

Striptease

SUSAN M. BLOCK

The Dr. Susan Block Institute for the Erotic Arts & Sciences, Los Angeles, United States

Striptease is an erotic dance in which a clothed performer gradually disrobes until he or she is partially or totally nude. It is a powerful aphrodisiac, revealing the natural mysteries of the human body in a suspenseful and viscerally exciting way. The National Health and Social Life Survey, a landmark 1992 University of Chicago study, found that the second most commonly desired sex practice, after vaginal intercourse, was watching someone attractive *take off their clothes* (Laumann 1992). Combined with the “poetry in motion” of dance, the act of removing garments becomes even more sexual. But some say that any kind of dance is erotic. George Bernard Shaw, for instance, famously called dancing “a vertical expression of a horizontal desire.”

A striptease may be presented or viewed by men, women, or transgenders; but most commonly the male watches the female. Glamorized and stigmatized, the striptease captures human civilization’s ambivalence about sexuality, the female body, and the male gaze.

History

Erotic dance is older than recorded history. People seem to have been dancing since shortly after they started walking, and some of their first dances were probably erotic. Though some anthropologists say that early prehistoric dances served to galvanize tribes for war, others who are more sociobiologically oriented posit an earlier function: to seduce lovers through the display of sexual “fitness,” like the peacock’s swish of its tail before the peahen. With the advent of agriculture, the hunter-gatherers’ courtship displays turned into “fertility dances.” These were more civic-minded exhibitions, usually performed by groups

of males or females, but still erotic at a personal level. There were dances to make the rains drench the farmland along with the women’s genitalia, and dances to make the crops grow along with the men’s erections.

For most of our prehistory, *Homo sapiens* was as naked as all other animals. As we started to cover our bodies with animal skins and foliage, at some unknown point in time human nudity turned taboo. *Un-clothing*—stripping—became the teasing “gateway” between the civilized, clothed world and the naked realm of primeval pleasures tacitly forbidden in everyday life.

In mythology striptease has been both sacred and profane, performed by the most revered goddesses and the most despised demons. One of humanity’s oldest myths, the ancient Sumerian story of Inanna’s descent into the Underworld, features a sacred striptease. At each of seven gates, the goddess strips off an article of clothing or jewelry until her naked arrival in Hell: a suspenseful journey that ultimately enhances her power. Inanna’s sacred striptease turns diabolically profane in the Biblical Salome’s notorious Dance of the Seven Veils. Although the New Testament mentions her iconic performance in Matthew 14: 6 and in Mark 6:21–22, the first modern references to seven veils occur in Oscar Wilde’s 1893 play *Salome* and in Richard Strauss’ operatic adaptation of 1905, which some consider to be the origin of modern striptease (Bentley 2002). But strippers worked their magic and plied their trade long before Wilde’s King Herod implored his sultry stepdaughter: “Dance for me, Salomé, I beseech you. If you dance for me, you may ask of me what you will, and I will give it you, even unto the half of my kingdom.” Though few could earn half a kingdom in one striptease, many have made a decent living through the art of erotic dance.

More evidence of the profession occurs in 600 B.C.E., when the Athenian statesman Solon established several legal classes of prostitution. These included the *aulētrides*, “flute girls”: female *aulos* (flute) players, dancers, and acrobats who

often stripped for all-male dinner parties in private homes (Basserman 1968). As evidenced in their art, the Greeks revered the healthy naked body as heroic. The Romans preferred its erotic implications: April's Floralia festival, honoring the goddess of flowers and fertility, featured striptease and nude dance.

The sixth-century C.E. Byzantine Empress Theodora began as a courtesan and actress who stripped while dramatizing the myth of Leda and the swan before marrying her best client, Christian Emperor Justinian. By the seventh century the church had banned such practices, condemning stripping, all forms of public nudity, and the very value of the body—at least for the common folk.

Private erotic performances for the wealthy and powerful were a different story, even within the Vatican itself—as this often reprinted account of stripping at the private court of Pope Alexander VI by his master of ceremonies Burchard, Bishop of Ostia, reveals: “50 reputable courtesans supped at the Vatican ... and after supper they danced about with the servants and others in that place, first in their clothes and then nude” (quoted in Wallace et al. 1981:436).

