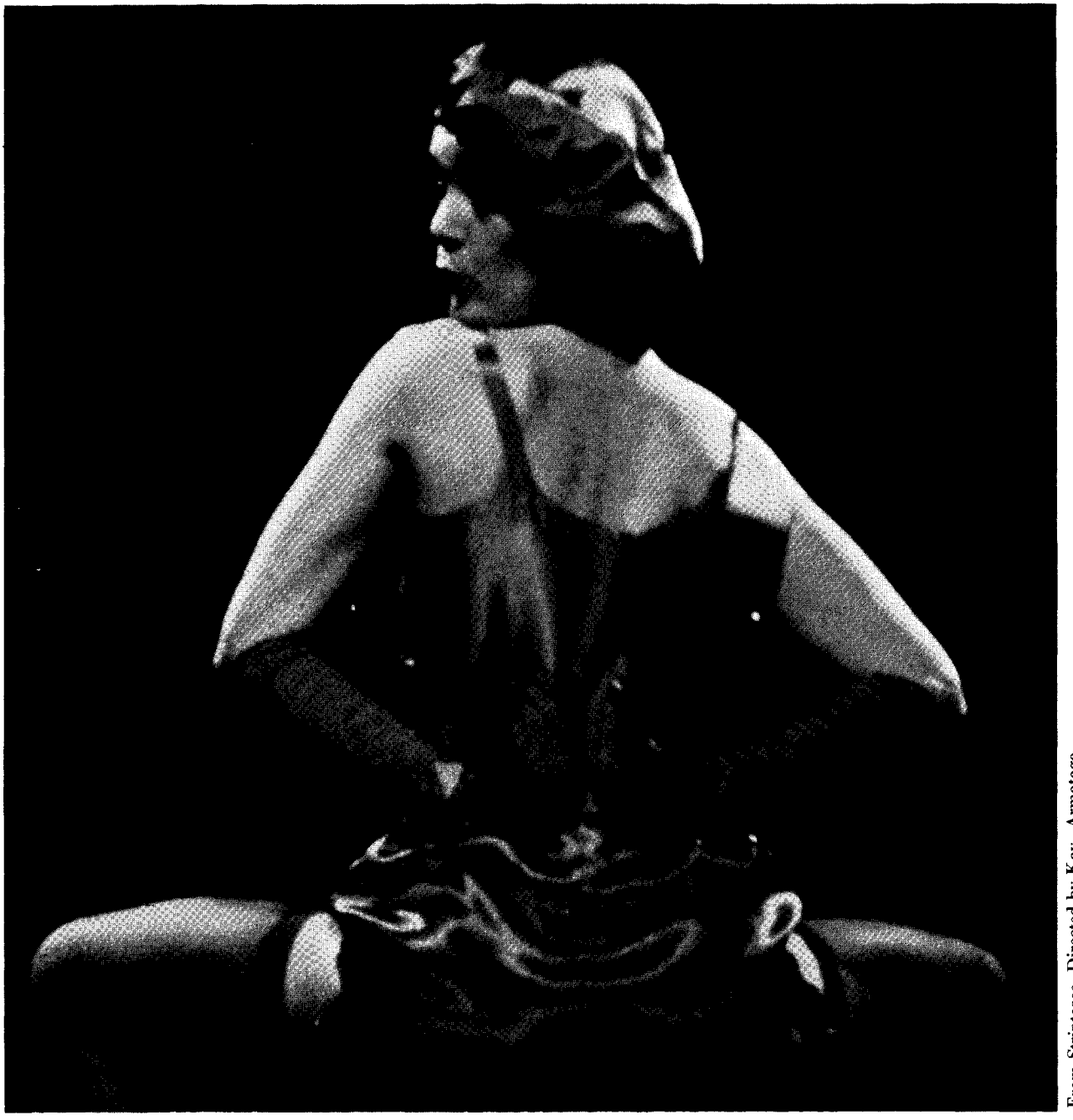

From *Striptease*, Directed by Kay Armatage

Striptease: Work, Performance, Sexuality

Kay Armatage

La stripteaseuse est une travailleuse qui gagne son salaire comme toute autre femme. Mais, comment peut-on parler de spectacle artistique lorsqu'il s'agit plutôt d'étalage sexuel, indicatif de la façon dont notre société, dominée par l'homme, se sert de la femme et fait d'elle un objet de consommation.

