

Sex Work in the Cinema: Lessons from the 1970s

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Metaphor to Metonymy

The keen interest in both sex work and domestic work in contemporary Latin American cinema points to a crisis in our understanding of what is understood by bodies at work. Films such as Karim Aïnouz's *O Céu de Suely* (*Love for Sale: Suely in the Sky*, Brazil, 2006), Laura Amelia Guzmán and Israel Cárdenas' *Dólares de Arena* (Mexico/Dominican Republic/Argentina, 2014), and Anahí Berneri's *Alanis* (Argentina, 2017) offer vivid explorations of the experience of sex work as addressing problems increasingly visible (as well as audible and palpable) for all workers today. These problems include the shape-shifting working day, the experience of affective and immaterial labor, and the erosion of work's status as an organizing principal for daily life.

In Aïnouz's *Suely*, the eponymous title character designs, markets, and shapes an episodic, informal, and contingent experience of sex work in Brazil's peripheral Northeast; her attempts at "making do" suggest how labor as a narrative anchor for both films and life has become increasingly eroded.² Guzmán and Cárdenas' *Dólares de*

¹ I am grateful to Hannah Freed-Thall and Rielle Navitski for comments on earlier versions of this article.

² On the evacuation of labor from narrative, I have found especially useful Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2004); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (2000); Gonzalo

Arena emphasizes the affective and immaterial labor of sex work, connecting the contemporary phenomenon of the “girlfriend experience” to problems of race, class, and imperialism in the Caribbean.³ Plunging into the stickiness of the asymmetrical relationships among its main characters, *Sand Dollars* navigates the edges of work and leisure, love and exploitation—asking us to consider what work look and feels like when these oppositions are simultaneous and superimposed. Finally, Bernieri’s *Alanis* offers a full-throatedly feminist approach to sex work. Her film eschews close-ups—a frequent cinematic shorthand for apprehending sex worker interiority—for long and especially medium shots; in this way, she both links her protagonist to a cinematic tradition of films about work and interrogates the longstanding desire to make sex workers confess their truth. In its efforts to de-spectacularize the prostitute imaginary and consider how close cinema might get to a non-sensationalized experience of sex work, *Alanis* also participates laterally in debates that have recently come to the fore of political discourse in Argentina—most notably in *Ni Una Menos*.⁴

In each of these films, sex work is depicted as an instantiation of contemporary labor’s shifting fortunes.⁵ By refusing the ritual of absolution or the facile discourse of empowered choices under capitalism, they position sex work instead as a metonymy for contemporary labor. For their protagonists, the work they perform resembles much work in the present: episodic and contingent, embodied and immaterial. It occupies but does not define them. In their observational approach, their eschewing of iconography, and their refusal to posit sex work as either the origin or result of a divided psyche, films like *Senly*, *Alanis*, and *Sand Dollars* insist that it is not the self that is being commodified in sex work, but the service, as for so many people who labor in the present.

Aguilar, *Otros Mundos: ensayo sobre el nuevo cine argentino* (2006); Joanna Page, *Crisis and Capitalism in Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (2009). On the other hand, labor does constitute a kind of structural principle for slow cinema and other contemporary documentary approaches (including the sensory ethnography turn), even as they eschew narrative.

³ On post-Fordist sex work and the “girlfriend experience” cf especially Elizabeth Bernstein (2007), *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*.

⁴ A growing body of Latin American films has begun to explore sex work in more capacious categories than my cisgender focus here. Yet, despite the centrality of the trans demographic in sex work in South America (and beyond), cinema has been less invested in these experiences.

⁵ Following many scholars and activists, in this article I define sex work as the selling, whether live or virtual, of sexual services. Like body work (hairdressing, massage, etc.), with which it overlaps, sex work forms part of feminized “high-touch, personal-interaction service work.” If all labor is gendered and embodied, “bodies and/or sexuality are the *object* of labour” only in certain jobs (*Body/Sex/Work: Intimate, Embodied, and Sexualised Labor* ed., Carol Walkowitz et. al. (2013), 4; see also Melissa Grant (2017), *Playing the Whore: the Work of Sex Work*).

In positioning sex work this way, contemporary cinema evokes an earlier period of cinema's fascination with sex work. During the 1970s, filmmakers—but also conceptual artists, activists and theorists—began to explore a different approach to this kind of labor. The sex worker's protagonism on screen beginning in the '70s provides an alternative account of how cinema grappled with and helped shape debates taking place over work's status, legitimacy, and embodiment, debates that have become increasingly urgent in the present, in and beyond cinema. In this context, sex work comes to the fore not only with respect to the figure of the artist (as many scholars have analyzed), but also to shape and constitute the figure of the industrial worker. Ultimately, as a "limit" case of what constitutes work in modernity, sex work is uniquely poised to reveal its seismographic shifts.

It is in the 1970s, I show, when the metaphorical 'use' of the prostitute to signify a dehistoricized alienation is thrown into doubt. In its place, filmmakers participate in a broader project to posit sex work as a metonymy for labor, as an embodied practice of "getting by": the work, that is, of the vast majority of the world's population. During the '70s, to posit sex work as a metonymy, as opposed to the prostitute as a metaphor, meant underscoring the 'doing,' rather than the 'being' of sex work, to paraphrase Foucault's contemporaneous *The History of Sexuality* (Vol I, 1976). This shift challenged a longstanding understanding of sex work, for it has rarely been seen in these terms. In the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, writers and visual artists frequently mobilized the figure of the prostitute to gloss the corrupting influence of modernity. Key examples include the naturalist novel and the moral panics surrounding the "white slave trade" during the silent film period; and, more broadly, anxiety over art's new status as a commodity in the marketplace, where the prostitute is a metaphor for selling out. (In cinema, scenes in which sex workers stare at themselves in the mirror as they get ready to work frequently offer a visual cliché to assuage the viewer's discomfort: the prostitute interrogates herself, for our benefit.)