The Renaissance uncovered the classical nude. Victorians, however, were fastidiously covering their table legs, while Parisians of *la belle époque* started showing off their legs, and even their genitalia, in a new dance called can-can. Meanwhile French colonists in North Africa discovered the “dance of the bee,” in which the dancer disrobed while pretending to look for a bee caught in her clothing. This ghawazee or “Gypsy” striptease migrated to Paris in the Gay Nineties and, combined with burlesque (humorous, bawdy, theatrical presentations), flourished at the Moulin Rouge and Folies Bergère. In 1905 the Dutch dancer Mata Hari, later shot as a spy during World War I, was a striptease sensation at the Musée Guimet.

In the Roaring Twenties an American in Paris, Josephine Baker, stripped to nothing but a “skirt” of bananas in her breathtaking *danse sauvage*. In the States, a nearly naked and often arrested Sally Rand teased her audience—and the police—from behind ostrich feather fans and bubbles. In the 1930s and 1940s the witty Gypsy Rose Lee, star of Minsky's burlesque, showed how intelligence could enhance the image of striptease, and that “anything worth doing is worth doing slowly” (Shalit 2003:

46). In response to Lee's request for a “more dignified” way to refer to her profession than “stripper,” H. L. Mencken coined “ecdysiast,” from the Greek noun *ekdusis* (meaning “stripping off” and “molting,” but mainly “escape, shunning, loss”).

Striptease artists of the 1950s, including Bettie Page, Lili St. Cyr, Tempest Storm, and Blaze Starr, began “molting” in more elaborate ways; Starr even had a trained panther remove her clothes with its teeth. With the sexual revolution of the 1960s, burlesque striptease gave way to “go-go dancing,” starting at Sunset Strip's Whiskey a Go Go, with dancers shaking wildly in miniskirts to rock 'n' roll. Carol Doda of San Francisco's Condor Night Club is credited with being the first topless—then bottomless—go-go girl. As go-go began to “take it all off,” modern stripping was born.

Modern stripping

The old striptease often ended when the performer was nude, if complete nakedness even occurred. But for strippers from the 1970s onward, undressing became just a gateway to the nude or nearly nude world of “exotic dancing,” which today encompasses pole dancing, table dancing, lap dancing, and full display of the body as far as local laws allow. Purists believe that, for this reason, stripping has lost its tease. Others say that, as long as no sexual intercourse occurs, the tease remains and in some ways is heightened. Indeed modern strippers sell the fantasy of sex—sometimes earning more than high-class call girls—without following through. If they break this rule—as some strippers do—then they essentially exit the profession of stripping, entering the realm of prostitution. In traditional stripping, there is no sexual intercourse. The customer either doesn't climax or does so in his pants.

Like sex workers of all kinds, the most successful strippers also understand how to market the illusion of emotional intimacy in addition to offering others the opportunity to gaze upon their nakedness without shame. Between some strippers and regular customers, this feeling of connectedness might be genuine. Regardless, it's just as important to the stripper “package” as is beauty or dance ability.

All the way from lavish “gentlemen's clubs” to cheap topless bars, stripping has become

a multibillion dollar industry worldwide. The strippers, aka “adult entertainers,” might be famous millionaire porn stars or single moms trying to earn their rent. Many women willing and able to exploit what Dr. Catherine Hakim (2011) calls their “erotic capital” find stripping to be a relatively easy, enjoyable way to make money, at least at first. Money is often the stated motivation for getting into stripping; but ego gratification is also a factor. On stage, the stripper becomes the center of a small galaxy, a star among gazers. Where else can an average woman get such adoration—plus tips?

Most customers are men, although couples, single women, and female–female duos are increasingly patronizing strip clubs. The great majority of strippers are women, including trans-women; and there are some notable examples of male strippers, like those who perform in gay clubs, and of Chippendales-type dancers who entertain all-female groups such as bachelorette parties. Female strippers may also perform for bachelor parties, private groups, and individuals, but most of them work in one of the thousands of strip clubs around the world. While stripping has become more commercial and focused on nudity, “neo-burlesque” striptease artists like Dita Von Teese have branched off into a separate, theatrical, humor-infused dance form, reviving old burlesque striptease traditions with new twists.