In the summer of 1980, I directed a documentary film about striptease. What follows is a discussion of some of the issues that interested me in the subject (although they do not necessarily appear as issues in the film).

If I had thought about striptease at all, I suppose that, until I started to research the film, I had thought about it in fairly stereotypical ways. It was a pretty sleazy job, to my mind, on the border of prostitution or pornography, another facet of the ubiquitous industry based on the exploitation of women's sexuality. I was right so far. But I also imagined that striptease was probably carried on by degraded, lost, thoughtless, damaged women who could, or would, find no other means of employment. In my (naïve and complacent) feelings of sisterhood, I also generously allowed that the women who did it probably hated their work.

That was the depth of my analysis, largely based on a characterization of striptease as primarily sexual and as exploitative of women's sexuality.

As soon as I began to meet the dancers, however, I had to revise my notions about what sorts of women they were. And when I began to see things from their highly articulate and thoughtful points of view, my view of striptease also had to change radically. It became evident, paradoxical as it may seem, that sexuality was not the primary issue. Rather, that the characteristics of striptease as a profession involving, indeed largely based on, sexuality had to be discussed first in terms of work and performance in order to create a context for any analysis of its sexuality.

I: Work

It became apparent that striptease had significant factors in common with those other universal professions for women that are based on sexuality or sexual exchange: Prostitution; Housewifery and its sub-category Motherhood; and a third which, although not based on sexual exchange, certainly traditionally involves such exploitation, Domestic work.

As a working class and lower middle class women's profession, striptease arose on a mass level in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, at the same time as mass recruitment of women to the typewriter, the telephone and the factories. Although numbers increased dramatically after the Industrial Revolution, the other two professions open to women of that economic and educational stratum had existed for centuries before: domestic work and prostitution.

Striptease is also one of the oldest professions for women, dating back at least to biblical times with Salome, and it has much in common with those other ancient professions for women.

First, it is seen as work that comes 'naturally' to women, a simple extension of women's traditional sexual and social function. As such, it requires no special training, although workers in those fields may become highly skilled, even renowned (the courtesan who becomes mistress to kings, the cook who is coveted by every chatelaine).

Second, almost as a corollary to the first, it is work that is seen as *not work*, and this factor is held in common with the other traditional professions for women: housewife and mother. In many ways this is the most significant factor, colouring society's view not only of the work, but of the worker as well. It is assumed that since it is not really work, some other motivation besides employment must underlie the activity: love or duty in the case of housewife and mother; exhibitionism or wantonness in the case of strippers. Such assumptions open the way to gross exploitation of the women in these jobs.

Third, like the work of domestics and prostitutes, as well as housewives and mothers, there is the possibility in the profession of relative independence. There is little or no job supervision and one can work to one's own time, talents and desires. The work is also done on an individual basis, rather than as part of a large group as in a factory or typing pool.

However, in common with those other women's professions, such as factory work, clerical work or waitressing, are the following characteristics: the work is paid very badly. With the odd exception, in fact the average income of women in those three professions is about the same. Also, the working conditions are horrible. Both the bosses and the clients are usually men and the women workers are subject to sexual harassment both in the workplace and outside. The work is seen by both workers and the rest of society as low status and undesirable work, though necessary, and it is therefore seen by the workers in those jobs not as professions or careers, but as part-time, temporary, stop-gap or supplementary work.

These factors, and particularly the latter ones, make striptease, like other women's professions, very difficult to organize. It is only in the late 20th century that secretaries have become organized into collective bargaining units: banktellers, domestics and

prostitutes have tried and, so far, have failed; and in Toronto the strippers' union (the Canadian Association of Burlesque Entertainers) is just struggling to its feet. There are historically well-known factors which make women's professions hard to organize: the work is not seen as a profession (as above), the workers are isolated from each other often in paternalistic relationships with a boss who 'takes care of them' (whether husband, pimp or more traditional employer) and finally women's traditional socialization makes them less aggressive than men about acknowledging that they have rights, let alone demanding them.

