

“The Guacherna: Funny Dolls”

A closer look at emotional design from the cultural implications involved in an object.

Angélica Lascar*

* *Universidad de los Andes, Design Program*
Bogotá, Colombia, alascar@uniandes.edu.co

Abstract: This Project was inspired from the Barranquilla Carnival, a party held in Colombia and considered a symbol of our culture. This essay shows the development of the design on the proposal concept: “The Guacherna [1]: Funny Dolls”. It starts with a brief explanation of the meaning of the Carnival, and how it is transferred to the emotional feeling that the dolls produce. The purpose is to show the scope of the objects and how they are not only attractive for their universally-determined esthetics, but also an answer to cultural references. Thus, the object, designed based on the traditions, becomes an emotional design exercise that proves the role of memory, tradition, and identity in the relationship with the created objects.

Keywords: *emotions, traditions, culture, carnival, esthetics.*

1. Introduction

The objects produce an emotional bond with individuals, particularly because they embody archetypal values inherent to a culture. This is the case of the *Guacherna: Funny Dolls*, a series of objects with their own re-interpreted story based on the Barranquilla Carnival (Colombia). Driven by this idea, I want to share the process that led us to the design of this set of dolls inspired in a carnival declared as Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Humanity Heritage by UNESCO in 2003. First, I will talk about the history of the Barranquilla Carnival, and I’ll make a brief theoretical reflection on the meaning of the carnival and the masks in this type of ritual festivities. Second, I will relate such theory with the meaning this sort of objects may have to Colombians and to foreigners.

2. Brief history of the carnival

Barranquilla, the third largest city in Colombia, is the cradle of the Carnival. This Carnival combines a mix of three main traditions derived from the Spanish, African, and Indian (tri-ethnic) cultures that, in time, have made a social difference evidenced in the several expressions of a carnival that is born in rural areas, and becomes a very rich multicultural phenomenon. This carnival appeared in the 19th Century; however, it is only made official in 1876 with the *bando*, an official document [2], to open the carnival which is held every year. The dominant class of people is the one who organize and operate the carnival from that moment on. There is a hierarchy of classes that is expressed in different ways: the elite, for instance, gets together in social clubs that

hold ballroom dances and luxurious block parties that have been influenced by foreign cultures. Then, there is the middle or second class, who celebrates in reception rooms and family houses. Finally, there is the lower-class who celebrates on the streets and popular “burreros” rooms [3]. Thus, the carnival became the main element ordering models of citizen cohabitation and productivity of the Barranquilla society. Nowadays, there are standards set by the Barranquilla Carnival Foundation that must be followed by organizations and companies who want to participate and finance such festivity.

3. Why get inspired in the carnival?

The carnival has a social function within the culture. Authors such as Mijail Bajtin [4] assure that there are spaces where values are inverted and individuals free their Ego, their passions and desires. Behind the masks, the rich man has the opportunity to dress-up like a poor man, the poor man may dress-up like the rich man, ugliness and beauty are not differentiated, and even dead people can become alive.

The carnival offers individuals the opportunity, not only to hide who they are, but also to free themselves and become anything they’ve always wanted to be, at least during the days when the order set by the “polis”, as a center of power, is relaxed and the pagan festivities are allowed. As a result, popular culture is expressed as opposite to hegemonic culture. This is why, in Catholic countries, the carnival is held before Lent, so the festivity allows individuals to relax and go out on the streets before the ritual of remembrance of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Then the bright colors and the dance are replaced by solemnity imposed by the mourning ritual and purification. The Carnival is indeed, the time when individuals go out to the streets, dress-up in costumes, and share with others without thinking about any creed, sex, or social classes. Moreover, the Barranquilla carnival has its main character: Joselito [5], who is sacrificed, within the logic of a ritual time that includes nostalgia, but renews itself every year. The above happens during a time that is not the characteristic time of the Western culture that we use now.