For their part, Marxist approaches frequently employed prostitution as a shorthand for estrangement and commodification from that which should be most inalienable, the body's innermost integrity, and the capacity for love; in the early Marx, it is frequently synonymous with both alienation and exploitation at various scales. Like many of his contemporaries, Marx saw prostitution as a "vice of the proletariat" (Marx 1975, 347), but this did not prevent him from also and ultimately understanding the sex worker as "a particular expression of the universal prostitution of the worker" (Marx

1975, 350).⁶ The tension in Marx—between sex work-*qua*-work and sex work as metaphor for a larger moral, socio-economic, or political problem—persists well into the twentieth century. Consider an interview with the filmmaker of *Working Girls* (1986), a feminist approach to the occluded lives of middle-class prostitutes. Lizzie Borden insists: “I wanted to place prostitution solidly in the context of work as opposed to sex” (Borden 1987, 6), comparing it to the work of secretaries and underpaid educators: “[p]eople insist that working as a prostitute has to mean something more but it doesn’t really” (Borden 1987, 6). Still, there is a tension in Borden’s words and in her film, just as there was in Marx: she oscillates between arguing for sex work as just another job and seeing it as a metaphor for alienation: “A parallel situation [to prostitution] exists for those who sell their minds” (Borden 1987, 6). Borden, in spite of herself, continues the pattern of employing the sex worker as shorthand for selling *oneself*. Committed to de-spectacularizing sex work, to revealing its more mundane, as well as structural, dimensions, Borden nevertheless slips into rendering prostitution a symbol of commodification and exploitation. Sex work’s specificity is a kind of vanishing point: attempts to pinpoint it often exhibit this slippage into the metaphoric and the moralizing. To a certain extent, this article also shares this conundrum. To focus on sex work as an object is already to privilege it as unique, to ascribe to it a representational function, and also to siphon it off from the problem of work.

Moving image technology and sex work have long been imbricated, mutually conditioning one another. The sex industry constitutes a motor of technological advancements in film, video, and later the internet; many pivotal moments in the history of moving images were motivated by the sex trade.⁷ In early 20th century South America, port cities were notorious nodal points in the transnational traffic of women’s bodies and erotic images, particularly of European immigrant women. In Buenos Aires, pornographic films were shown in brothels and circulated transnationally; Rio de Janeiro was equally renowned for sex work, including a market in “stag” films.⁸ Yet it was in

⁶ Cfr. Karl Marx (1975), *Early Writings*, Marx (1990), *Capital: a Critique of Political Economy* Vol I and also Leopoldini Fortunati (1996), *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor, and Capital*.

⁷ See especially Linda Williams (1999), *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Watson argues that “cinema might be thought of as an avatar of exploitation” (Watson 1997, 8).

⁸ International prostitutes at times carried this cinematic contraband in their underwear. See Andrea Cuarterolo (2015), “Fantasías de nitrato. El cine pornográfico y erótico en la Argentina de principios del siglo XX”. On Argentina, see also Donna Guy (1991), *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Nation, and Family in Argentina*; on Brazil, Sueann Caulfield

the 1970s that the sex worker acquired a particular prominence on screens in and beyond Latin America. In cinema (as well on gallery walls), ‘she’ appears alternately as a figure of anxiety, provocation, and reappropriation.⁹ The term *sex work* was coined by activists during the ‘70s; in Western Europe, sex workers during this period formed and joined trade unions, and a group of feminist theorists from Italy began to provocatively link sex work and housework as twinned sites of how capitalism produces gender, posing a set of demands that will reappear in global activist circuits today. Sex worker activism in the ‘70s pointed to how anti-prostitution efforts could re-objectify and victimize the very women they purported to help, arguing instead for the need for improved working and living conditions; more provocatively, many found in sex work a space from which to critique the way in which labor was ascribed both moral and economic value through the wage—a means of hierarchizing and exclusion, as much as incorporation and inclusion.¹⁰

This international preoccupation with sex work found in a unique iteration in Brazil. In fact, the figure of the sex worker fueled a robust national film industry during this period, traversing highly stratified realms of production and consumption. Any retrospective of Brazilian films of this period would encounter an impressive gallery of sex workers, making their way through large-budget, star-studded productions; leftist denunciations; and the lower-budget ‘trash’ films I focus on here. Popping up in anguished melodramas, carnivalesque comedies, and gritty realist approaches, sex workers are protagonists in critically-acclaimed and retrospectively canonical films like Jorge Bodanzky and Orlando Senna’s *Iracema, uma transa amazônica* (1974), Carlos Diegues’ *Xica da Silva* (1976) and his *Bye Bye Brasil* (1979), Arnaldo Jabor’s *Toda Nudez Será Castigada* (1972), and Héctor Babenco’s *Pixote: a lei do mais fraco* (1980); they were equally prominent in *marginal* filmmakers like Osvaldo Candeias and in the period’s most lauded auteurs (for example, the now relatively-neglected Walter Khouri, who was particularly fond of the brothel as a setting).

In the U.S. and Western Europe, the sex worker’s rise to prominence on screen occurs as the decline of industrial labor comes into view, in the form of industrial ruins

(2017), “The Birth of Manguê: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Prostitution in Rio de Janeiro, 1850-1942.”

⁹ On conceptual art in the 1970s, see Julia Bryan-Wilson (2012), who opens her analysis with the conceptual art piece by Argentine artist Carlos Ginzburg’s “Latin American Prostitute” (Brussels, 1974).

¹⁰ Cf Kathleen Millar (2014), “The Precarious Present: Wageless Labor and Disrupted Life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.”; Michael Denning (2019), “Wageless Life”; Andrea Komlosy (2018), *Work: the Last 1000 Years*.

and narratives of emasculated workers. These contexts thus allow for a neat mapping of the industrial-to-postindustrial shift, in which sex work acts as the immaterial labor that replaces the Fordist era. In Brazil as elsewhere in the Global South, however, sex work emerges on screen just as the industrial laborer is becoming a protagonist in political and economic life and begins to be registered in/on film, in particular through an unprecedented cycle of activist pro-labor films made in São Paulo beginning in the late '70s.¹¹ During this period, the sex worker and industrial labor activist co-existed uneasily in the archive and at times on screen, each at the apex of their cinematic iterations. Focusing on the Brazilian case thus troubles stages model of capital's itineraries; it also suggests the ways in which sex work does not supplant, but rather often mutually constitutes (if often negatively), a contemporaneous exaltation of the industrial waged worker.¹²

Here I show how the films and film networks grouped under the rubric *Boca do Lixo* (São Paulo, 1973-1982) constitute a particularly intensive approach to sex work in the cinema, one that differed from what had been screened up until this point. In focusing on the key features of this illuminating yet relatively neglected site of film production, I aim to show how these films query, through sex work, what we imagine when we invoke the term *work*, including our limitations in apprehending it (visually, aurally; through images and icons). Rather than an embarrassing aberration in Brazilian film history, they thus offer a particularly salient example of how sex work in the cinema negotiates labor's shifting fortunes, in and beyond Brazil.

