

Striptease: The Art of Spectacle and Transgression

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She must remain available to all, possessed by none.

—M. G. Levine, “From Vanna to Amana”

If revelation is what we seem to desire and fear most, it is perhaps because the dream of laying bare, however blindingly insightful and terrifyingly beautiful it may be, itself conceals something else. That the truth in all its terrible nakedness, that the truly, devastatingly naked might itself be but another garment, a possibility which has fascinated post-Nietzschean philosophy, for there is ultimately something comfortable in the idea that full “disclothsure,” however devastating it may be, is still finally—no matter how great the price—possible.

—M. G. Levine, “From Vanna to Amana”

What is the striptease really about? Flashing lights, large breasts, and gyrating hips? Or a postmodern spectacle that reflects and subverts dominant cultural paradigms? Is it about the dancing, the clothing, or the pronounced lack of either? One can watch strippers for a long time and not even notice the dancing. Consciousness given to sexual fantasy is consciousness unavailable for dance appreciation. How important is the dance element anyway? Is the dancing enough to raise the stripper above the overtly genital? After all, sex is something we descend to. Art is something we exalt. Or is it? Naked bodies, and naked bodies of women, in particular, have been frequent topics of artistic exploration. There really is no erotic art in the nineteenth century which does not involve the image of women, and precious little before or after (Nochlin 9). As Sigmund Freud observes:

Covering of the body, which keeps abreast with civilization, continuously arouses sexual curiosity and serves to supplement the sexual object by uncovering the hidden parts. This can be turned into artistic “sublimation” if the interest is turned from the genitals to the form of the body. The tendency to linger at this intermediary sexual aim of the sexually accentuated “looking,” is found to a

certain degree in most normals; indeed, it gives them the possibility of directing a certain amount of their libido to a higher artistic aim. (Freud 42)

The tension between sex and art has always been pivotal to exotic dancing. In more modest times, the entertainment value of burlesque was the cover for its titillation. The professional stripper conceives of her show as a creative dance performance utilizing the vehicle of her nude body. The audience sees it as an erotic spectacle that sometimes makes the transcendent leap into entertainment (Scott 28, 82).

The striptease performance reflects a key attribute of postmodernism: anticipation of the ideal versus apprehension of the real. Umberto Eco, in his essay "Travels in Hyperreality," argues that "the sign aims to be the thing, to abolish the distinction of the reference, the mechanism of replacement" (Eco 7). Contemporary American society is based around the inability to tell the difference between fantasy and reality and, in most cases, preferring it that way. The fake is simply more intoxicating. When there is a fake, "it is not so much because it wouldn't be possible to have the real equivalent but because the public is meant to admire the perfection of the fake and its obedience to the program" (Eco 44). The fake *is* the real thing, and the real thing is a shadow of its former self.

People enter the strip club, not in a state of disbelief begging suspension (as they do when they sit down to watch a play or movie), but expecting to see a revelation of a woman's sexual self. We think the stripper's performance must be congruent with her feelings. We don't think of her as playing a role or wearing a mask. After all, she's naked—what can she hide? The entire premise of her performance is disclosure, not masquerade (Scott 62). At the same time, what we are seeing is an ephemeral image, a construction of eroticism as unreal and intangible as a character in a film. We know this but choose not to believe it. Stripper Heidi Mattson writes: "Nothing was what it appeared. Most of these women took multiple names, matching their multiple personalities. Image, reality, manipulation, fantasy, it was a stew of deception" (Mattson 144).

The locale of the strip joint plays an important role in the effect of the performance, with its implications of the exotic, the freaky, and the lawless. Antagonistic to family values and community standards, the building blocks of culture, the strip bar attracts strange elements and fuels depraved appetites. It transports the viewer not only into fantasy but into the shadow world beyond the pale (Scott 119). Part of the thrill, in the words of Eco, stems from the "shudder of the Bad" (Eco 57). Unsurprisingly, the general public often assumes strippers to be women

of low character, low intelligence, and low moral standards. Strip joints and the strippers themselves are linked to the underbelly of society, where crime, drugs, and prostitution thrive. The viewer's desire for someone designated a social deviant brings up some guilt, but it can also generate some rebellious excitement. The stripper is bad in that colloquial sense that makes her deliciously good (Scott 124, 125).