Carnival’s celebration in the 21st Century gave foreigners who visit us during that time and the Colombian people the opportunity to experiment and express the beauty of transgression, contrasts, noise, sexuality that is freed when dancing, among many expressions typical of our culture. It is indeed based on this that the funny dolls, inspired in the Guacherna, somehow mix the values of the carnival, becoming both a souvenir of the Barranquilla Carnival and objects fueled with emotions that are typical of the meaning of these festivities.

4. Emotional design to the rescue of traditions

Traditions remain through the cultural goods of people and their objects. Men and women are usually doing their everyday duties until the carnival starts. During the carnival, a space is shared by adults and children. The dolls support such transmission and values. Thus, the Guacherna: funny dolls, achieves this connection.

Another aspect of my proposal is that “*Attractive things work better*” [6]; even more when they are esthetically conceived with elements that are typical of the culture and recognizable by a community. It is evident that, although with globalization there are certain esthetic values that may be considered universal, beauty and ugliness are perceptions built and associated with culture. Thus, if for Mayas an elongated skull was considered

beautiful and a symbol for status, for Colombians there are also certain referrals that lead us to consider some forms or colors beautiful as we associate them to our culture. For instance, yellow, blue, and red, are just primary colors to an American, but they are the Colombian flag to a Colombian (Figure.1), and they represent her or his country. Therefore, if one of these colors is used in a doll, for example: The bull (Figure.2); it is not only recognizable to that person, but it can also produce nostalgia, laughter, and many other emotions.



Figure.1 Colombian flag [7] and 2 bull doll (Torito)

The above examples make it relevant to take these dolls into contexts different from ours, for anyone that knows Colombia, and likes the Barranquilla Carnival, when seeing them can recognize our culture and maybe feel that such carnival object also touches his/her emotions. Likewise, the dolls may cause curiosity, in that if a foreigner sees a doll in a display whose forms are disproportionate and has bright colors, he/she would probably want to know what they are, where they are from, and this way, he/she may get close to Barranquilla, to Colombia, and to the Carnival. All this takes us to associations inherent to the concept of experience, one of the things we wanted to include as aggregated value to the dolls design.

5. Development of the concept of “The Guacherna: Funny dolls”

This design concept was based on the capacity of the objects to be objects of affection. Likewise, it starts from concepts developed by Umberto Eco [8] where beauty and ugliness are questioned as universal values addressed from the culture, considering how the social-historic context, among other ethical values, influences the perception of individuals. The creation of the family of affectionate objects was planned this way, inspired in the characters of the Barranquilla Carnival that tell their own story in a funny way. Therefore, the concept of this system of dolls makes it possible for original cultural aspects like the Barranquilla Carnival, to be known in a contemporaneous way to catch the attention of children, youngsters and family groups from Colombia and from other nationalities.

Some representative characters of the carnival were taken, such as: Marimonda, Little Bull (Torito), Death (Muerte), Congo, and Puloi Colored Woman (Negrita Puloi). Each story emerges from people’s narrations. In the case of Marimonda, for instance, (Figure.3, 4, 5 and 6), one of the most emblematic characters, what is ridiculous is shown as funny. This is why things that are grotesque, marginal, chaotic, emerge, and thus, they get closer to the “esthetics of ugliness”. The carnival allows people from the coast to make fun of themselves in a nice, recreational, and spontaneous way.



Figure.3 Marimonda mask used for the Barranquilla Carnival [9], 4 Marimonda doll, 5 and 6 tag of story of the character stuck to the body of the doll [10]

In their design, several concepts were related to the emotional design. For instance, the dolls should generate immediate emotions of happiness, disconcert, surprise, and remembrance of an event in Colombia. Thus, when the collection is perceived in its entirety, the audience is expected to recall pleasant moments associated to a big festivity like the Barranquilla carnival, allowing the user to keep the dolls and revive the carnival experience every time he/she sees them. Additionally, the form of the dolls is intended to establish an affectionate bond with the user when perceived and owned.

In closer consideration of the object: “the esthetics of ugliness” is the organizing element of the form. This is, what gives the characters a defined personality full of defects, is also perceived as cute and captivating. There are several references which influence this concept. One is related to current fashion of the urban tribes, full of contrasts, exaggerations, “anything is valid”, and no rules (Figure.7 and 8). The other is observing people and how they now show themselves as they are, without fears or concealment before society. Lastly, there is a reference to the Ugly Dolls [11] and Kidrobot [12].



