

From Pin-Ups to Striptease in Gambaro's *El despojamiento*

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Griselda Gambaro's *El despojamiento* performs its own deconstruction as a striptease. The elements that create a performance—props, gestures, discourse, costumes, etc.—are singled out and their function revealed in this one-act monologue. In the course of the play, the set is dismantled and the main character, a woman, is stripped. In the destruction of the theatrical image (the set and its main character), the audience discerns the sign systems that constitute a play and becomes aware of the voyeuristic pleasure inherent to performance. At the same time Gambaro's play comments on the image of woman within a society dominated by the patriarchy.

Performance has long been the theme of much self-conscious theatre: Shakespeare, Tamayo y Baus, Peter Weiss, and Pirandello. Lionel Abel in *Metatheatre* proposes that works aware of their own theatricality employing such devices as the play-within-the-play impose upon the audience an unavoidable awareness of the form and the nature of the dramatic medium and the relationship between spectator and spectacle (60). Gambaro's play, contemporaneous and perhaps competing with other media of illusion such as television and film, achieves a self-reflective level by foregrounding "performance" within the drama. *El despojamiento* therefore is more closely allied to works like Rodolfo Usigli's *El gesticulador* and Jorge Díaz's *El cepillo de dientes* where "gesticulating" or "acting" is the central action. Here the device of the play-within-the-play gives way to "representation" or "performance" itself. In *El gesticulador*, César Rubio takes on the role of a revolutionary hero and the powerful mythologizing forces of the government convert the farce into the only accepted reality. In Díaz's play, there is no attempt to harmonize the act of representation with that of reality. The man and woman constantly assume roles, at one time game show host and contestant and then again as middle class couple. Díaz reveals the emptiness of social roles within Chilean urban life.

As in Díaz' play, the main character of Gambaro's drama represents

several roles. In fact she is an actress. What's more, like Díaz's nameless characters, she is a child of television and film. References to popular culture—photos, film, cabarets and tangoes—flesh out the “representational” world the set symbolizes. And the woman's performance explodes the empty images of modern society and woman's place in it as meaningless caricatures, alienated icons of life. Gambaro's one-act play presents a woman past her prime in a sexually exploitative field, as actress and model, who is literally stripped on stage. At the same time, the play is deconstructing the actual systems of signs that within drama and society create meaning. The action of the play involves the dismantling of the stage. The props are gradually taken away, the gestures are those that represent the act of “despojamiento,” and the discourse systematically presents and rejects the actress's illusions until her true situation is revealed.

As representation and icon, theatre signifies through several media: the linguistic (discourse), the paralinguistic (intonation, inflexion, accent, etc.), the kinesic (gestures, facial expressions, movements, poses), and the proxemic (spacial distances). The central character of Gambaro's play, the woman, functions on all four levels of signification and, as such, embodies the essence of the theatrical. The other character, a young man, functions syntactically and indexically only through the kinesic and proxemic modes. Although the woman is the only character who speaks, thereby tapping into many more levels of communication, it is the young man who controls the dramatic situation, as catalyst, creating movement in the play's development. The woman constantly reacts to his actions and succumbs to his demands. She becomes the object in contrast to the male as subject, but she is also the icon for performance in that she moves within all four categories of signification and reveals their structure and function.

The set is that of a waiting room/anteroom, represented simply by a few props: “En escena, una mesita con revistas, una silla, un pequeño sillón.” In contrast to the minimal nature of the set, the metadiscourse reveals visually that the object of the spectator's gaze should not be the set so much as the woman, whose description is more extensive and carries iconic as well as indexical meaning:

Entra la mujer. Viste con una pretensión de elegancia deteriorada, falda a media pierna, blusa y una capa corta. Lleva pendientes en las orejas y calza zapatos de tacos altos, torcidos y gastados. Trae una cartera ordinaria y un sobre grande de papel madera bajo el brazo.
(120)