The stripper is so bad, in fact, that she could never be pinned down in a "real" relationship. After all, it would be impossible to have a relationship with so ephemeral a creation. One can have a relationship with the person, but why would you want to? Out of context, removed from her format, the stripper's gratifying eroticism soon disintegrates. The stage, the lights, the cigarette smoke, the pounding music all combine to elevate and idealize the stripper's human dimensions. Her exotic name and costume, "the bizarre ritual of her strip, her seductive poses and facial expressions, her flamboyant flaunting of feminine indiscretion, and her makeup...all contribute a sense of otherworldliness to her image. The stripper invokes the dream of a 'girl from somewhere else'...the woman who is long on possibilities and maddening to fantasize about" (Scott 118, 119). On stage, something happens. Amidst the lights, smoke, and music, the yawning girl in the front row of *Art History 172* transforms into a sleepy siren, a treacherous sex-selling slut (Mattson 148). Take her off the stage and the illusion disappears.

The stripper's success comes from her ability to perform this illusion, to become and encourage this fantasy. She must appear to expose her (sexual) self, reflecting both crafted femininity and spontaneous eroticism. We don't want the real thing. As Eco argues, we want the sign to abolish the distinction of the reference and replace the thing. A character in Edward Albee's play *The Zoo Story* points out that when you are a kid you use pornographic playing cards as a substitute for the real experience, but when you are older, "you use the real experience as a substitute for the fantasy" (Albee 27). We want the stripper to expose herself as the fantasy. The stripper's performance depends on the implication of distance and inaccessibility. At close range, the stripper ceases to be a strictly visual happening. Less distance means greater intimacy, and intimacy is the least of what this show is about. Intimacy is an image destroyer. It presents a major threat to the integrity of the image (Davis 146). Therefore, regardless of physical proximity, the stripper must always maintain a conceptual distance. She must create tantalizing yet ephemeral characters. She must always remain just out of reach, just out of "real." At its fundamental level, stripping is a theatrical medium. The performer stays unreal by becoming the vamp, the coquette, the rock star, the rodeo queen, the Barbie doll, the Southern belle, the Grecian

goddess, the *femme fatale*, the dominatrix, the virgin bride, the nun—the possibilities are endless. In Venus DeLight's words: "You get to play Miss Dress Up again" (Davis 146). The stage becomes a reflection of the postmodern premise that we are all composites of various identities which we perform based on the specific reality of the moment.

Having established that the stripper's performance and the public's image of it are not synonymous, it appears that what makes it different has less to do with the stripper than with the men. That is, what we understand as the stripper is as much a construction of the male mind as a role played by women. Conceptually, the stripper is a physical manifestation of an idea resident in the minds of men. The best strippers respond to the desires of their audience, concocting personalities and mannerisms with them in mind. They become a feminine ideal in which natural sentience and vitality have been replaced with a monolithic eroticism serving male fantasy (Scott 82, 196). Before her strip scene in the movie *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, Sophia Loren's coach, hired from Le Crazy Horse nightclub in Paris, instructed her in the art of striptease. He emphasized that the stripper's purpose is to appear to be an extension of her viewer's desires. Looking the man in the eyes conveys an air of confidence, self-esteem, and commitment to the effect. It also implies approval for the viewer and his fantasy of her (Scott 143). It is the stripper's job to become what her audience wants and to make them want what she becomes.

