Human Figurations, vol. 10, no. 1 (2026).
https://doi.org/10.29311/hf.v10i1.5548

Streaking:
The Naked Truth[1]

Richard Kilminster (1988)

At the Derby at Epsom in June this year, a male streaker, Tony Buckmaster, achieved fleeting notoriety by running naked in front of the main stand—which includes the Royal Box. The tabloids had a field day, with headlines like 'They're off!' and 'We are not amused', and competed for the best pictures of the coy royals having a sneaky look while trying to remain dignified. Some thought the event was a gesture against privilege, but the class-statement theory was soon scotched when it transpired that the streaker was a builder and had had to strip off his top hat and morning suit for the streak. He claimed that he had done it in aid of a charity, but this was never named.

Streaking is a form of exhibitionism, so the key to understanding this streak, like the others, lies much more in the crowded, open, public and anonymous nature of the venue rather than the purpose of the occasion or the social make-up of the crowd. By definition, streaking has to take place in public places such as thronging shopping malls or supermarkets, but streakers have come to favour the big public spectator venues such as soccer or rugby stadiums or other large sporting locations such as cricket grounds, where they can be assured of getting a very large audience. The bigger the venue, the better; and if the TV cameras are there, even better.

Unlike indecent exposure (which streaking assuredly is *not*) or the use of public nudity to gain shock media publicity for some cause, streaking is universally regarded as very funny. As we shall see later, it in fact tells us something of serious import about the nature of modern society, but for the moment we can revel in the mirth generated by streaking. In a recent feature on the subject on BBC Radio Leeds, the DJ Tim Dower had dug out of the sound archives John Arlott's live reaction to a streaker on the pitch at the England v Australia Test Match at Lord's in August 1975: 'We've got a streaker down the wicket now … not very shapely, and it's masculine'.[2] In the

[1] Editorial note: This essay was originally written in 1988. It is published here as a tribute to Richard Kilminster, who died on 21 August 2026. We have reproduced it as he wrote it, with the exception that a small number of obvious typographical errors have been corrected and two words added to improve the clarity of a sentence (these additions and amendments are marked with square brackets).

[2] [John Arlott (1914–91), English journalist, author, poet, *bon viveur* and—especially—cricket commentator on the BBC's Test Match Special, which provides live ball-by-ball radio coverage of cricket Test Matches.]

background, other male commentators are falling about laughing and one quips: 'he flashed through the covers'. And in what has now become the traditional *modus operandi* of the smiling police officers who have to lead away the (usually) male streaker, a helmet is modestly placed over his genitals. For the less common female streaker, the technical problem of manipulating three helmets usually proves insuperable, and she is covered with a cape or jacket.

The heyday of streaking was the late 1960s and early 1970s in Western countries, being—it seems—almost unknown, as such, prior to then. The practice developed simultaneously in the USA and Europe, sometimes but not always associated with university campuses and usually involving isolated individual runners. (There have been some mixed-gender group streaks in Germany and elsewhere.) For the novelty pop single 'The Streak' to have made Ray Stevens a lot of money from vast sales at No. 1 in the British charts for 12 weeks from May 1974 suggests that it had latched on to something at least noticeable, certainly amusing and perhaps even slightly worrying, in people's lives at the time.

Since then, the incidence of major public venue streaks has diminished slightly, to a norm of about one every two or three years. Prior to this year's Derby, prominent recent streaks have included Erika Rowe's notable topless run at Twickenham Rugby Ground at the England v Australia match on 2 January 1982.[3] There was some suspicion at the time that she was an aspiring model seeking publicity, so this one may not strictly qualify as a streak proper. In June of the same year, a male streaker at the England v India Test Match ran across the field with two balloons tied round his waist, blowing kisses at the crowd.

Those are the bare facts. Streaking is rare but memorable. But what are we to make of the phenomenon? Should we write off streaking as trivial exhibitionism born of boredom? Something only of significance for the media during the Silly Season? Or perhaps regard it as just another craze, akin to hula-hoops, skateboarding, disco bonkers, yo-yos or Frisbee throwing? But the difference is that streaking does not require any consumer items or special equipment. Streaking is certainly harmless, though, and the shock people sometimes show during or report after a streak is usually an expression of stylised or mock affront. What they are witnessing is not actually very disgusting at all, nor does it last very long. But in its wider implications as a social symptom, streaking is far from trivial.

[3] [Twickenham is the largest rugby stadium in the world and headquarters of the Rugby Football Union. Erika Rowe (or Erica Roe in some sources), born in 1957, is often still remembered as the most famous British streaker, although she ran across the pitch not naked but merely 'topless'.]

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Modern society is highly controlled. The complexity of social life routinely demands of its members a high degree of self-restraint, or drive control. We take for granted this even regulation of impulses and it is part of the fabric of societies that have attained a stage of what the sociologist Norbert Elias calls a 'civilising process'.[4] The general code of public conduct requires this high degree of self-restraint, which for the most part the populace successfully delivers. In particular, a large number of taboos surround natural functions, the body and sexual relations, in respect of which thresholds of embarrassment are high.

Drawing on Elias's theory, the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters has coined the term 'informalisation'[5] to refer to a process in which dominant modes of social conduct tend towards greater leniency and variety, such phases occurring at various times in history, but notably for our purposes during the 1960s and early 1970s—during the so-called 'permissive' age. To cut a long story short, this general loosening of restraints shows itself in much more informality in dress and forms of address, and particularly in a decrease in the social restraints imposed upon sexual behaviour and related spheres of conduct. This relaxation extends the scope of sexual experiences, making possible, for example, a relaxation of the no-sex-before-marriage rule and the showing of more areas of male and female bodies without offending good taste.

