

Underwear as a tool for female empowerment at the Moulin Rouge, Paris.

Role of women's underwear using theories of power.

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Underwear is commonly conceived as an intimate set of garments that have been adapted for different occasions displaying different purposes, like insulation. However, its function can also be to empower the wearer, give them a seductive power over a subject, or simply to feel more comfortable, therefore the exposure of underwear and use of it in costume on the Moulin Rouge stage and in their advertising, presents a blurred purpose, questioning if the Moulin Rouge establishes female empowerment or sexual enjoyment.

Women's underwear has historically been used for many different functions, the conventional idea that underwear is seductive and used for sexual attraction is a fairly modern concept. In the Middle Ages underwear was used to keep clothes clean, provide more insulation and shape the body to fit the fashionable silhouettes of the day. (Cunnington & Willet, 2019/1951) Their function didn't really change until the 19th/20th century when women started to have more freedom and rights. "The whole history of underwear during the past forty or fifty years reflects increasingly the social ... effects of what can briefly only be described by the rather outworn word 'emancipation'." (Ewing, 2010) During the late Victorian period the corset soon became more restrictive than 18th Century stays and created the famous 'S' silhouette, which put a lot of emphasis on female assets. Larger bosoms have been deemed attractive in the past due to their link with fertility, therefore when the corset was transcribed to costume in Moulin Rouge, there was a large emphasis on the breasts and corsets, for attraction purposes, as decorated women seemed more attractive.



Figure 1 Moulin Rouge, Paris Cancan, par Jules Chéret. 1890.

In this 1890s poster for Moulin Rouge by Jules Chéret (Figure 1), there is a heavy focus on the women's décolletage and underwear, underwear here is a way of presenting the woman sexually, without them being naked. This poster enforces the opinion of women being aesthetically pleasing for men, especially as she appears sweet and submissive, also note she is in white. It is posing a young girl as an object for men to come and watch for pleasure. Thus, the poster is a clear example of women having no control over how they are seen and how they are used. Showing how at the Moulin Rouge, the women's performance was of a sexual nature, purely for men to enjoy. The poster would be the first thing that a client would see and would have to draw the audience into wanting to attend.

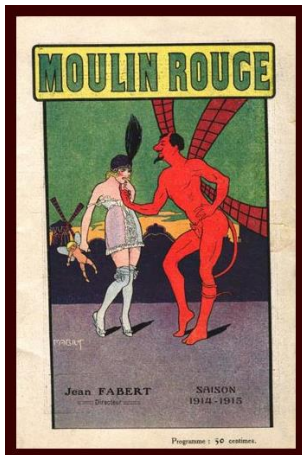


Figure 2 Moulin Rouge Programme cover, 1914

Underwear is a focus in almost every Moulin Rouge poster, (Moulin Rouge, Paris, 2013), inviting the audience in with its display of the women.

A 1914 programme cover expresses the early attitude of the Moulin Rouge. By having the woman holding a children's toy dressed in a soft, luxurious lingerie set, they are presenting her at her most vulnerable. This dress was not commonly seen on the stage at the Moulin Rouge which had women costumed in more 'Burlesque'¹ and 'La Belle Epoque'² fashions. Her underwear is charming and, again, white, representing purity and therefore we can depict a loss of innocence from the image. The clear connotation that the Moulin Rouge is the 'devil' and was turning innocent women into 'Courtesans', sits well within this image.