Clothing becomes an integral part of this process. Sexy clothing, which *implies* nudity, becomes more erotic than nudity itself. Roland Barthes observes that the striptease is based on a contradiction:

Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked.... It is only the time taken in shedding clothes which makes voyeurs of the public.... There will therefore be in striptease a whole series of coverings placed upon the body of the woman in proportion as she pretends to strip it bare...all aim at establishing the woman right from the start as an object in disguise. The end of the striptease is then no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth, but to signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and artificial clothing, nakedness as a natural vesture of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh. (Barthes 84-85)

The premise of the act is to imply what both the performer and the spectator know will never come—sexual fruition and exposure. A stripper's performance is all a tease. Wearing provocative clothing, or none at all, the stripper tantalizes her audience, implicitly promising a more satisfying degree of intimacy to come, which never arrives (Davis 133). We

want this fantasy, though. We don't want a relationship, or even an honest conversation. We don't want to hear about painful feet or uncomfortable costumes. The second the stripper becomes real, the striptease becomes a job, and the image disappears. A successful striptease must remain a tease. Vicki Funari, a peep show worker, debates why men keep paying for the pretense:

I keep wondering: Why are men willing to put money down for what is so clearly faked? The only answer that seems to work is that the men aren't interested in the truth of the women's experiences. The porn customer's truth is one of paying for services; that's the only power he can claim in this interaction. But is that what gets him hard? His buying power? Why then are we advertised as seductresses and paid to simulate our own desire?... For the man who buys the services of a dominatrix, being "topped" is attractive as long as it's a service. He feels in control of this fictional loss of control because he himself has paid for it. (Funari 26)

Another inherent paradox: the man pays to feel out of control. He controls his domination. To be able to buy is the same thing as being in control, which becomes the same thing as being sexually desirable (Berger 144). The man feels powerful, because the stripper is dancing for him. Because he is paying for the fantasy, he is controlling it, thereby creating the illusion that the fantasy is a response to him.

Most threatening about strippers, more than their supposed low class, stupidity, or superficiality, is their defiance of conventional systems of order. By appearing to be available on a grand scale, strippers symbolize freedom from social control.

Public female nudity, flaunted and enjoyed, cannot help but suggest to more rigorous conformers the seed of something perilous to social order. Its immediate implications are the unfettering of male lust, the contamination of commerce with sex (and vice versa), and the unsettling of family values. The stripper personifies the exotic and dangerous outsider...the woman whose sexual aura creates havoc everywhere she goes. (Scott 134)

As a threatening outsider and social outcast, the stripper demonstrates society's system of deviance-defining. Society, in order to have high art and high culture, must have something that isn't. Diana Crane argues that high culture is frequently associated with specific social contexts which are relatively inaccessible to the average person (Crane 64). High art, by its very definition, must be exclusive in order to differentiate it from the masses. Edwin Schur, professor of sociology at New York

University, continues this argument, observing the importance of deviance-defining on the social system, where the elite become the “norm” and everything else becomes the “other”: Deviance-defining “is now recognized to be central to the maintenance of social structures.... Although economic, legal, and direct political power may sometimes be involved, what is most essentially at stake...is the power or resource of moral standing or acceptability” (Schur 6, 68-69). David Scott further extrapolates this fundamental argument:

The norm sets the boundaries of order, sanity, health, morality, and security. The social order that supports and sustains the power structures also conveys a sense of predictability to its adherents. Conformity to the norm implies a social consensus and establishes the rules for power sharing. Those who cast the stone place themselves in a superior social ranking by virtue of their monopoly on moral uprightness, mental health, dignity, order, and progress. The quickest means of elevating the self is to debase others. To have an in group requires the creation (and maintenance) of an out group. Outsiders serve to underscore the limits of the acceptable to set in relief the zone of privilege. (Scott 132-33)

The outsiders in this case are, of course, the strippers, forced to deal with the stigma of their work:

VENUS DE LIGHT: Burlesque is the toilet of entertainment. Nobody respects it. It doesn't matter if you go out there swallowing swords or spitting fire. All they see is: “Oh! She's stripping! She must have no talent.” They figure you're a social outcast, that you've sold your soul.

LAVA NORTH: A dancer is considered easy, no good, and probably unintelligent. She's just there to be used and abused. (Scott 132-33)

Having attained a feeling of superiority by covering his body, man at an early date began to set standards of behavior regarding the permissible uncovering of his body. Those who live up to these standards in their communities have generally been regarded as superior to those who do not. Most civilizations have achieved superiority by putting on their clothes (Langner 71, 99). A stripper removes hers.