In addition to these factors, there are others which make striptease hard to organize as a collective bargaining unit. If successful, the worker has made it alone and in competition with others and thus she doesn't see the need for solidarity or collective bargaining. More usually the cause is that the workers see it as a transient profession: many enter it for a short time and find it doesn't suit them, or they move on to a more lucrative profession (eg. prostitution). Even if the workers are not *actually* transient, they often see themselves as such; they are always just about to quit and go back to school, get into modelling, get married or whatever. This is another form of not seeing the job as a career and has to do also with the nature of the profession and the social stigma attached to it. The strippers don't want to admit that they do it; they don't want to identify themselves with the job or with other strippers. Finally, even if the women identify themselves as career strippers (as many do), another factor enters: like university professors, they want to ally themselves with another class besides *workers* (traditionally union members); they see themselves as entertainers, performers, successful for their individual talents and contracts therefore to be negotiated individually and on individual merits.

This last brings us to the nature of the work as performance art.

II: Mode of Performance

As a performance mode, striptease has several distinctive and significant characteristics.

It is highly formalized, like ballet or the other classical arts. It is done in a limited time (usually about 13 to 15 minutes) and must include certain traditional elements. It must have at least three different moods corresponding to three basic 'movements'. The Parade includes the classic strut which shows off the costume and clothed physique, possibly some superficial clothing action such as glove or boa and some dance elements. The Tease moves on to the removal of clothing. The classic form includes garters and stockings, possibly a corset, certainly a bra, and various layers of skirts, gowns, etc. The last is the Floor Show, which is *de rigueur* for some portion of the third mood. Props may include a rug or a bench, and actions usually include splits, gymnastics and contortions, as well as the traditional bumps and grinds. The object of the last portion of the strip is frankly sexual: the simulation of sexual intercourse, the display of the women's genitals, or both. I'll return to this later.

Another distinctive characteristic of striptease as a performance mode is that it is performed alone. Unlike actors who have ensembles to work with, or singers or other kinds of dancers who are accompanied by musicians, strippers are completely alone onstage, the music provided by tapes or a jukebox. The only other common kind of performer who habitually works alone is the stand-up comic, in many ways, the male equivalent of the stripper.

Like the stand-up comic, the stripper must be creative in a multi-faceted way: each is his/her own writer, director, stage and costume designer, choreographer, stage manager. They take care of their own props, wardrobes, make up, hairdos. Most of the strippers actually sew their own costumes, doing all the sequin and bead-work by hand. And like stand-up comics, the good ones have highly developed characterizations. Stand-up comics also work largely in smoky awful bars and have to face drunkenly aggressive and sometimes hostile audiences.

However, the elements which distinguish strippers from stand-up comics are instructive in their stereotypicality. The comic can break out of the bar circuit if he becomes famous: Steve Martin and Chevy Chase make more per year than the average secretary. But even the famous strippers like Chesty Morgan and Tempest Storm continue to perform in bars — never the Palladium.

More significantly, the comic works with his mind and speaks on all manner of topics usually stemming from subjective experience. The stripper, on the other hand, works with her body, doesn't speak and completely effaces her subjectivity. Many strippers lip-synch the lyrics of the music to which they're dancing but, to me, this only emphasizes their actual silence. And one stripper told me that she considers lip-synching thoroughly unprofessional, for it is evidence of a private experience when the illusion should be one of total accessibility to the audience; i.e., no subjective mind allowed.

Moreover, unlike the stand-up comic, the stripper as a performer presents a pure spectacle; she is not expected to look back at the audience, or to address them in any direct way. She is, in the most extreme sense, objectified. That is the nature of the art.

Thus, the stripper represents, *in extremis*, woman's traditional and still enforced social position, characterized by isolation, silence and sexual objectification. And this is what defines the performer-audience relation and colours, therefore, the eroticism of the performance.

III: Sexuality

When the audience is looking, what are they looking at? What does the action of looking mean anyway?

These two questions are inextricably entwined and they are central to definitions of the sexuality of the art.

