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# Las Vegas Striptease Spectacles: Organization Power over the Body

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I contrast Barthes' and Debord's theories of striptease and spectacle by tracing the alternative "striptease" narrative in several competing texts in cyberspace and in novels. I look at how the striptease becomes narrated as part of the Las Vegas spectacle, legitimating commerce and consumption, but also a rags-to-riches storyline. I begin by analyzing the possession of the body by commerce and consumption, and end by suggesting that strippers cross the boundary between life on the "Strip" and in community.

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Las Vegas is the belly of a beast, a thriving sex industry of patriarchal logic that is under-researched by those of us in the ivory tower. Yet stripping is big business, with over 3.5 million people, primarily men, attending clubs each week and millions more taking in the Big Casino Resort Shows, escort services, and legalized prostitution (Scott, 1996). Beneath the glittery spectacle of Las Vegas show life is the production and consumption management of the woman's body as the site of discipline of sex industry power. Las Vegas is the center of a sex-soaked patriarchal world of lap dancing, strip clubs, swingers and gentlemen's clubs, and big casino topless showgirl revues. This industry as lore has it migrated from the Paris revues. Resort casinos such as Paris offer "Notre Dame de Paris," a 21st Century pop/rock adaptation of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" described as "one of the most successful musical spectacles in France." The spectacle imitation of Paris, like New York, Egypt, and Rome in Las Vegas is touted as better than the original. But the female workers in this imitation pay a dear price, a loss of human subjectivity in favor of the body as object.

The value of studying sex industry texts is to expose the narratively constructed body of its workers. According to Benjamin (1997), Las Vegas strippers of Cheetah's Lounge, Crazy Horse Too, Crazy Horse Saloon, What's Up Lounge, Olympic Gardens, Little Darlings of Las Vegas and the Girls of Glitter Gulch have filed class action lawsuits. The women's labor claim is the clubs where they work violate Nevada law by refusing to pay them minimum wage and forcing them to share their tip-earnings with club owners. At the Tally-Ho Club, a dancer reports, «Aside from the outrageous fees the dancers get charged, the

club is falling apart. With all the money the club takes from the girls you'd think they'd add some features to the club to make it more enticing for the customers as well as the dancers (...) Take it from a 22 year old dancer who knows!!!» (Raven, 1999). Workers are also not being allowed to leave the club during their shifts, which violates their status as independent contractors. «Topless dancers, the lawsuit states, have the same job requirements and employer demands as a normal employee, yet work for tips only, and those must be shared with the management» (Gang, 1997). And there is more going on than wage cheating.

My research question is within competing texts of striptease dancer (called lap dancers in the trade) and showgirl body and spectacle. How are narrative claims formulated, legitimated, and performed? There is a rags-to-riches story told by big business to attract labor, the same one told in the movie *Show Girls*, and before that *Gypsy*. This rags-to-riches story is also retold in books written by former strippers (Lewin, 1984; Dragu and Harrison, 1989; Futterman, 1992; Mattson, 1995; Shepard, 1996). The books, in particular, run counter to stereotypes of sex industry work as inherently degrading and exploitative. The myth of easy money is a lure to attract women into the sex industry. Mattson (1995) for example, wrote about paying her Brown University \$22,000 per year tuition by doing work as a part-time topless stripper. Other strippers have written reviews of books about stripping and argue that little of the bitter truth of the stripper's profession comes out and the years of being paraded as objects have leached strippers lives of any glamorous identity or subjectivity. As one dancer-reviewer points out, Heidi Mattson may be the one in a million exception that proves the rule:

«I'm a dancer in Dallas, and things are very different. Dancing is a full contact sport. Guys expect quite a lot for their twenty bucks and four minutes. Her strong sense of identity, loving family and the oodles of self-esteem are highly unusual among myself and the girls I know. This was a nice look at the industry, told by a nice girl. In reality, few of us can withstand night after night of honest contact with lots of men and still be chipper and happy with the world at large the next morning. Still, her book was groundbreaking, told truthfully and gave a great role model in terms of self-respect. She achieved a personal triumph, no matter what the arena» (Anonymous, 2000).

«As a college graduate, I know how difficult it is to finance a four year degree. Unlike Heidi, I financed mine by working two part-time jobs while attending school. I read this book and have to admit I found her story somewhat interesting, but overall the book was not really worth reading. I have several friends who work as exotic dancer and they don't describe it at all like Heidi does. Besides, Heidi comes across as if she's the only good girl in the industry. For a good realistic book on strippers I recommend *The Naked Eye*, that's a great inspirational story» (Jones, 2001).