The clothes worn underscore the concept of “representation” in that there is an effort both to disclose and disguise the socio-economic condition of the woman. We learn that the cape is borrowed for the interview and eventually the woman admits that her shoes “no son muy finos . . . No deben creer que yo uso esa clase de zapatos. Tengo mejores, de cuero, de gamuza, sucos, sandalias” and that the earrings “puestos disimulan, parecen finos” (122-123). The contrast of “elegancia” with “deteriorada,” the choice of flashy dress, the worn-down nature of the high heels, the borrowed cape with an ordinary bag indicate that the woman is consciously “representing.”

However, at the same time, we are permitted to see behind the sham or "pretensión." In her attempt to make a grand appearance, the woman sets herself as the object of the voyeuristic act.

In theatre, as in film, the audience's gaze actively constructs the meaning within the representation, for the images are produced for our consumption. The spectacle plays to our expectations. Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" elucidates the power relation embedded in a visual medium such as film. Equally, her approach can contribute greatly to our understanding of drama as spectacle:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey, 11)

In particular, Gambaro displays the role of woman in a patriarchal society as object and creation of such a gaze. The waiting room or casting couch which the set of Gambaro's play displaces is symptomatic of woman's dilemma as object of desire. In several ways the character reiterates the fact of her exhibitionism: as an actress/model, she offers herself as object of both the camera and the director. On the kinesic level, the character consciously views herself from the outside as the young man and audience would. This leads to an objectification of the image. Several props become indexical of the basic objectification that the character undergoes in the play: the photographs that she carries to the interview and the mirror. The photos are early shap shots, "las de jovencita . . . amarillentas," and are an attempt to belie the reality of the situation, "la ambición de mostrar que fui otra, sin arrugas, cándida" (121). Even the mirror does and does not reveal the truth. At one moment, still confident, the woman looks at herself in the mirror, recalling a faded beauty as if ever present: "¡Qué ojos! Miro y caen a mis pies" (120). Subsequently, the mirror reveals underneath the make-up the bruise resulting from a blow from Pepe, her lover or husband:

No. No se nota. Qué golpe me dio el desgraciado. Cosa de arruinarme. Está negro. (. . . se pone una gran cantidad de polvo sobre el pómulos. Aleja el espejo. Se mira) Creerán que me maquillé mal. (122)

In addition, the woman strikes definite poses, offering herself to the gaze of the young man who is her only vehicle to the other room where the director/employer is to assign her a role. The common strand running through the act of exhibitionism is its pretense, the nature of the mask, its "representational" essence. The pose in *El despojamiento* comes to signify the plasticity of the theatrical performance and its iconic essence. As Keir Elam discusses in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*:

Theatre is able to draw upon the most "primitive" form of signification, known in philosophy as *ostension*. In order to refer to, indicate or

define a given object, one simply picks it up and shows it to the receiver of the message in question. . . . the thing is "de-realized" so as to become a sign. (29-30)

By ostension, the poses the woman adopts reveal her purpose, her role, her identity as actress. In Gambaro's play an actual actress portrays the would-be actress, and we have an example of iconic literalness (Elam, 23-24) in which the similitude between the objects is mediated by the signified class or concept (Elam 25). The class that mediates in this play is that of the actress and, by extension, that of woman both as object of voyeuristic pleasure and as victim in the power system of a phallogocentric society. A few examples of the character assuming poses will suffice to make the connection between "representing" and being a sexual object. She attempts to control the young man "con un simulacro de seducción," "Se sienta, cruza las piernas, adopta con esfuerzo una actitud que supone atractiva. Se endurece en la pose," and, in another instance, "Cruza las piernas, sonr e. Se sube un poco la falda, balancea la pierna derecha en el aire. Intenta mirarlo intensamente" (121-122).