Networks

Brazilian cinema of the 1970s frequently recounts the story of a migrant worker's journey from the interior to the burgeoning megalopolis of São Paulo. Already seen as straining at the seams during a particularly acute moment of de-ruralization and urbanization, São Paulo is depicted as receiving the migrant in a process of violent habituation to capitalist modernity. In this genre, which I call the *worker picaresque*, the protagonist is a male worker, generally from the rural interior, in search of industrial or construction work in the megalopolis. In the cinema of the '70s, all roads appear to lead to São Paulo, the center of South America's auto industry, and the fraught heart of

¹¹ On the gendering of skill, see Barbara Weinstein (2006), "They Don't Even Look Like Women Workers: Femininity and Class in 20th-Century Latin America."

¹² For example: the most prominent feature-length film about industrial worker struggles, Leon Hirszman's *Eles Não Usam Black-Tie* (1981), was exhibited and advertised in the press alongside titles like *Aluga-Œe Moças* ["Girl\$ for Rent"].)

peripheral Fordism.¹³ Less remarked upon is the migrant worker's 'feminine' equivalent, the sex worker, who shadows him: she too has mishap-filled journeys to São Paulo, she also must live by her wits and make do, navigating what is seen as its unbridled, unjust modernization.¹⁴ Yet if migration to São Paulo is often depicted in cinema as a devil's bargain for both would-be industrial workers and sex workers, the latter is more often made to function as a metaphor for the city's corroding influence.¹⁵ Her journey thus rehabilitated tropes of the fallen girl from the interior, prominent in both naturalist novels and popular forms like the *literatura de cordel*.

This prurient interest in the sex worker—in which moral denunciation intertwines with a fascination with her increasingly “debased” young body—is submitted to an early parodic critique in Carlos Reichenbach's *Lilian M: Relatório Confidencial* (1975). The film follows the title character from her life tilling fields in the countryside to a “kept” woman in São Paulo, through her Brechtian encounters with industrial magnates, art world louches, criminals, militant radicals, private eyes, and petty bourgeoisie office workers. Enacting her own *paulistano* picaresque, Lilian becomes a dancer, a masseuse, a confessor/therapist, and a bored homemaker, as well as a sex worker. Reichenbach's film has a notable self-reflexive framing device: a Nagra recorder, synecdoche for the documentary realism of the 1960s and 1970s. Recursively, we return to scenes of Lilian speaking not only to viewers but also to a sound technician and off-camera director, in this way exposing the scaffolding of our desire for sex workers' testimonies, suggesting how these ostensible moral denunciations are also discursive stripteases.¹⁶ The film's ironic subtitle (“a confidential report,” suggesting both yellow journalism and sexploitation films) promises to reveal a secret, to make the

¹³ This is the moment when Brazil's cinematic geography shifts to São Paulo, and away from the hereto hegemonic Rio de Janeiro. The origin of the *pornochanchada* is generally considered to be in Rio, e.g., Rogerio Faria's 1969 film *As Paqueras*, but it will have its heyday in São Paulo in the mid-to-late 1970s. For an overview of this period, see especially Stephanie Dennison and Lisa Shaw (2004), “The 1970s”.

¹⁴ I develop an analysis of the worker picaresque in my current manuscript, *The Labor of Images: Work and its Discontents in Brazilian Cinema, 1973 to the Present*. In most films from the period—in contrast to lived experience in the industrial belt—women factory workers are nowhere to be seen.

¹⁵ Bodansky and Senna's striking *Iracema* located the sex worker at the center of its devastating critique of economic exploitation through the eponymous character: as she moves from a near subsistence livelihood to the commerce of her body. “Her modernization is synonymous with her prostitution,” per Ismail Xavier (1997).

¹⁶ Cf. Grant (2017); also *Sexography: Sex Work in Documentary* by Nicholas de Villiers (2017); B. Ruby Rich (1983), “Anti-Porn: Soft Issue, Hard World”; Debra A. Castillo (2012) on “tragedy porn” in “One the Line: Work and Choice”.

sex worker speak. *Lilian M*—whose initial title was *Confissões Amorosas*—presciently foregrounds the era’s hunger for sex workers’ stories, the spectacle of their bodies, and audiovisual media’s complicity therein. Recasting the worker picaresque through Lilian’s body, the film suggests that the hunger for the sex worker’s story is a way of obscuring trajectories of the feminized migrant worker.

When she plans to become a masseuse, Lilian is warned that she might “end up in the *Boca do Lixo*.” This warning is a moment—a characteristic one, as we shall see—of self-reflexivity. By invoking the *Boca do Lixo*, an area in downtown São Paulo, the film momentarily locates us in a specific map of filmmaking, distribution, and consumption, one that is key for understanding sex work in the cinema during this period. In Reichenbach’s film, as in many of its contemporaries, the named location is at once part of the film’s diegesis and the context of its production. Many of the films shot in the *Boca do Lixo* were located on its streets—in its porn theaters, brothels, and flophouses. In *A Noite do Desejo* (“Night of Desire,” Fauzi Mansur, 1973), for example, shot on-location in the *Boca do Lixo*, a hand-held camera captures the jittery energy of the young factory worker protagonists who go in search of sex. The montage of neon constructs it as a sordid dreamscape, a glittering hall of mirrors. One sequence shows a character recently arrived to the big city asking for directions to the *Boca do Lixo*; we arrive there through his eyes, as the film registers different lives passing through this space of illicit traffic.

It is in the *Boca do Lixo*, I argue, where sex work begins to be seen less as a metaphor of degradation than a metonymy of work’s transformations. A center of the informal traffic in both sex and drugs, the *Boca do Lixo* was also a nodal point of the informal economy, a point of transit for migrants and both illicit and legal goods to and from the city. Its proximity to major railways had also made it a center of film distribution since the early 20th century; since the mid-century, it appeared frequently in police blotters, journalism, and *literatura marginal*. The phrase *Boca do Lixo* itself invokes an equation between “trash” [*lixo*] and the sex workers, ragpickers, and street children who lived and worked there—a longstanding association between refuse and those who live on the residues of the informal economy, outside of the wage, one which will permeate, often through self-conscious strategies, the films made there.¹⁷ From the few

¹⁷ *Boca* (an opening—e.g., a river or street) culls up images of quarantines, cavities or openings, as well dangerous purchase points for illegal goods; “a *lugar ruim, perigoso*” <http://www.dicionarioinformal.com.br/boca/>. Cf. Denning, “Wageless Life,” on shifting understandings of the *lumpenproletariat*.

square blocks where the films were made and distributed, a circle radiated outward to a group of rapidly decaying but still active movie palaces in downtown São Paulo—exteriors that often appear in the films themselves—and beyond, to neighborhood cinemas in lower-middle class neighborhoods where the films were consumed. During the 1970s, the *Boca do Lixo* also became a (much maligned) center of film production, during one of the most prolific periods in Brazilian cinema. With them, Brazilian audiences went to see Brazilian films at a higher rate than they ever had—or, arguably, ever would.