D'Arcy's explanation of 'connotations' express that "different people will have a different reading of the same image" (D'Arcy, 2019), however, the

way that women are displayed on the Moulin Rouge posters changes through the decades and thus, clearly displays the change in opinions. The empowerment of female rights was shown in a later

poster (Figure 3). The title translates to "The review of the Red Mill", and the image shows a Moulin Rouge dancer, in underwear (reflecting the design of the mill), high-kicking aristocratic men over the infamous structure. The image and use of the word 'review' propose the idea of change of opinion and attitude; that the women (Moulin Rouge) on stage now have power over the audience and own them, especially the men. On stage they were set higher and are there to be watched as they dance in their underwear and are congratulated for their talents. When they had the title of a 'Moulin Rouge dancer' they would not be shamed for showing off their bodies or wanting to experience pleasure, as they are the 'Moulin Rouge'. They now had complete control of the way men looked at them and how they presented themselves, no longer seen as dancing 'objects' but as highly talented entertainers. Their power and presence on stage was very 'forward thinking', as at the time they would not be over shadowed by or be the partner of men and would be 'untouchable'. This poster also displays the power the dancers now had over the audience as it is one that depicts the woman (over the man) as the focus. It also shows her kicking the men over the Red Mill, this "would be exhibited as a warning to men taking unwanted liberties, threatening a kick in the face if they persisted" (Cuttle, 2017). The poster thus, is a warning to men that the women are there to do their



Figure 3 La Revue du Moulin Rouge, 1924

¹ A burlesque is a musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects (Oxford Dictionary). It is more commonly displayed as a seductive variety show including Cabaret and Stripteases.

² La Belle Epoque is a Western and French period overlapping between the 19th and 20th century which is characterised by its optimism, economic elevation and arts and cultural development, it was also known as 'The Age of Opulence'.

profession and 'everything will be on their terms', a very powerful visual statement, showing how the women had a great power over the men, this idea was forwarded by the use of underwear as costume, a very modern thought amongst the era's traditional views.

Foucault, however, does not fully analyse representations as the semioticians did, he liked to look at the whole discursive formation³, he is "much more historically specific, seeing forms of power/knowledge as always rooted in particular contexts and histories...this greatly expands the scope of what is involved in representations" (Hall, 2013). To imply Foucault's ideas to Moulin Rouge, a statement can be formed around why underwear is not empowering. During the time of the establishment of the Moulin Rouge in 1889, attitudes toward sex were very conservative, therefore the dancers were, sometimes, referred to as courtesans, which was a truthful title for some, as when it opened it "welcomed high-kicking courtesans, artists, and aristocrats alike" (Schaefer, 2019). Therefore, their performance on stage was clearly a controlling and powerful method to seduce men and women, as the underwear was on display like a courtesan's, or prostitutes would have been; they belonged to that 'type' of profession.



Figure 4 Bal Du Moulin Rouge, 1955

At the Moulin Rouge the French 'Cancan' is a famous and regular routine. In the past it has been perceived "as a dance for the amoral and created solely for the pleasure of men" (Ismael, 2018). The formation of many moves, most of which unveiled underwear, were created to tease the crowd and be purposefully seductive. For example, "'the cathedral' was created to provoke clergymen and the 'military salute' was to tease soldiers" (Ismael, 2018). The Cancan was originally derived from a couples dance that would have been performed at Parisian bourgeoisie private balls, it was then made famous when women in France in the 19th century "wore open-crotch pantalettes beneath their long ... skirts and light petticoats, so the high kicks often revealed more than intended" (Come to Paris, 2019). Thus, the dance inherited a disorderly reputation, especially amongst the older generations and more moral crowds. It can be discussed however, that the Cancan was only made a symbol of empowerment through the power women would have over men by displaying the garment through the dance, as the viewing of the underwear was no longer through an intimate interaction, it teased men and their sexual desires.

The blurred line still stands between the Moulin Rouge being an establishment for female empowerment, or for sexual desire, as the aim will always be a seductive one. However, the argument

³ Statements or examples which share the same order, correlation, position, or function.

is, which ideal is behind it being seductive? The women either display underwear to empower themselves and deem themselves 'untouchable' or they are performing the world's most erotic and elaborate mating call, for men to enjoy. The display of women in underwear in their advertising shows that they are definitely an object of the performance used to arouse a crowd, but also shows them as empowered figures. The dances also show a theory of empowerment, using certain moves to expose the underwear for a teasing and dominating incentive, however the roots of the most infamous underwear displaying dance, the 'Cancan' contradict this idea.

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