Opposition to striptease

Striptease is performed and enjoyed by many as a stimulating expression of seduction. Yet it has been plagued by controversy since it began. Though the profession has made recent gains in social acceptability from Bangkok to Las Vegas, it still generates controversy and condemnation from various quarters, including religious conservatives and radical feminists.

With globalization, societies around the world are deeply divided about stripping and strip clubs, as they are about all sex work. Even as many find economic and personal fulfillment in stripping, many others denounce it as corrupting, shallow, and exploitative—of the performers and of the customers. In 2010, for example, Iceland outlawed striptease shows and strip clubs. Johanna Sigurðardóttir, Iceland’s prime minister, said:

“The Nordic countries are leading the way on women’s equality, recognizing women as equal citizens rather than commodities for sale” (Bindel 2010). But many have criticized the law. Tracy Clark-Flory (2010) called it “dogmatic” and the opposite of feminism, as it discriminates against and penalizes women who wish to work—that is, sell their bodies and skills—as strippers. In any case, banning strip clubs in Iceland may not do much to combat the increasing global popularity of striptease, especially with the rise of the Internet.

Striptease on the Internet

Striptease has gone digital. Not only can you see videos of millions of strippers of all kinds from every culture, you can watch your own “private dancer” live on webcam on your laptop or phone. In the modern age the line blurs between stripper, porn star (who often performs in strip clubs), and webcam girl. Performing via webcam, the stripper doesn’t even have to dance; she can just lie on her bed, remove her clothing, and seduce her audience (of one, or of one thousand) into giving her money, attention, and adoration. And, of course, she can do much more than is permitted in a club. But, since performer and viewer can’t have sex with each other or even touch, the tease of striptease still exists.

SEE ALSO: Beauty or Physical Attractiveness; Desire, Sexual; Fantasy, Sexual; Feminism; Human Sexual Response: Cultural Perspectives; Seduction; Sex Work; Voyeurism

REFERENCES

-
- Basserman, Lujo. 1968. *The Oldest Profession: A History of Prostitution*. New York: Stein and Day.
- Bentley, Toni. 2002. *Sisters of Salome*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Bindel, Julie. 2010. “Iceland’s Parliament Bans Strip Clubs.” *The Guardian*, March 31. Accessed August 23, 2014. <http://iskconnews.org/icelands-parliament-bans-strip-clubs,1767/>
- Clark-Flory, Tracy. 2010. “Iceland’s Stripping Ban: Does the Country’s Move to Shut down Strip Clubs Really Make It the Most ‘Female-Friendly on the Planet?’” *Salon.com*, March 26. Accessed August 23, 2014. http://www.salon.com/2010/03/26/iceland_bans_stripping_strip_clubs/

- Hakim, Catherine. 2011. *Erotic Capital: The Power of Attraction in the Boardroom and the Bedroom*. New York: Basic Books.
- Laumann, Edward O. 1992. "National Health and Social Life Survey." The National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. Accessed August 23, 2014. <http://popcenter.uchicago.edu/data/nhsls.shtml>
- Shalit, Gene. 2003. *Great Hollywood Wit: A Glorious Cavalcade of Hollywood Wisecracks, Zingers, Japes, Quips, Slings, Jest, Snappers, and Sass from the Stars*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin.
- Wallace, Irving, Amy Wallace, David Wallechinsky, and Sylvia Wallace. 1981. *The Intimate Sex Lives of Famous People*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- "Exotic Dancers: Gender Differences in Societal Reaction, Subcultural Ties, and Conventional Support." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, 10(1): 1–11.
- Fowler, Ruth. 2008. *Girl, Undressed: On Stripping in New York City*. New York: Penguin.
- Frank, Katherine. 2002. *G-strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Monchalian, Lisa. 2006. "Motivations of Professional Strippers." Paper 2 in Master's Theses and Doctoral Dissertations, Eastern Michigan University, MI.

FURTHER READINGS

- Bernard, Constance, Christen DeGabrielle, Lynette Cartier, Elizabeth Monk-Turner, Celestine Phill, Jennifer Sherwood, and Thomasena Tyree. 2003.