This explains why strippers are assumed to be idiots, and why strip joints are physically exiled to specific areas such as red light districts. They take the hard won gains of civilization to sanctify sexuality with love, flesh with intimacy, biology with poetry, and turn them carnal again (Scott 134). Sex, more than anything else, threatens the precarious structure of social order. Subverting the intellectual rationale of civiliza-

tion, flesh without intimacy antagonizes the carefully outlined boundaries of the “norm.” Sex appeals to the primal and irrational, like the worst of popular culture.

You never talked about sex. It simply wasn’t mentioned. The whole point was to have sex but never to admit to the other one that you’d had it. Even while you were buttoning up your fly, you just didn’t admit it. Nice people simply never talked about it at all. (Al Capp, qtd. in Fleming 39)

In order to maintain social order, erotic and everyday reality must be kept separate, one relegated to the realm of the rational, the other to the realm of the irrational. For this reason, all societies smooth out the temporal flow of everyday life by regulating the occurrence of the erotic episodes which interrupt it. Our society attempts to restrict sexual arousal to the vague temporal ghetto we call “bedtime.” In order to further minimize contact between realities, our society has restricted public sexy settings to clearly circumscribed spatial ghettos (Davis 15, 21). A stripper brings the erotic into the everyday, into the public, into the urban environment. By doing so, she takes it out of the private nighttime realm it has been relegated to by societal convention.

In addition to stigmatizing herself by removing her clothes in a public place, the stripper must struggle with another cultural mental block: the exchange of erotic activity for money. Professional dominatrix Mistress Veronika Frost writes that “sex work is seen as the ultimate bad-girl activity” (Nagle 152). As primal and crude as nudity might be, for many people, selling it leaves strippers in the same league as prostitutes. By exchanging nudity for money, the stripper emphasizes the mingling of erotic and everyday realities. By making sexuality an economic commodity, she blurs the distinction between rational and irrational, between love and money. Stripper Heidi Mattson writes: “I never forgot the point: encourage tips” (Mattson 155). Disturbingly enough, the stripper reminds us that the distinction between entertainment and consumerism has dissolved completely. What is most threatening about the economic situation is that the women are clearly in charge. Money has been substituted for personal relationships, demonstrating that it is all an act, the spontaneity just an illusion. And if it is all act, the men are the suckers and the women go to the bank.

With men the suckers, and women pocketing the cash, the striptease becomes a reversal of society’s conventional male/female roles. Striptease is, at its core, a form of role removal.

Since most social roles are permanently woven into the clothing worn to play them, whoever undresses casts off these other, sexually irrelevant, social roles—paring himself or herself down to his or her gender role alone. The movement of one's consciousness into erotic reality, then, parallels the increasing revelation of the essential self of one's sex partner.... It is not surprising, therefore, that a society which invests social roles with great significance will discourage disrobing. (Davis 56)

Adam and Eve were the first to realize that their world was divided into two realms, a "good" everyday realm and an "evil" erotic realm, and that they had to suppress the latter as much as possible by concealing the physical features that generated it, in part by means of clothing (Davis 166). With her unapologetic nakedness, the stripper defies this division. The differentiation in clothing between men and women arose from the male's desire to assert superiority over the female and to hold her to his service. This he accomplished through the ages by means of special clothing which hampered or handicapped the female in her movements (Langner 51). By removing her clothes, the stripper disrupts years of patriarchal hegemony.