Rather than *pornochanchada*, the more common term for the genre, I thus refer here throughout to the *Boca do Lixo*, which refers at once to the films, the industry that produced them, and the part of the city where they were made.¹⁸ These are not precise equivalents—other genres emerged from the industry, and some sexploitation films were made elsewhere—but their overlap is significant. Within the *Boca do Lixo*, producers, distributors, advertisers, technicians, actresses, and filmmakers worked with and alongside other kinds of *malandros* or “hustlers,” including sex workers, beggars, and pickpockets. The particular role cast, crew, and filmmakers of the *Boca do Lixo* occupied on the national stage shaped a conflicted identification between sex work, film work, and work as such. This identification is shaped by the films’ diegetic worlds, many of which treat sex work as well as other kinds of labor in the informal economy, and extends outward to the discourse of filmmakers, producers, and the press. The close working relationship among producers, distributors, actresses, and exhibitors who jostled together in a single marginalized part of the city made the films economically viable and helped to consolidate a recognizable genre, one further consolidated through the medium of the periodical, both in the mainstream press’ obsessively negative depictions of it, and sympathetically in its own periodical, *Cinema em Close Up* (1975-77), which included interviews, news of the latest productions; exchanges among readers, filmmakers and technicians; and nude photographs of leading actresses.

The *Boca do Lixo* films index the hangover of all the untrammelled growth in the heart of Brazil’s wealthiest and most self-congratulatorily “productive” city—the other side of São Paulo’s unprecedented urban and industrial transformation in infrastructure, real estate speculation, and factory zones—as well as the site of its

¹⁸ *Chanchadas* were ribald comedic films (often musicals) of the 1930s-40s, satirizing Brazilian customs and parodying foreign imports, derived from earlier theatrical revues. By 1973 the neologism *pornochanchada* had begun to circulate to describe the emergence of a sexual variant of the *chanchada*. The term *chanchada* itself invokes trash.

incipient industrial labor movement. The heyday of the *Boca do Lixo* maps on to the waning of the economic *milagre* (1969-1973) and the most brutal phase of the military dictatorship, its “years of lead” (1968-1974), on one hand; and the *abertura* of the mid-to-late ‘70s/early ‘80s, on the other. Generally condemned by most intellectuals and the mainstream press, these films featured low production values and sleazy, catchy titles drawn from the earlier popular culture example of the *teatro de revista*; formally, they were influenced by Italian comedies in the style of Lando Buzzanca. An outcome of Brazil’s frustrated participation in the international sexual revolution and its cinematic iterations, they locate sex as their visual and narrative engine: an emphasis that led to their low prestige, but which itself recalled the thin or weak narratives of the *chanchada*, with sex acts taking the place of the earlier genre’s musical numbers.¹⁹ In the language of international film genres, they are sexploitation films, fabricated with a clear economic motivation, sex-crazed but less revealing than their hard-core counterparts.²⁰

Spectators watched *Boca do Lixo* films in movie houses in which the public was probably exclusively masculine; as with the stag film of the early 20th century, that is, the homosociability of the films’ voyeurism—and its trenchant homophobia—is part of the viewing experience and is also inscribed in the diegeses through its narratives and gags.²¹ These films thus constituted a sexual pedagogy for a significant swath of the male population, reproducing, displaying, and occasionally challenging, the dictatorship’s own repressive mechanisms (forms of control that were also, for their part, highly productive, allowing the industry/genre to flourish). They assumed, and actively shaped, a heterosexual male spectator; constituting, in the words of Robert Stam, an “x-ray of the social neuroses of the white middle-class male” (Starn 1997, 77). And they offered a specific “tactile training” and sexual citizenship for a generation at the fraught intersection of the sexual revolution and a conservative military regime: a way of speaking about the intersection of sex and the economic at once culled up by and condemned by the dictatorship.²²

¹⁹ See Inimá Simões (1979), “Sou...mas quem não é? Pornochanchada: o bode expiotório do cinema brasileiro.” Williams compares pornography and the musical in the U.S. in *Hard Core*.

²⁰ *Coisas eróticas* (Rafaelle Rossi, 1981) is considered the first hardcore Brazilian film, although I have found earlier films claiming this status in the archive. On exploitation film in the U.S., see Watson (1997).

²¹ Cf. Simões (1991, 1992) “Quém não”; on the U.S. context, see Thomas Waugh (2004), “Homosociality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen.”

²² Cf. Stephanie Dennison (2009), “Sex and the Generals”; Nuno Cesar Abreu (2006), *Boca do Lixo. Cinema e classes populares*. On “tactical training,” see Linda Williams (2008), *Screening Sex* (2008).

Sex work in the *Boca do Lixo* operates on multiple planes. It appears as a problem of narrative and characterization, as well as being registered in cinematically-specific dimensions, including the framing of bodies and the work of film performers themselves. Thus sex work is at once a theme, a formal motivation, and a process that occurs in the making and distribution of the films. In other words, they represent the sex worker as a figure, present the sex worker as a body through specific formal strategies (e.g., close-ups, pans, *mise-en-scène*), and register sex work in the process, since the performers are also doing sex work as they are filmed. They frequently oscillate, for example, between narrative and description, representation and presentation—between a loosely-constructed story and shots of posing, writhing, etc.²³ Simultaneously, the genre's broad self-reflexivity doubles or shortens the gap between the sex work being shown and the sex work being done on screen: these films seem to be constantly talking about the sex work performed in them.