Figure.7 [13] and 8 [14] Contemporary urban tribes

To this end, we used exaggeration of some parts, we broke the symmetry of space location in certain ways, we left incomplete figures, used black as a representative color for the collection, and mix different forms in a same space to give the characters a portrayal. Likewise, elements such as rings under the eyes, braces, pot-bellies, glasses, among others, are part of the esthetics of the characters, who tell their own story written in the tag attached to their bodies. Such tag includes the character name, the carnival it comes from, and how it was made. (Figure.9).



Figure.9 Tag with the story of the character

Another method within the design process was working close to several actors in prototyping the form (form modeling). To this end, photographs and sketches of the carnival characters were made with the help of children, teenagers, and adults. These sketches were the basis for working on the form with the ideals we were looking for. Also, we worked with the people who made the sketches, so that they understand the proposed form and get design contributions. All this resulted in a co-creative design proposal (cooperation and participation). The “fabric over fabric” technique was followed (putting fabric over fabric to get the proposed forms); this work is handmade. The idea of this combination was to evidence configuration between craftsmanship and design. See design process (Figure.10 and 11)

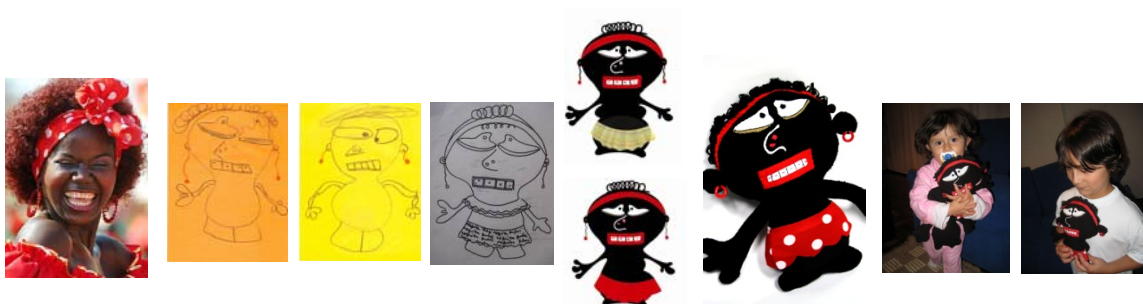


Figure.10 Costume of “Negrita Puloi” used for the Barranquilla Carnival [15], and 11Process of the formal development of the doll.

Then, we made a non-structured observation of different people in Bogota (children, teenagers, and adults) to determine immediate emotions produced by the dolls. The bull formed happiness and attraction in children more than the other dolls. This was due to the contrast of color and the basic forms. Teenagers were attracted by Garabato, because of its risk-taking attitude and dark meaning, together with feelings of cuteness and friendship. Congo, a character that colors its face with white and wears black glasses, produced a direct connection with people who wear glasses. The Black Puloi Girl, the most exaggerated character in its form, produced emotions of happiness, friendliness and cuteness among teenagers and adults. Marimonda, the most colorful of all dolls, and the most emblematic of the carnival, always produced laughter (Figure.12).



Figure.12 La Guacherna Collection: the small bull “Torito”, Death “Muerte”, “Congo”, Colored Woman “Negrita Puloi” and “Marimonda”.

Finally, some observers got excited with the dolls as they related them immediately with Barranquilla Carnival, although they didn’t know all the characters. Others related the dolls with Colombia but didn’t know about the carnival. Foreigners living in Bogota thought some characters were more interesting than others. Garabato and the Black Puloi Girl were related to Mexico and the African Continent. As they knew about the carnival story, there was greater recognition by them.