To take pleasure in looking without being looked at (in striptease, the defining characteristic of the audience/performer relation) is the definition of voyeurism. That may not seem startling or even important at first glance. At a recent screening of the film *STRIPTEASE*, a man in the audience asked provocatively, 'Voyeurism? Is that all?'

Well yes, that's about it, but that's a lot.

Voyeurism, in psychoanalytic theory, is irrevocably bound up with sadism on the one hand and with the fear of castration on the other. The combination is lethal — for women. The fear of castration is engendered by the sight of the woman's genitals, which are interpreted as already-castrated, a bleeding wound. But the threat of castration must be allayed and this is accomplished (as Simone de Beauvoir, among other feminists, pointed out) by the sadistic subjugation of woman. The woman is reduced to fetish, object, Other; the man asserts himself as Subject through his dominion over her. The violence is not merely philosophical or psychological — horrendous as that may be — but it is a brutal and physical, though perhaps unconscious, slavery. It is accomplished through the operation of the oedipal complex: the son's identification with the father/patriarch and his subjugation/possession of the mother.

So when the audience is looking, they are looking at not just any spectacle, but at THE spectacle, the female genitals which are the evidence of castration and of the necessity for man's sadistic self-assertion. The foundation of the patriarchy is re-enacted and reproduced with each performance of striptease. The sexuality of striptease is therefore essentially pornographic in its continued violence to women.

But is that inevitable? Is that all?

There is an argument to be made — and it is made by one of the strippers in the film, a woman who considers herself to be a feminist activist — that the above argument only pertains because women's genitals have been hidden, secret, taboo, suppressed. She asserts the beauty and normalcy of the vulva in opposition to that argument.

We accept, in fact rejoice in, the male genitals. Not that male frontal nudity greets you at every turn, but it is virtually a cliché, greeted with an accepting or even fond chuckle, that the culture abounds in phallic symbols of monumental proportions. There are few people past the age of adolescence who would not have some rueful self-awareness of the significance of his/her admiration or distaste for a skyscraper, say, or the shape of a long-necked bottle, or the power of a dock-side crane.

Yet such delight in, or even awareness of, our pleasure in symbolic representations of the vulva are strenuously repressed. How many cultured and sophisticated adults would be aware of such a source of pleasure in the highly-polished, lusciously pink-mouthed, inwardly coiling conch shell displayed on the coffee table? D.H. Lawrence has made the fresh fig a cliché but otherwise, as a culture, we are remarkably unaware of our attraction to symbolic representations of female genitals, or of the beauty of the vulva itself.

One feminist stripper says that her performances rebuke the traditional horror of the vulva as dirty, smelly, ugly, a bleeding wound to be hidden, repressed. She asserts that woman is complete and powerful in her multiplicity and wholeness, rather than characterized by any 'lack' of the phallus (as psychoanalysis would have us). She wishes the audience to confront its fears of the female genitals ('it's a fear of the female power of birthing', she says, 'that makes them project such sadistic hostility onto the woman body'.) and she is confident that the pornographic fascination will die once the body, the whole body, has been seen and accepted.

Her argument is acceptable, to my mind, only up to a point. Her revolutionary task is blighted by the context in which the woman body is presented: in sleazy strip joints which degrade both audience and performer and by the audience/performer relation which seems to be in the nature of the performance. Silence, isolation, spectacle for the women; voyeurism — sadism and fear, shame and hostility — for the audience.

Thus the working conditions, the social and personal attitudes towards the work, the nature of the performance, and the performer/audience relation provide the context for a consideration of the erotic character of striptease. The sexuality is over-determined by material conditions, making a progressive reading virtually untenable.

In the film, I attempted to remove the art and the sexuality from their normal environment, so that the film audience could begin to experience their beauty. At the same time, I tried to place that experience in a new context of self-interrogation: a confrontation of the film audience with its own voyeuristic desires. And I think that the film works in those ways.

But in real life, in the strip joints and in the bars, the patriarchal beat goes on. ◔

STRIPTEASE

directed by Kay Armatage
16mm., colour, 24 min., 1980
Available for rental or purchase from:
Lauron Productions, 91 Scollard St., Toronto, 967-6503.