Beginning in the early 1970s, as the political art cinema broadly known as *Cinema Novo* began to be proclaimed dead by filmmakers and the press alike, *Cinema Marginal* rose to dispute its place at the cinematic vanguard, but without its economic resources or prestige platforms.²⁴ This self-styled “garbage” cinema—understood as both immersed in the underworld (including sex work) and made on the margins—found a home in the *Boca do Lixo*. Here, filmmakers, producers, distributors, exhibitors, actors, and spectators were understood as forming an opposition to Brazil's “audiovisual elite,” including prominent figures in *Cinema Novo*, their counterparts with university training, who were enthusiastically profiled in the mainstream press and had access to state-based funding.²⁵ While scholarship on the working lives of the *Boca do Lixo* actresses is scarce, many appear to have come from the lower-middle and working-classes; at least some of them embraced the self-made, by-hook-or-by-crook ethos of the *Boca do Lixo*: financial independence irrespective of traditional avenues of power in

²³ Interestingly, Lukacs' (1970) “Narrate or Describe?” (*The Writer and the Critic*) also builds on the example of the bordello and the commodification of the prostitute to distinguish literary realism from naturalism through Zola's *Nana*.

²⁴ Openly hostile towards *Cinema Novo*, *Cinema Marginal* was made by filmmakers who identified as *udigrudi* (“underground,” in a parodic distortion of the English word), with their aggressive, citational films. See João Luiz Viera (1988), “Rebel with a Cause: the Films of Carlos Reichenbach, Jr.”; Ismail Xavier (2006), *O Cinema Moderno Brasileiro*; Randal Johnson (1998), “Old Beginnings, New Beginnings.”

²⁵ Cf Abreu (2006). The boom in national film production that began in the early 1970s and declined in the early 1980s was fomented by changes in Embrafilme (Emprêsa Brasileira de Filmes Sociedade Anônima), which funded production, distribution, and policies that unintentionally helped fund some *Boca de Lixo* films (aka “quota quickies”).

Brazilian culture—last name, education, state or private patronage. Arguably the most famous actress, Helena Ramos, future “muse of the *pornochanchada*,” for example, had worked as a drugstore cashier and in a glass factory. Others worked before and during their filmmaking careers in low-paid service sector jobs, making their way into photo shoots or beauty competitions, and then into films. For a small group of these actresses, the *Boca do Lixo* would offer a relatively rapid path to a fairly lucrative career, as well as fame and recognition. They received top billing in credit sequences; their names and images were the focus of huge displays in shop windows and in advertisements in both mainstream and specialized periodicals like *Cinema em Close Up*. Within the films, they are also privileged: lighted, framed, and costumed reverentially, as well as being awarded protagonism in the plot. A few would become protagonists in an emergent star system in national film and television. In this hierarchy, actresses with enough “erotic capital”²⁶ to become box-office stars within the low-budget world of *Boca do Lixo* had more opportunity to choose what kind of work to engage in—to perform or not to perform explicit sex, for example. (See the case of future transnational star Xuxa Meneghel, protagonist of Khouri’s upmarket brothel film, *Amor, Estranho Amor* (1982)).

Like many of the actresses, the *Boca do Lixo* film crews often came from the lower-middle classes, learning to make films on the job. Others had been workers in the failed national studio systems of the 1950s (Vera Cruz, Maristela, Multifilmes), holding low-paying jobs before embarking on their own production adventures. Revisionist accounts thus tend to depict *Boca do Lixo*’s varied participants as cinematic bricoleurs and auto-didacts, self-made people, who inhabited a particular class and economy. At the same time, consumers of the *Boca do Lixo* films were also depicted as belonging to this same class, participating with the makers of the films in a shared “ritual of complicity” (Abreu 2006, 158-159). As in the frequent on-location shooting in the *Boca do Lixo*, these rituals of complicity are at times self-consciously inserted into the film, mise-en-abymes of the working-class spectators hovering beyond the frame. For example, the two working-class protagonists of Mansur’s *A Noite do Desejo* are themselves spectators of sex shows, surrogates for actual viewers: unable to afford a table in the *Boca do Lixo* nightclub, they have to keep moving, a strategy that allows us to keep entering into different illicit spaces, the camera as proxy for those who can’t

²⁶ Catherine Hakim deems *erotic capital* an invisibilized, feminized corollary to economic and cultural capital. See “Erotic Capital” (Hakim, 2010). On the *Boca do Lixo* actresses, cf especially Abreu (2006); Marcel de Almeidas Freita (2004), “Pornochanchada: capítulo estilizado e estigmatizado da história do cinema nacional”; Johnson (1984), “Popular Cinema in Brazil.”

afford the real thing. The *Boca do Lixo* network—yoking together the films, their print culture paratexts, filmmakers, crews, actors, and spectators—foregrounds questions of access: to the materials of filmmaking, to moving images of sex, and to the valorizing terms of “work” and “productivity.”

Sex Work, Film Work

The *Boca do Lixo* films rarely explicitly question structures of injustice (sex, race, class) but instead explore and display how sex operates in blunt and cynical ways. These films stage dilemmas of sex in a world characterized by its simultaneous repression and hypervisibility: worlds where desirable women are momentarily within the spectator’s gaze and the characters’ reach. In the process, they query repression, harassment, violence, and class *ressentiment*, often employing lowbrow humor to manage anxiety about displaying sex during a time of censorship. “Try to cover yourself up and at the same time show yourself”—the words of a photographer to a nude model in one *Boca do Lixo* film (Jean Garrett’s *O Fotógrafo*, 1980)—a neat encapsulation of the genre’s peek-a-boo voyeurism.

Frequently located in lower-middle class worlds of São Paulo (the mechanic shop, the bar, the dance hall, the by-the-hour hotel), the *Boca do Lixo* films are punctuated by flights of class-skipping fantasy and narrative arrest/visual spectacle around the nude and willing female body, stitching together thinly-constructed plots through a cinema-of-attractions of nudity. (A factory laborer to his co-worker: “If I were rich I’d have my own apartment and be able to buy any woman I want” [*A Noite do Desejo*]). Like their hardcore contemporaries in the U.S., they were capable of “transforming dreariness and scarcity into phallic and commodified intensity and abundance”—a scarcity belied by the so-called economic miracle and the rhetoric of hard work and uplift that characterized the military dictatorship (Williams 1999: 156).²⁷ In responding to two of the dictatorship’s key mythologies: the economic miracle, and the privileging of the Catholic family, endlessly ridiculed and punctured here, they also suggest the failed promises of sexual liberation: Brazil’s 1968 as an ultimately truncated promise for those seeking to disrupt its hyper-gendered politics. Their “pornotopias” were often sadder and stingier than their U.S. counterparts: their escapism truncated,

²⁷ Early on, José Carlos Avellar proposed early on that the genre’s popularity with the working class was a reaction to the false promises of *milagre*. Cf also Simões (1979); Dennison (2009).

and often deeply cynical, displaying the scaffolding of the economic miracle's own cruel optimism.²⁸

Mansur's *A Noite do Desejo*, for example, follows the two factory worker friends after they have saved up their earnings for a night of sex in the *Boca do Lixo*. As the night drags on, they are increasingly frustrated in their efforts, a "coitus interruptus"—as opposed to hard core's "money shot."²⁹ The promised night of desire is thwarted by various obstacles: the lack of an available private space to consummate the act, the prostitutes' own negotiation, an interloping voyeur, the vice squad. At the film's end the two men are back where they started, in a bus on the outskirts of São Paulo, heading to the factory with other workers.