5. Acknowledgement

Thanks to my friend Mario Pinilla for working with me in developing the Guacherna Project (funny dolls). This was a very satisfactory and enriching process, as we addressed the emotional design from traditions and culture. Thanks to the artisans contest of Colombia “artisan path” 2008 [16] where we won the first prize in the Children category. To Maria Clara Salive for the style correction, to Monica Holguin for the translation, and to Carolina Parra for helping me in getting the photographic material, and to all those whose opinion enriched the process.

6. Conclusions

With this work, I can conclude that retaking the culture and traditions of a community, as a way of incorporating design, generates a close and long-lasting emotional bond between the individual and the product. This was represented in the forms of the proposal whose symbolic load (what reminds me and what evokes certain things) connects levels that go from visceral to reflexive [17]. Likewise, the most attached emotions are generated from the recognition of symbols that are typical to every country. These symbols, although forgotten or asleep, awaken when the person comes in contact with certain objects, in this particular case, the Guacherna dolls.

Additionally, the meaning of emotions changes from one context to another. For people who know the traditions and culture, the meaning is more symbolic than formal. On the contrary, for those who don’t know the traditions and the culture, emotion is reflected in the formal part of the product. This is very important if we want to take a local design proposal to other countries.

It is clear that as a product carries cultural background, the audience gets involved deeply with such product and, therefore, this is reflected in a higher level of appropriation and attachment, thus, becoming more emotional.

It is important to look for mechanisms to enrich our country's typical things, to create innovation. Innovation of the "Guacherna: funny dolls" is reflected in the design of the characters, each character's stories, and the memories from the Barranquilla Carnival. As well, the dolls were intended not only for children, but for other audiences such as teenagers, and foreigners. To this end, more universal references were used to help strengthen the formal characteristics of the carnival dolls. They are objects that help to revive and strengthen the passion for local traditions, promote the Barranquilla Carnival at an international level, as well as the artisan work and cheerful culture of Colombians.

7. References

- [1] <http://www.videosmusicales.tv/La+guacherna-letra-107112.html>. [Accessed 14 Feb, 2010]. It is a song composed by Milly Quezada, used as official opening of the Carnival. We took this word to give it a name to the project: "The Guacherna: funny dolls", is the people to us, the recreation, the happiness, the party, Colombia, etc.
- [2] Friedemann, S. Nina. (1985) *Carnaval en Barranquilla*. Editorial La Rosa, Bogotá.
- [3] Rey Sinning, E. (1992) *Joselito Carnaval*. Ediciones Costa Caribe. Barranquilla
- [4] Bajtin, M. (2005) *La Cultura Popular en la edad media y el renacimiento*. Alianza Editorial
- [5] Rey Sinning, E. (1992) *Joselito Carnaval*. Ediciones Costa Caribe. Barranquilla
- [6] Norman, D. A. (2004) *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday things*. New York, USA: Basic Books.
- [7] http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_tveb5Vm_M9s/SBxkeh3DI/AAAAAAAAAGY/Mnv5fuA6jeg/s400/bandera+IV.jpg. [Accessed 14 Feb, 2010]
- [8] Eco, Umberto. (2007) *Historia de la fealdad*. Lumen. Barcelona.
- [9] http://www.carnavaldebarranquilla.org/previo/noti_08_03.html. [Accessed 14 Feb, 2010]
- [10] De la Espriella, A. Personal Interview. June 2008
- [11] <http://www.uglydolls.com/>. [Accessed 10 Feb, 2010]
- [12] <http://www.kidrobot.com/>. [Accessed 10 Feb, 2010]
- [13] <http://hjovent.hola.com/ocio/2008/11/quieres-ser-una-harajuku-girl.html>. [Accessed 14 Feb, 2010]
- [14] http://www.blog.com.co/photos/Generales%5CImgArticulo_T1_568_200942_145353.jpg. [Accessed 14 Feb, 2010]
- [15] <http://archivo.giganet.com.ar/imagenes/carnaval-barranquilla.jpg>. [Accessed 14 Feb, 2010]
- [16] <http://www.artesaniasdecolombia.com.co/trazaartesanal/guacherna.html>. [Accessed 14 Feb, 2010]
- [17] Norman, D. A. (2004) *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or Hate) Everyday things*. New York, USA: Basic Books.