By aggressively subverting this societal convention, the stripper takes on masculine attributes and defies feminine passivity. First of all, she brings up emotions that cannot be freely expressed in public without garnering social disapproval. Sexual desire clashes with civilized self-control. Strippers further reverse the rules of the game by exalting the role of the woman in the rite of seduction, while forbidding the role of the man. On one hand, the woman is the object and the man is the possessor. All the action is toward the woman: man talks, woman listens; man gives, woman receives; woman attracts, man approaches. She is both sex goddess and feminine coquette. However, the viewer is not free to pursue his desire for the stripper. She is literally and figuratively out of his reach. By simultaneously resolving and re-invoking man's primeval fears about woman's ambivalence and her power over him, she tears him apart (Scott 52, 124). Strip joints provide one of the few outlets in which women exercise unchallenged command over their bodies. Women freely express their sexuality in an environment that upholds their authority over it. Beneath much of the rhetoric against topless bars lies a fear of women realizing their sexuality while simultaneously holding complete control of it. Stripping and modeling are among the only legal female-dominated careers in which women earn as much as men who work in more traditional, respected professions (Reed 183, 184).

Contemporary culture's stigmatization of sexual pleasure for its own sake further condemns the striptease. Charles H. Keating, Jr., who served

on the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography during the Reagan administration, advocates censorship and argues that “any form of sexual activity which is impersonal, which uses the body alone for pleasure, violates the integrity of the person and thereby reduces him to the level of an irrational and irresponsible animal” (Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography 516). Keating’s breed of legal moralism operates on the principle that pleasure is wrong and that we should experience it only accidentally in the pursuit of higher ends (Reed 182). Stripping, just like sex without the goal of reproduction, is immoral and fundamentally wrong. Unless there is a practical purpose, a rational function, sexual activity cannot be condoned.

Despite whatever uncertainty as to the merit of her performance, there is no question that the stripper is a performer, but is she an artist? Does her status as a social outsider link her to the subversive aspects of the aesthetic or guarantee her exile from anything of the sort? Where does she fit in the high versus popular culture debate? Most strippers are convinced of the performance aspects of their work. In order to be successful, they know a stripper has to be more than just a pretty face:

HEIDI: I had thought that the business was wholly sensual: the music, lights, costumes, and movement. But a conventionally gorgeous woman who has nothing to say will fare about as well as one who can’t dance. (Mattson 35)

GIO: I regard what I do as performing and as theater.... As a creative expression it has given me so much freedom to enjoy the performing aspect of it. What I’m doing is creating a fantasy up there. I want them to fantasize that I’m obviously the best woman that they could possibly have in bed. (Scott 123)

DEBI: It takes practice and talent to be able to pull off an entertaining and truly erotic performance. To create good art, an artist must have a sophisticated and sensitive knowledge of her subject. (Sundahl 177)

This brings up the fundamental issue: what constitutes art? Postmodernism thrives on emphasizing the indefinite, malleable aspects of the term, determined to thoroughly confuse the ambiguous definitions between art and life.

According to Pierre Bourdieu, the difference lies in the intention: “the demarcation line between the world of technical objects and the world of aesthetic objects depends on the ‘intention’ of the producer of those objects...the pure intention of artistic research [must be] an end in itself” (Bourdieu 174). At the same time, Charles Keating condemns any form of sexual activity whose purpose is pleasure for pleasure’s sake.

According to Kant, however, the highest intention is pleasure for pleasure's sake. Only with that intention can one achieve an aesthetic experience. Any other intention denies the aesthetic. Bourdieu goes on to argue that because "the image is always judged by reference to the function it fulfills for the person who looks at it...aesthetic judgment naturally takes the form of a hypothetical judgment implicitly based on recognition of 'genres,' and the perfection and scope of which are defined by a concept" (Bourdieu 184). Therefore, the judgment of whether or not the striptease is art lies with the beholder. The viewer/performer relationship becomes so interwoven that the striptease becomes aesthetic as a result of the audience's response, as a result of what they are looking for. The stripper splits into the "lived" body of the self and the "object" body seen by the other (Williams 107, 112). When you empathize with the dancer, with the "lived" body, the relationship becomes about more than just money for genitalia. In that case, it becomes about an aesthetic experience, about an appreciation of the performance, about an appreciation of the creation of the "object" body. However, when all you notice is the "object" body, without any understanding of the "lived" body creating it, then the striptease becomes little more than an economic transaction, where dollars equal sexual exposure. Men pay to see the image of the stripper as commodity (Dolan 65). Only when you are detached from economic and sexual necessity can the striptease become art.

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