Despite all its titillation and anxious voyeurism, *A Noite do desejo* ends by suggesting that sexuality under capitalism functions as a support for the exploitation that happens under 'free' waged labor, as a misogynist mirroring of Silvina Federici's essay "Why Sexuality is Work" (1975): "Sexuality is the release we are given from the discipline of the work process...It is a license to 'go natural,' to 'let go,' so that we can return more refreshed on Monday to our job. 'Saturday night' is the irruption of the 'spontaneous,' the irrational in the rationality of the capitalist discipline of our life" (Federici 2012, 23).³⁰ In Mansur's film, however, even the "letting go" is thwarted; the constant frustration of desire inadvertently threatens to turn the worker-consumer's night on the town into a long, nightmarish prolongation of the working day in the factory. The film posits the relationship between the male factory worker and female sex worker as symbiotic—a process, I suggested, that occurs across films from the period more broadly. The sexual desire that is delayed and thwarted may be enacting a strategic peek-a-boo with the censors, and an ultimately conservative one (Stam), but it nevertheless opens up key questions, and it is one of the only places where cinema asks them: how does sex work prolong and shape the working day in the factory? Moreover, what is a working day (or *night*)? How do services line up or fail to correspond with work-time in sex work, in the factory?

The credo that all sex is deeply self-interested, in the economic sense, is a constant in the *Boca do Lixo* films. Characters are constantly staging the exchange of sex

²⁸ I take the phrase from Lauren Berlant's (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. On the "failures" of the sexual revolution in Brazil, see, for example, Victoria Langland (2013), *Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the Making and Remembering of 1968 in Brazil*.

²⁹ On *coitus interruptus*, cf. Stam (1997, 277); on the "money shot" see Williams (1999).

³⁰ Her analysis here also recalls earlier theories by Adorno and Horkheimer ("The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception") and C. Wright Mills (*White Collar*).

for money: they steal from one another other, discard each other in the interest of wealthier characters; they ostentatiously display objects of consumption to compensate for infidelity or to reward sex. Money-as-mediator is baldly displayed (thrown on the bed, waved around, performatively tucked into a blouse), rarely a vanishing mediator; sex is the primary means of glossing economic power, with the utmost efficiency: a character may stroke his crotch while talking about money; a woman calculates her career advantages amidst a session of vigorous thrusting; even the sex ‘numbers’ or interludes are riven through with prominently displayed exchanges of cash. All this in implicit contrast to the exchange of money in waged labor, which in prestige productions tended to be either invisibilized or highly mediated: the paycheck discussed around the family dinner table. These films thus implicitly give the lie to the idea that waged labor is voluntary or free, while eschewing the work ethic and the legitimacy of the wage for informal, illicit economies and a display of *malandragem*.

Naked interest and “getting by” thus link sex workers to everyone else in the world of these films. As they shape an understanding of sex work-*qua*-work, they do not, in the process, valorize or elevate work. Work does not bring satisfaction for its productive forces, or instill a sense of pride, as it does in the contemporaneous industrial film cycle. In *malandro* fashion, work is a means to something else entirely: mobility, independence; the flouting of a circumscribed, marginal status. In *A Dama da Zona (Hoje tem gafieria)* (Ody Fraga, 1979), for example, all the characters participate in one way or another in the sex work economy of the tenement (*cortiço*), where much of the film is shot and set. Carlos Reichenbach (here as cameraman), takes us up and down staircases, providing visual interest as bodies circulate, spy on each other, haggle, negotiate, and into corners, homes, bars. The film pivots around the title character, a desirable, financially independent (i.e., she works without a pimp or madam) sex worker, played by the *Boca* star Marlene Silva.³¹ The beauty of the neighborhood—the camera, like the characters, idolize her—Esmeralda is among its more successful and admired residents. Her home is the nicest, with ‘luxury items’ like a refrigerator, and she dresses better than any of the other characters. She also sets her own work terms: she only works at night, in a hotel, at a price she determines: “No one exploits me. With me a man must pay.”³² For Esmeralda, sex work is tiring (“All night long with my legs

³¹ See Luis Alberto Rocha Melo (2002), “Ody Fraga.”

³² The film’s title parodies the prestige production *A Dama da Lotação* (Neville de Almeida, 1978), a prestige production (high-budget, major stars, and adulation by the mainstream press) that is arguably equally misogynistic.

spread wide”), yet it affords her a rare economic independence. *A Dama da Zona* suggests sex work as a process, rather than an identity, and one that is a response to specific, often precarious circumstances. One of the film’s subplots, for example, foregrounds the anxiety of the residents, some of whom are sex workers, over not being able to pay the rent in the tenement. Indeed, it is not a far stretch to read the tenement as a microcosm of the *Boca do Lixo* itself: what do we all do, the film asks, to get by? And, ventriloquizing through Esmeralda, in the bluntest of terms: “Who are you to judge?”

Throughout the 1970s, journalists, essayists, and other filmmakers expressed acute anxiety over the *Boca do Lixo* films’ “contamination” of the public. The press, eschewing any sense of mediation, insistently accused the films alternately of upholding the dictatorship, dampening political energies, working in tandem with the censors, and of promoting both artistic devolution and immorality. At the same time, the negative coverage undoubtedly heightened the films’ relevance; in decribng the film’s narratives—and often pausing on the shapes of the actresses’ bodies—the press prolonged their afterlives and extended their virtual reception in the very act of denunciation.