The augmentation of the social power of women in relation to men during this period is one strand of this process, giving them—relatively speaking—more social confidence and autonomy, which shows itself in many ways, but also in their wearing more revealing clothes and going topless on beaches. During an informalising phase, people experiment with new standards and practices, and a new code of conduct governing relations between the sexes eventually jells—a process of 'reformalisation'. Ironically, far from these developments signalling a decline into decadence and loss of moral control, as Mrs Whitehouse so fears,[6] the phase imposes upon people a higher degree of self-restraint than the earlier stage to enable these relaxations to occur and for the new code then to become routine. The relaxation and remoulding

[4] [Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, ed. Stephen Mennell, Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Richard Kilminster (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 3]).]

[5] Cas Wouters, 'Formalisation and informalisation: changing tension balances in civilising processes', *Theory, Culture & Society* 3(2) (1986), pp. 1–18. [See also Wouters, *Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West 1890–2000* (London: Sage, 2004), and *Informalisation: Changing Regimes of Manners and Emotions in the West since 1890* (London: Sage, 2007).]

[6] [Mary Whitehouse (1910–2001), an English Christian and social conservative activist who founded the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association and campaigned against the media (especially the BBC) for their supposed promotion of the 'permissive society'. In more liberal quarters, she was regarded as a figure of fun.]

of constraints is, therefore, a *controlled* process and imposes new demands upon *both* sexes.

The sexually provocative way in which young people, particularly women, routinely dress in ordinary nightclubs today, compared with 20–25 years ago, let alone 35 years ago, shows how far [down] this road we have come. Indeed, the leading edge of the process can be observed in certain ultra-fashionable clubs in the metropolis, where women can dance and socialise almost nude, often clad only in scraps of clothing and decorated with body paint. In the May 1988 edition of the trendy design monthly *i-D*, perhaps the best barometer of these trends, a review of clubs described the expected garb for patrons of one in Camden:

> Girls are purposely co-ordinated with the boys and are identified by midriffs and hairsprayed curls. Boys accentuate their interesting areas with large baggy jeans and big belts. Functional clothing for funksters means that expensive leather jackets are left at home. This is a look for sweating in – the DJ being more important than the designer. The music dictates a uniform which allows for foreplay on the dance-floor and the promise of a taut body later.

A full-page photo in the same feature shows a young woman in a Brixton club completely naked, pubic hair and all, except for a few accessories—high heels, self-supporting stockings and an elaborate headdress. Significantly, she has a long billowing silk cape around her shoulders tied at the neck, which completes her outfit for a trendy night out in the 1980s. Obviously this is an extreme example and represents the practices of a minority avant-garde under specially controlled conditions. But one only has to look into any local mainstream heterosexual nightclub to see the remarkable change in the level of controlled sexual display in dress and movement that now occurs between men and women compared with the 1950s and 1960s. The point is that for this to be possible presupposes a significant rise in the extent of self-restraints that makes the new code possible.

Where does streaking fit into these trends? It is an individual response to the tendency towards exaggerated self-restraint required for living in a society going through a phase of informalisation/reformalisation. The significant point is that the streaker *streaks*, or runs through the setting. Streakers do not stand and expose their naked bodies to the public—this would still be for many the ultimate humiliation. The whole point of streaking is the running; the transient frisson of excitement derived from the fleeting exposure of the naked body to public gaze. For the few moments of the streak the person achieves a temporary ecstatic release from the demands of modern social conditions, these being particularly burdensome during the phases mentioned. The streaker momentarily flouts the taboos surrounding the body and then returns to the normal automatic constraints of everyday life to which we

conform for the vast majority of the time. Streaking is an innocuous symptom of exaggerated, perhaps excessive, constraint.

But why are there apparently more men than women streakers? The process whereby the relative power of women in relation to men has risen gives a more demonstrative social role to women, which then puts men under pressure. The higher self-restraints needed to operate the new code of sexual behaviour put more demands upon men because their socialisation into a gender role still [tells] them that they have to take the lead and be masterful. Women, on the other hand, are equally likely to feel the rare impulse to streak, but are less likely to overcome the considerable inhibition against doing so because it is more risky for them. Unlike men, they are threatened by the fact that their body may not match up to the Page Three[7] or pin-up of the perfect woman's body with which we are bombarded in the press and on TV, so they fear humiliation and shame. (It is significant that Erika Rowe *did* meet the female stereotype.) Men experience less fear of this kind because an ideal of the manly body, although it exists, assumes less cultural importance and salience in our society.

[7] [Page 3 here refers to a standing item in the UK tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*, which featured pictures of topless female glamour models on page 3. Significantly, following a successful campaign against the practice, originally initiated by writer Lucy-Anne Holmes, *The Sun* phased out its Page 3 topless photos from 2013–2015. Such shifts arguably mark a further extension of the equalisation conflicts linked to processes of informalisation discussed in this essay. They attest to the ascendancy of newly emergent behavioural standards in which such practices came to be understood as sexist and anachronistic. Parallel trends can be seen in decreasing taboos surrounding the use of the 'F' word, even by politicians, and growing taboos surrounding the 'N' word.]