerd* (also *geek*)⁷ — a formerly negatively-connoted stereotype of the alienated and science-fiction-obsessed “computer freak” with horn-rimmed glasses turned more and more into a positive stereotype of intelligent, cool, and creative people (Glöss 2006).⁸ New Orleans is a city with the alternative “nerdy” *Chewbacchus Mardi Gras*, organized and performed by committed local groups, to where many science-fiction fans from the whole country make a pilgrimage. The *Chewbacchus* cosplay parades

mentioning the Polish accent in New Orleanian Voodoo, connected with the story of Polish legions sent by Napoleon to Haiti to fight the revolution. Instead of fighting against this revolution, Polish legionnaires joined it and settled down in Haiti. Their Polish cult of the Black Madonna from Czestochowa was transferred to the voodoo cult of Erli Dantor, which became a spirit patron for queer people (Conner and Sparks 2004, Monroe 2011 and Kępa 2015).

⁶ To mention are filmed novels *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams and the *Interview with a Vampire* by Anne Rice.

⁷ David Anderegg (2011: 24) explained the difference between *nerd* and *geek* in the following: “[...] it looks like the term ‘nerd’ lays a subtle emphasis on the pathologically unself-conscious, physically repulsive end of the terminological spectrum, while ‘geek’ lays a subtle emphasis on the bearer as a repository of boring arcane knowledge, especially technical knowledge.”

⁸ Some roles in the positive rewriting of the nerd stereotype play out in popular US-American sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory* (Heyman 2008). The nerd phenomenon is also connected with the pop cultural trend of the affirmation of being child-like (observable in new marketing terms for the age-group 25–35 like “kidult” or “adultescent”) (Brooks 2003).

are colorful, vivid events filled with young people with obvious elements of the pop culture, especially science-fiction movies, which are fancifully parodied with the use of the hand-made costumes.⁹ This joy of costuming and the ironic play with pop cultural scripts found entry into the burlesque scene in New Orleans. In charge of New Orleanian *nerdlesque* is the group *Society of Sin*, founded by burlesque performer Xena Zeit-Geist, with its weekly *Talk Nerdy to Me* shows in a local alternative bar and the big and recently highly-frequented performance events themed after cult movies such as *Star Wars*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Batman*, and *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, or inspired by Japanese anime fantasy films like those of Hayao Miyazaki. These *nerdlesque* performances are an interplay of pop cultural elements, eroticism, comedy, and acrobatics as well. Xena Zeit-Geist describes *nerdlesque* as “a performance style which combines cosplay with the art of the tease” (Cross 2015). For her, a writer, creative director, and producer of the shows, *nerdlesque* is an interesting burlesque form because of its fabula: “It’s full of characters that I feel passionately about. I like to be able to craft fan fiction that’s played out through stripteases. Seeing what I’ve written come alive onstage is my favorite part of the show” (Cross 2015). The shows from *Society of Sin* are a mixture of female and male performances, of different body types, and of heterosexual and queer elements as well; this heterogeneity makes burlesque transgress the gender and heteronormativity restraints. As Zeit-Geist concludes: “I don’t see burlesque as an act that should be gendered. What I think is important to think about is queerlesque — people who aren’t necessarily fitting into one-gender binary onstage” (Cross 2015). The *nerdlesque* connected with the *queerlesque* shows in New Orleans function as a remarkable parody of gender roles, sexuality, and pop culture, with their strong *gender bending* character.

These examples of different kinds of burlesque performances in New Orleans already show the interdependences between not only the questions of *what* will be and *how* it will be performed, but also the question of *where*. In contrast, burlesque shows in Berlin play with the myth of the *Golden* or *Roaring Twenties* and its cabaret tradition of the “sinful” Berlin as a “[...] roaring metropolis; a rush of colors, lights and velocities; a lunatic ball night at the edge of a precipice” (Scheub 2000, 8).¹⁰ Similar to the myth of New Orleans, the myth of Berlin in its “golden

⁹ For Baudrillard (1989, 56), the strong US-American fascination with films and identification with film stars were kinds of fetishes: “The screen idols are immanent in the unfolding of life as a series of images. They are a system of luxury prefabrication, brilliant syntheses of the stereotypes of life and love. *They embody one single passion only: the passion for images*, and the immanence of desire in the image”.

¹⁰ According to Scheub (2000), Berlin during this time could not compete with the splendor of much more cosmopolitan cities like Paris or New York. Nevertheless, Berlin offered an atmosphere that supported creativity and an imposing cultural program: “The four-million-person metropolis counted, in the mid-1920s, 49 theaters, 3 opera houses, 3 big varieties, 75 cabarets, stage areas, and locations with entertainment, 367 cinemas, 37 film companies that produced annually about 250 feature films, 16,000 restaurant (550 of them cafés), 220 bars and dance halls. Over

age” is a simulacrum filled with fantasies supported by the literary perpetuation of the dissolute eccentric artistic atmosphere of those years, as in *Grand Hotel* by Vicky Baum or *The Pious Dance* by Klaus Mann.