The play dramatically represents the voyeuristic pursuit of drama/film in an unmediated way. The object of the eye/camera is Woman, but Woman as a projection of man's desire. Based on Freud's study of scopophilia, Laura Mulvey analyzes film psychoanalytically. She finds that scopophilia, or the pleasure derived from taking "other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze," discloses a power relation inherent to the treatment of women as objects of voyeurism: "Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey, 7-8).

Gambaro's play deconstructs the connection between female identity and the relation of power in a phallogocentric world by representing the divestiture of meaning from the woman by the young man. On the one hand, the woman has no identity; she is a conglomeration of props (her clothes and her poses). On the other hand, she is an object in the power structure and at the mercy of the young man who progressively strips her on the stage: "Entra el muchacho. Su comportamiento es despersonalizado, como si actuara s olo con objetos, incluida la mujer, que le resultaran indiferentes" (121). He never humanizes the woman by addressing her; he moves only in the imperative mode, commanding through gestures. He takes one article of clothing at a time: first the cape, then the shoe, and then the earring. There is a progression from the external properties to the more intimate, from the cape which is external wear to the shoe which is on the body. And removal of the earring results in actual physical pain; the body is transgressed: "con un gesto brusco le arranca el pendiente. Ella pega un grito" (123).

The young man is invariable in his demands, either indicating the article to be surrendered or taking it peremptorily. The woman's reactions however are fascinatingly revealing. They vary following a definite projectory: first shock, then the invention of rationales to explain the young man's abuse—"Seguro que la pidi  el director. Querr  saber c mo estoy vestida" (121). The dominant pattern, however, is initially to complain and then to recoil into

submission: “¡Venga para acá, sinvergüenza! ¡Contésteme! (El muchacho se detiene y la mira. Una pausa. Ella se desarma) No quise decir esto. Me . . . me arrebaté. . . le presto la capa, sí, ¡se la presto!” (124).

In further demands by the young man, the woman eventually complies because she realizes that she is risking her chance at the position. When he indicates that her skirt is to be taken off next, the woman herself removes it and surrenders it to him. From this moment on, it is obvious that the woman is completely at his mercy and no longer needs to be stripped but rather becomes the stripper. The young man no longer states his demands; the woman proceeds willingly with the degradation. We discover that the young man's treatment is no different from the way Pepe abuses her at home. Pepe's demands are often unspoken ones that the woman has painfully learned to heed in the same submissive way. There exists a language of oppression that in Gambaro's play again the woman verbalizes. Nevertheless, she does so only by appropriating her lover's voice: “No le planché la camisa, no le dejé de comer. Va a poner el grito en el cielo.” She continues as Pepe, in his language, which like the cape is borrowed: “‘Para qué servís si no puedo tener una camisa limpia’” (122).

The final moments of the drama play out on an erotic level as striptease and on a symbolic level as victimization. The woman lacks an autonomous identity. All the props that define her belong to the role, to the mask, and underneath the mask remains only the victim: “Se sienta en la silla, se desabotona la blusa, se abre el escote en un gesto patético provocativo, las piernas abiertas” (127).

The woman insists on believing that in her essence she is desirable, but she remains admittedly ingenuous to the fact that desire is determined by a patriarchal system and is not inherent. She attempts to conform to an image of desirability constructed and sanctioned by the dominant culture. As she looks in the mirror discovering the lines she would like to disguise, the woman deludes herself: “Pero la gente no mira a uno en la cara persiguiendo los moretones, mira los ojos, busca lo que uno es y entonces, con estos ojos . . . (Ríe) ¡yo tengo la batalla ganada!” (122). She has learned from the phallogocentric society the means of reconstituting the image by manipulating her own gaze upon herself. For as she observes herself in the mirror or through her representation as object, she bestows upon herself desirability. Her perception of who she is is constantly mediated by an alienated form, through photographs, previous and future roles, and through Pepe's eyes: “les demostraré que no hay papel que no pueda encarar con . . . talento” (125).