In fact, and despite claims to the contrary, the *Boca do Lixo* films rankled not so much for their sex and nudity, for these were widespread and unremarked upon in still formats (magazines, poster, calendars), as some of the era’s most clear-sighted critics noted. Nor was it their low-production values, since earlier film movements (*Cinema Novo*, *Cinema Marginal*) had often been at least tacitly celebrated under these very terms. The scorn heaped on the films, and often cultivated by the *Boca do Lixo* itself, hinged instead on their economies, and more specifically the overlap between sex and money, of a too-direct link between them, and of the slapdash ethos of the gimmick. *Meretriz*, one of many synonyms in Portuguese for *prostitute*, shares a Latinate root with *meretricious*: prostitute-like; also “tawdrily and falsely attractive”; “superficial”; attractive but inherently valueless. Both stem from the verb, “to earn” and the noun for “prostitute.”³³ Per the mainstream press and official organs, the *Boca do Lixo* films were thrown together cheaply to feed a voracious machine of sex-starved working-class and petit-bourgeois men, to the detriment of any ennobling, aestheticizing dimensions (such as those of “high art,” which have long sought to contain the female nude).³⁴ The plots

³³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meretricious>. Accessed March 15, 2018.

³⁴ See Lynda Nead (1992), *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*.

of sexual/economic interest thus resonate with their context of production: as though the genre were always talking about itself, both depicting and enacting *malandragem*. Indeed, many of the films are about making films, and/or about selling images of sex, in one way or another.

Boca do Lixo films were thus depicted both from within and without as simultaneously displaying and fomenting the illicit economies of sex work. Producers and distributors use polemics sell films; “bad taste” and “explicitness,” became marketing ploys. They courted and helped shape their own oppositional stance: their rough-and-ready productions unabashedly fashioned for profit, in opposition to the *miúra*—the film of cultural importance with no pretensions for success in the market, backed by the Embrafilme or private foundations. They were a self-fashioned ragtag group of semi-professionals who made cinema through often unholy alliances that ostensibly compromised artistic integrity, yet they managed to collect. Here, for example, is Carlos Reichenbach (1988):

Unlike the situation in Rio, the São Paulo filmmaker did not look for investors among bankers, powerful industrialists, or wealthy patrons. His or her financiers were generally found among ranchers, lascivious gasoline station owners, friends with rich friends, well-to-do relatives (normally a liberal uncle), small businessmen and even lottery winners. Production became so diversified for that reason. For that reason as well, every fast-talking film technician dreamed of making a native Western, every marginalized actor could become a tropical Charles Bronson overnight, any semi-illiterate could make a *pornoanchada*...in record time. Those who studied the cinema or wanted to use the medium to express ideas, had to adapt to the system or move to Rio. (125)³⁵

Reichenbach’s synthesis of the *Boca do Lixo* production positions it at various margins, simultaneously: of the avant-garde, of academics, socioeconomic elite, and the press. Those who rose to prominence, or simply made money in this particular space, did so with a certain temporality (“overnight,” “in record time”), without a safety net, demonstrating “um certo *know-how* industrial” (Bernardet 2009, 212).³⁶

Reichenbach’s description of how *Boca do Lixo* films were made also includes a cast of marginalized types who seem to come from within the films themselves (“ranchers, lascivious gasoline station owners, lottery winners”). In yet another iteration of the genre’s self-reflexivity, these films often staged class- and taste-based hierarchies through dialogue. Characters might parrot debates or positions on taste, revealing the

³⁵ As quoted in Viera 1988, 125, from an original interview in the journal *Filme Cultura*.

³⁶ “A Pornochanchada Contra a Cultura ‘Culta’” was originally published in 1974 in the periodical *Opinão*.

extent to which filmmakers were following polemics surrounding Brazilian cinema during the period. In *A Dama da Zona*, for example, we periodically witness the apparition of two young filmmakers in search of ‘authentic’ location sets for their obviously late-*Cinema Novo*-inspired film, an exposé of the culture of poverty. To the young man with the camera’s condescension about cultural uplift, a tenement resident defends *sacaganem* as “culture, too.” *Sacaganem* here refers to “dirtiness,” “trickiness,” dishonest dealings, possibly sexual: the stuff *Boca do Lixo* films are made of, and the worlds they trace. (The two eager “denunciatory” filmmakers will ultimately end up being roped into making a pornographic movie.) In Jean Garrett’s *O Fotógrafo* (1980), a sexy sociology student similarly wants to reveal the “misery” of life in São Paulo through the camera, and brandishes leftist, feminist language: “reification,” “alienation,” “the commodification of the body.” (She is “captured” by the photographer’s lens, and then winds up in his bed.) These inserts of sociological commentary demonstrate the way in which the films engaged in a competition with prestige productions, deflating their language and celebrating bad taste as an alternative work ethic that implicated filmmakers, sex workers, and more.³⁷

Making films by any available means, seeking out johns, turning tricks: these were directors-for-hire, fast-talking people from the margins, crafting experiences for their (male) counterparts. To stage a *reapproachment* between the filmmaker and the sex worker; to consider sex work a form of legitimate, if delegitimized labor, through an industry that paralleled it: this marked a clear difference with past conceptions that metaphorized the artist-prostitute relationship to depict the artist’s debasement at the hands of the market. The *Boca do Lixo* films and filmmaking process unhinged this negative identity. Like the sex workers they filmed and produced on screen, the filmmakers and crew of the *Boca do Lixo* were hustlers (*malandros*); they trafficked in *sacaganem*; “gigolôs de puta pobre”; “spurned/lost daughters” of Brazilian cinema.³⁸ Their creed was that of a character in Fraga’s *A Dama da Zona*: “It’s not a question of respect — it’s a question of *biz-ee-ness*” (“business,” in English.) The depicted work as both debased in the public eye and acceptable, even roughly honorable —because honest— according to the codes of the *Boca do Lixo*. In the process, sex work tended to be depicted less as a metaphorical fall for artistic filmmakers and more as just another

³⁷ Here I am inspired by Laura Kipnis’ (1993) virtuoso reading of *Hustler* in *Ecstasy Unlimited*.

³⁸ How filmmaker Ozualdo Candeias describes himself. As quoted in Angela Aparecida Teles (2012), *Ozualdo Candeias na Boca do Lixo. A estética da precariedade no cinema paulista*. On “filha enjeitada,” see Abreu (2006, 23).

form of marginalized, potentially lucrative, work. In this sense, the *Boca do Lixo* challenged the figure of the filmmaker as *auteur*; it also challenged the construction of the productive worker that was emerging concomitantly through cinema and print media.