Web texts by striptease performers narrate themselves as alienated spect-actors, viewing the spectacle of their sex work as alienated realities and sometimes questioning the role model being handed them. At

Cheetah's one dancer reports: «These guys also have to understand that as entertainers we pay a fee to the house to work every night and cheaper dances can cut our money in half, or make us have to work twice as long to make what we would make working someplace else.» (Anonymous, 2001a). When individual's entire work life is reduced to body-object spectacle, I assume there is damage to self-respect and self-esteem. Further the stripping and showgirl spectacles stage male power by "stripping" away and commodifying any veil between public and private sexuality. The spectacle holds up the image of the token female who is successful in making the transition from laptop dancer to showgirl or to Brown University graduate, while the majority live different careers.

Mine is a deconstructive feminist reading of Strip and Show Spectacles, tracing the disempowering aspects of careers of marginalized young women (you don't strip much after 30) in a sex industry reproducing male power in control of the female body. The National Organization of Women (NOW) held their 1997 national convention at Bally's. NOW according to Minor (1996) staged protests or letter writing campaigns targeting violence against women on the strip, billboards for a major hotel that show women in g-strings, billboards for a beeper vendor that show a woman straddling a beeper and a hotel show that had a gratuitous rape scene. NOW passed resolutions calling for union organizing and health and other protections for sex workers (Minor, 1996). Brents, a UNLV Sociology Professor says hotel owners benefit from Las Vegas' image of «sex being freely available» at the same time they attempt publicly to distance themselves from the sex industries (as cited in Patton, 1997). Brents and Hausbeck (also a sociology professor) taught "Sociology of the Sex Industry" in 1997 but had to deal with what males found inappropriate about researching and teaching the unglamorous side of spectacle. «We're always asked, "So are you doing this research because you used to work in the industry?"» Hausbeck said. «There's this real voyeuristic need to associate us there.» (Patton, 1997).

Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1972) describes striptease as a spectacle. I seek to relate Barthes' use of spectacle to Guy Debord's (1967) *Society of the Spectacle*. The point of **Table 1** is that Barthes and Debord write about spectacle in similar ways. Barthes and Debord's spectacle overlap. Both view spectacles as based in fear on a stage covering misery. Barthes (1972) uses the word "spectacle" five times in his 3 and half page essay. I have reproduced the complete sentence of each and matched it with comparable uses by Debord (See **Table 1**). Barthes' (1972: 84) first reference to the spectacle of striptease points out a contradiction «Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked.» There are routines in strip clubs and nude gentlemen's clubs that mystify the rituals and games. The ritual of disrobing is part of the game of "tease." And tease moves from tipping the performers, paying for their drinks, requests for lap dances and private booth performances and deposits on dates later in the evening. This is part of the hustle.

Each spectacle performance repeats moves and steps that have been done a thousand times before. The strip clubs offer amateur competitions that for Barthes return the event to pre-spectacle form, a less ritualized and mystified performance or as Debord puts it, fewer magical techniques are available to amateurs. Striptease in the clubs and casino shows is sanctioned as weekly sport, as the performance of spectacle. The casino show has the alibi of art, a directed and rehearsed spectacular performance of great cost. It is sport and art in a male world, a phallogocentric world, in which women are objects. Most of the Casinos do not include striptease or showgirls as part of their entertainment offerings and narrate to distance themselves from the news that Las Vegas is built not only on gambling but sex industries. However, others narrate to overlay sex and entertainment.

**Table 1.** Barthes and Debord on Spectacle

Barthes	Debord
<p>We may therefore say that we are dealing in a sense with a spectacle based on fear, or rather on the pretence of fear, as if eroticism here went no further than a sort of delicious terror, whose ritual signs have only to be announced to evoke at once the idea of sex and its conjuration (p. 84).</p> <p>It is only the time taken in shedding clothes which makes voyeurs of the public; but here, as in any mystifying spectacle, the decor, the props and the stereotypes intervene to contradict the initially provocative intention and eventually bury it in insignificance: evil is advertised the better to impede and exorcise it (p. 84).</p> <p>Not only does it give to the show the alibi of Art (the dances in strip-shows are always 'artistic'), but above all it constitutes the last barrier, and the most efficient of all: the dance, consisting of ritual gestures which have been seen a thousand times, acts on movements as a cosmetic, it hides nudity, and smothers the spectacle under a glaze of superfluous yet essential gestures, for the act of becoming bare is here relegated to the rank of parasitical operations carried out in an improbable background (p. 85-86).</p> <p>All this, this meticulous exorcism of sex, can be verified a contrario in the 'popular contests' (sic) of amateur striptease: there, 'beginners' undress in front of a few hundred spectators without resorting or resorting very clumsily to magic, which unquestionably restores to the spectacle its erotic power (p. 86).</p> <p>Striptease here is made to rejoin the world of the public, is made familiar and bourgeois, as if the French, unlike the American public (at least according to what one hears), following an irresistible tendency of their social status, could not conceive eroticism except as a household property, sanctioned by the alibi of weekly sport much more than by that of a magical spectacle: and this is how, in France, striptease is nationalized (p. 87).</p>	<p>The spectacle exists in a concentrated or a diffuse form depending on the necessities of the particular stage of misery which it denies and supports. In both cases, the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil center of misery (#60).</p> <p>The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society (#18).</p> <p>Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance. But the critique which reaches the truth of the spectacle exposes it as the visible negation of life, as a negation of life which has become visible (#10).</p> <p>The spectacle obliterates the boundaries between self and world by crushing the self besieged by the presence-absence of the world... One who passively accepts his alien daily fate is thus pushed toward a madness that reacts in an illusory way to this fate by resorting to magical techniques (#219).</p> <p>When its vulgarized pseudo-festivals, parodies of the dialogue and the gift, incite a surplus of economic expenditure, they lead only to deception always compensated by the promise of a new deception. In the spectacle, the lower the use value of modern survival-time, the more highly it is exalted. The reality of time has been replaced by the advertisement of time (# 154).</p>