One of the first new burlesque event series in Berlin, called *Salon Kokett* (Coquettish Salon), was founded in 2010 by two women who have crucially marked the Berlin burlesque event scene¹¹. They are the burlesque performer Marlene von Steenvag and the event manager Inga Jacob, specialized in nostalgic retro events and better known by her artist name Else Edelstahl.¹² The *Salon Kokett* events took place until 2012 and recalled the myth of Berlin in its golden age through discussions and readings about “sinful” Berlin.¹³ Since 2006, Edelstahl has also been organizing the glamorous, established Roaring-Twenties-themed event series *Boheme Savage*, which includes burlesque performances. The required dress code is “strictly bohémian, cabaret, dandy, decadent, diva, gala, ganove, gauner, gigolo, glamour, glitter, mafiosi, variété, etc.”¹⁴ The *Boheme Savage* shows are loaded with fantasies and myths from those years. The elaborately arranged events take place in exclusive and nostalgic locations and the original places of the Roaring Twenties era. A similar event that clearly references the tradition of Berlin’s 1920s cabaret scene has also been produced by Edelstahl and the English performer and singer la Pustra, called *Kabarett der Namenlosen* (Cabaret of the Nameless). It is a “salon-style cabaret” or “decadent mise-en-scene”, the bawdy scenic atmosphere of the twenties taken from the post-expressionist paintings of Otto Dix or Georg Grosz. Apart from the aforementioned shows, since 2009, Edelstahl has also produced regular burlesque events called *La Fête Fatale*, with the motto “where beauty meets bizarre,” which draws on the current US-American burlesque trends with its parody of and interplay with pop cultural elements (like shows dedicated to superheroes, the myth of the Wild West or the *Star Wars* movies).

In comparison with the burlesque scenes in the USA and the UK, the burlesque scene in Berlin is young and still in development. Since 2013, Berlin has had its *Berlin Burlesque Festival* and, since 2016, *Berlin Burlesque Week* as well. As the Australian photographer and observer of Berlin’s burlesque scene Paul Green pointed out, many international burlesque performers come to Berlin and put on their shows in locations ranging from spectacular historical sites to smoky little bars “where the backstage area is a store room, or a tiny nook with a mirror” (2013, 7). According to Edelstahl and van Steenvag, Berlin is a cynosure for

100 daily papers and more than 2,600 magazines were published here providing an income for more than 5,000 writers and 2,000 publishers” (Scheub 2000, 8).

¹¹ In Berlin *The Teaserettes* established the first new burlesque female group in Germany in 2005 which connects burlesque with elements of comedy.

¹² Along with the Berlin Burlesque Academy, Marlene von Steenvag also founded her own burlesque school.

¹³ See: www.salon-kokett.com/2past.html#1 (access: 10.01.2017).

¹⁴ See: <http://www.boheme-sauvage.net/galerie/bs01/index.html> (access: 10.01.2017).

international performers due to the low costs of living and affordable costume prices; there is also more solidarity and less competition between the performers. The internationalization of the Berlin burlesque scene, especially through festivals, is changing the underground, trashy “*berlinerisch*” character into a more and more cosmopolitan one (Schwartz 2013).

Less international is the new burlesque scene in Warsaw, but it is nonetheless filled with Polish national myths. The first Polish performer, Betty Q, along with her troupe, started in 2010 and has since become the established producer of the Polish Burlesque Festival (starting in 2015) as well as a burlesque trainer with her own academy. An interesting aspect of Betty Q’s performances is the combination of elements of US-American pin-up-vintage-style burlesque with some components of Polish history. Maria Janion (2004, 150) described the Polish patriotic discourse as “a caricature of the romantic paradigm,” concentrating on the messianic-exceptional character of the Polish nation with its tradition of independence. The patriotic Polish discourse is based on the victim-myth of the country, colonized by Russia, Prussia, and Austria-Hungary, ignoring that Poland was also a colonizer of the Ukraine. Janion therefore emphasized the necessity for postcolonial discourse in Poland and for a paradigm shift through the telling of the “other history” (2004, 151) as a new narrative, especially including the perspective of women, which has too long been covered by the history of Polish men fighting for “God, honor, and the fatherland.”

I see the burlesque performances of Betty Q as an “other history,” due to her ironic play with the Polish uprising tradition and bringing the female focus into it. An example of this is the show *Niepodległość jest kobietą* (Independence Is a Woman), performed on Polish Independence Day, November 11, 2013, where erotic performance was mixed with the innuendo of the tradition of Polish uprising. The organizer described this event with the following words:

The romantics and their outbreaks (where raspberries and clothes are torn off), the husars (with ostrich’s feathers as well), the banner from a woman’s skirt, [...], the blue angels and, finally, the alleviation on the breasts of Mother Poland, or maybe of the Queen of Poland? Do you think that Polish women knitted at the fireside while waiting for their fighting men? It is time to read between the lines of history, because there is apocryphal waiting, sticky and sweet like honey. Independence is joyful, crazy, sexy, pretty and becomes a body.¹⁵

Performances by Betty Q can also be seen as a simulacrum of the fantasies of Slavic culture mixed with Polish history and folk religion and US-American influences. This is visible in the *Darklesque* show from November 2016 as a celebration of Halloween, as well as in the Polish folk tradition of *Andrzejki* (St. Andrew’s Day) and the Christian *All Souls’ Day*.

¹⁵ See: www.e-teatr.pl/pl/artykuly/210703.html (access: 10.01.2017).

Conclusion

According to Roland Barthes (2009), there is no escape from myths, unless we make our own. The phenomenon of new burlesque can be seen as a new myth or as another iteration of the common imaginings of gender roles, sexuality, and local legends. The performative interplay between these fantasies emphasizes the matrix of meaning that we live in. Therefore, there is not one particular question about the empowerment or disempowerment often asked regarding female performance, but the question of the postmodern condition and of *burlesquing* the narratives we are surrounded by as a simulacrum and lived history of meanings without their own references.

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The new burlesque as an example of double-simulacrum

Summary

This article deals with the phenomenon of the new burlesque in a double sense: as a simulacrum of gender and sexuality construction and as a simulacrum of local myths. It shows, according to the simulacrum approach of Jean Baudrillard, the current research on burlesque and an example of the international comparison of the burlesque scenes in New Orleans (USA), Berlin (Germany), and Warsaw (Poland). It poses the question of how the imaginings of gender roles, sexuality, and local "authenticity" are embodied in the new burlesque.