However the young man deconstructs that image the woman would like to project. As her props are stripped away, her role becomes more and more ambiguous, her identity, function, and behavior become more problematic: “¿Qué es lo que quieren? ¿Cómo debo comportarme? ¿En qué lugar dice cómo una debe comportarse? En qué lugar?” (125). She is forced to accept an image that society foists upon her. The woman does not control her identity: she bears meaning but cannot create it. By virtue of her submission and adherence to male fantasy, the woman hopes to retain the voyeuristic gaze of the young man, Pepe, her lover, and that of the spectator.

The content and form of *El despojamiento* center on the act of “representation,” which according to Umberto Eco: “acentúa el carácter sígnico de toda acción teatral, en la que algo, ficticio o no, se ostenta, a través de alguna forma de ejecución, con fines lúdicos, pero sobre todo para que esté en el puesto de otro” (96). The action of this play becomes an icon for the victimization of women. Not only is the woman auditioning for roles before directors, but, in her personal life, she performs in the same way before her lover/husband, Pepe:

Quando le represento a Pepe, se queda embobado. “Negra, haceme la inguena” (Baja los ojos, representa) “¡No, señor, no señor! Mamá me prohibió hablar con desconocidos. ¿Cuáles son tus intenciones?” (Gambaro 125-6)

Performance occurs on two levels: the woman is actress both to the young man who assaults her in the waiting room and to Pepe who abuses her in the bedroom. As Keir Elam states (25), an action standing in similitude to another necessitates a process of mediation. Here, the subordination of woman in a phallogocentric culture serves as mediating principle. The violence perpetrated on stage is the metaphor for the mistreatment of women in society.

The case of the woman in Gambaro’s play extends to the dilemma of all women cast into roles defined by a patriarchal society. The woman lists these possibilities: “Puedo representar todo tipo de madres, locas, cariñosas, distinguidas . . . haré mamás y después abuelas, y después, se darán cuenta de que soy joven, y podré ser la muchacha enamorada o la ingenua . . .” (126). However, the case is much more limited than she would admit, and her choices are few. In reality, society has determined which roles the actress must agree to perform: “No quieren una vedette, quizás quieran una p . . . prostituta. . . . Y bueno, ¡en fotos! ¡No significa serlo!” (126). The woman does not control her own identity, for she cannot choose her role within society. Naively she pretends that in essence she is untouched by the parts she represents. She denies that within the exploitative realm of the camera, she is a construct and that to play the role is to become the role.

Umberto Eco reminds us that “el signo teatral es un signo ficticio porque finge no ser un signo” (96). However Susan Wittig states in “Toward a Semiotic Theory of the Drama,” that by foregrounding the performance aspect of the play, the situation is reduced to the “*medium* of the dramatic presentation; to the theatricality . . . of the play . . . [and] invites us to see our sign systems, our communicative acts, as signs, as a way of framing the world to fit our understanding of it; they deny us the comfort of forgetting that our languages are a construct, and not a reality” (451). Gambaro allows a glimpse into the construction of the theatrical event by deconstructing the spectacle. Towards the end of *El despojamiento* the young man begins to disassemble the actual set: “El muchacho entra y se lleva la mesita” (127). Of course this implies that both the objects on the set and the woman herself are only props; it also affirms that the event has been created by the relationship of the gestures, props, costumes, discourse, and space presented before a spectator. The “wholeness” of the event depends upon the gaze or attention of this spectator. Gambaro incorporates the visual element as a dynamic motif into

the text of *El despojamiento*. The main character is iconized through her photographs, poses, and attire. As actress, she presents herself as object of the male gaze, and the young man becomes the "camera" that the woman hopes to please. As the spectacle is dismantled before our eyes we can clearly see our own complicity in the theatrical act. Just as the woman, we are all representing and are represented by our particular cultural environment: "La ingenuidad es lo último que se pierde," says the actress (127), but Griselda Gambaro would have us see beyond the fictions.

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