The Tropicana offers “The Best of the Folies-Bergere” which they advertise as “sexier than ever.” Riviera advertises “Crazy Girls” as Las Vegas’ «Sexiest Topless Revue [and as] a fun-loving adventure through the world of beauty, music, dance and comedy, featuring the most stunning showgirls in Las Vegas.» (Riviera Casino, 2001b). And “Splash” at the Riviera is «An All-New Kind of Cool!»:

«An entertainment extravaganza, the stage spectacular Splash explodes with high-energy dancing and state-of-the-art special effects. Gorgeous showgirls in glamorous costumes, world-class ice skaters, motorcycle daredevils, and the hottest specialty acts on the strip. (...) Two Topless Shows Nightly!!» (Riviera Casino, 2001a).

Strip clubs on the other hand imitate casinos with floorshows and featured acts, but narrow the distance between sex and performance. A reviewer of the Palomino Club says «Girls are above average and for a dollar tip they will usually let you put it in their g-string or pick it up between their breasts.» (Anonymous, 2001b). Lap dancers are rated on object-scales on how far they bend the no touching rule. In strip clubs, the hustle and tease dangles the possibility of dates with the performers, while prohibiting them by employment contract from accepting dates. There are numerous guidebooks and webs sites that detail information on etiquette (such as tipping practices), types of dances, strip club lingo, and there are ratings of the quality of facilities, shows, lap dances, and bodies.

Cheetah Club, for example, is one of countless seedy strip joints that dot the side streets just off the higher-rent, higher-class Las Vegas Strip. Cheetah’s Topless Lounge is «where the infamous Paul Verhoeven film *Showgirls* was shot (...), but don’t expect the full-contact lap dance [presented by Hollywood]. Rules are rules, and the rule here is 12 inches—as in minimum distance from the customer.» (Vegas Comdex, 2001). Crazy Horse Too is located in the industrial section of town and is one of the oldest striptease establishments in Las Vegas while Topless Girls of Glitter Gulch is located in the middle of the high-voltage shopping mall that Fremont Street is trying to become. In the movie *Show Girls*, «Seduction, passion and power struggles unfold as the [movie’s makers] blow the lid off the seemingly glamorous world of Las Vegas show dancing to create one of the most controversial films of all time. Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley) has what it takes to make it as a Las Vegas showgirl—what she doesn’t have is a way in. To survive, she accepts the only job available: lap dancing at a seedy club... until she meets Cristal (Gina Gershon). As Vegas’ reigning showgirl, Cristal has everything Nomi wants—and they both know she’s Nomi’s ticket to getting there.» (MGM, 2001).

Books, movies and advertising sell us the spectacle narrative of rags to riches, the American Dream realized in the career move from Strip Club to Showgirl, from strip and tease to Big Bucks Casino shows. “*Stripped and Teased*” is another very personal movie of the women behind the facade of Las Vegas showgirl and striptease dancers (Williams, 1998). Both films speak to the topic of what happens to a society in which everything is a spectator sport. But *Show Girls* (the movie) holds out the American Dream as a transcendental teleology that can be realized in Las Vegas spectacle.

## CONCLUSIONS

The forces of discourse act upon and through the female body as the center for male domination by the warring organization forces of strip bar and casino show (Foucault, 1984). The female body is stripped naked of property and bears the marks of the fleshly purpose of male power and discursive formation. Her body becomes object stripped of subjective illusion on the stage playing out strategies of oppressive discursive practice and serving the interests of organization power. Resistance to the disciplinary techniques of strip and show from the point of view of bodies constituted as targets of administered power is futile.

Those who commute, to take a job for a weekend, or a few weekdays become a temporary character in the spectacle of Las Vegas. The local dancers, by contrast, mostly live in the suburbs, and only work on the "Strip." They commute from suburb to strip and for them striptease is work, a job and a way to pay bills, keep kids in school, and live in the non-Strip Las Vegas. Both temporary and local strippers cross boundaries between Strip and the rest of their life.

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