Blindspots

Not all filmmakers in the *Boca do Lixo* were able to abandon the prostitute-metaphor, however, indicating that this is less a definitive historical rupture than a moment of renegotiation. Some filmmakers also attempted to reassert the prostitution-alienation trope as a means of capitalizing on the long-standing art versus commerce opposition and, by extension, elevating their own work. In fact, it this struggle to reassert the metaphor that shows the crisis of its hegemony. One example will suffice. Garrett's *O Fotógrafo* follows the sexual and emotional ups-and-downs of a photographer who earns a living capturing pornographic images but secretly longs to create artistic images that express what he calls his "deepest self." Displaying Garrett's virtuosity for composition and framing, *O Fotógrafo* stages the dilemma of the artist and market through the confluence of soft-core pornography and advertising, beginning with its opening credit sequence. Here, still images of faceless, fragmented female nudes are intercut with technicians setting up a photo session, followed by a detail shot of a disembodied hand signing a check. The final image in the credits displays the title of the film and the director's own name, as skin magazines pile up around them. With the characteristic self-reflexivity of the *Boca do Lixo* films, *O Fotógrafo* thus opens by evoking Garrett's own work—in this case, his training in the advertising industry, registered in the careful, 'formalist' quality of his images—while also alluding to the *Boca do Lixo* films' reliance on the advertising dollars of local businesses to jumpstart their productions.

Yet, in contrast to other *Boca do Lixo* films (and here we find Garrett's *auteur* signature) the film features numerous attempts at "elevating" the *Boca do Lixo* model. These include classical music, reinforced in later scenes by shots of marble nudes in the photographer's home studio, as he snaps away at fleshy, greasy nudes; references to Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* and its "puta de luxo"; in one scene, title character, in profile, pretentiously recites Borges.³⁹ Despite its unusual inclusion of independent women

³⁹ Ruy Gardnier reads *O Fotógrafo* as an allegory of the *Boca do Lixo* director, trapped between art and industry. See "Jean Garrett, artesão da Boca do Lixo" (Gardnier 2002).

characters (the university student; the protagonist's skilled assistant) the real action takes place among the photographer, the businessman who provides the funds and, beyond, the consumer of the images. Refusing sex work its metonymical purchase, adopting the anxiety-ridden, belabored metaphor of "selling out," Garrett's pseudo-intellectual and mannered clinging to elevated taste end up exacerbating the genre's trenchant misogyny, revealing the ways in which bids for autonomous art depend on the shadowy figure of the prostitute.⁴⁰ As the protagonist of *O Fôtoógrafo* bemoans having to sell himself out, viewers are provided breasts, 'beaver' shots, and staged lesbian scenes, all ostensibly part of his anguished work-for-hire. In this sense, rather than approximating the labor of the sex worker to their own, the filmmaker self-fashions as pimp.

For as filmmakers struggled with the question of the value of their own labor within the circuits of cultural production of Brazil, something else was also happening. Bodies were being exchanged; they were produced, fragmented and reassembled within and beyond the films. They are produced through the genre's characteristic framing and cinematography (down the blouse, up the skirt, 'elevator' shots). The camera also seeks out as much flesh as possible: typical are its framing of the omnipresent nude photos plastered over walls in workspaces or bars, or stripteases framed by mirrors, to multiply the undressed body at various angles. In *A Dama da Zona*, for example, Esmeralda's body is overdetermined and fabricated in various ways: verbal descriptions and visual sequences highlight, and characterize the informal economy within the film's diegetic world. In an early sequence, a young girl has already learned to participate in this economy: she receives some money from one of the tenement-dwellers whenever she alerts him to Esmeralda's trips to the communal shower. (In the tenement, showering is public knowledge; the genre requires that women characters are regularly watched without their consent.) Descriptions of her nude body are then shared by the voyeur with the bar owner in exchange for beer. This traffic-in-voyeurism coexists with the emphasis on Esmeralda's self-made power, putting it in its place.

At the same time, in interviews with filmmakers, press kits, and advertisements, the actresses' bodies were depicted as raw material, devoid of skill and training. Rather than performers, they were presented as natural, even as national primary products, as

⁴⁰ On autonomous art and the prostitute, see especially Jennifer Doyle (2006), "Tricks of the Trade". From Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967) to later incarnations (e.g., Eliseo Subiela's *El lado oscuro del corazón* [Argentina, 1992], Carlos Reygadas' *Batalla en el cielo* [Mexico, 2005]), Hispanophone cinema positions the prostitute as enabling the male protagonist to "unmask" bourgeois values.

in the fruit and gems that burst forth from the Brazilian landscape, elaborated and worked on by technology, industry, and the filmmaker. (In his parodic short *Vereda Tropical* [1977], Joaquim Pedro de Andrade thus pushes the genre to its limits in this respect, detailing the protagonist's ornate sex life with Brazilian watermelons.) For their part, scholars and critics also participate in this practice—for example, frequently 'analyzing' the "shapes" of actresses in language that recalls the framing of the films themselves. Or in depicting the actresses as vulnerable victims, approximating the dangers of street prostitution. In this way, they contribute to an understanding of their bodies as matter devoid of skill: novice, untrained, a series of manipulable fragments. In contrast, sex work theorists and activists—as well as many characters within the *Boca do Lixo* films—have insisted on sex work as skilled performance.⁴¹

Within the *Boca do Lixo*, then, sex is posited as work, a powerful visible and audible component of Brazil's extensive but mostly invisibilized informal economy. But simultaneously, the actresses themselves also have their own labor invisibilized, and their bodies are reinscribed as material to be exchanged. It is as though the filmmakers could grant to their characters, up to a certain point, what they could not grant their performers as workers. "Sometimes doing gender might be treated as part of doing the job; at other times doing the job is part of what it means to do gender," in Weeks' pithy chiasmus (10). If the *Boca do Lixo* films depicted the sex worker as laborer, provoking in the process normative, and gendered, understandings of work, they nevertheless tended to extra-digetically position actresses as raw material to be trafficked and negotiated. This way of "doing gender" coexisted alongside their challenge: to see sex work not as moral stain or a symptom of general decay but as just another option when the promises of a good job and the good life were beginning to be glimpsed for a relatively privileged minority of the Brazilian population.

The *Boca do Lixo* would decline with Brazil's return to democracy, beginning in the early 1980s, through a combination of loosened censorship codes, the end of protectionist quotas for national film exhibition, and the arrival of international hardcore (or *pornô*, as the imports were known in Brazil.) The *Boca do Lixo* felt itself under attack, although it would not go down without a fight, in a last gasp that continued into the mid-1980s with the move into hardcore. The arrival of video would contribute to the decadence of movie houses and of feature-length pornography

⁴¹ On sex work as skilled performance, see Grant (2017); Virginie Despentes (2010), *King Kong Theory*.

consumed in public, and its urban space would suffer, like the “downtowns” of many global metropolises, further transformations. Sex work become increasingly (but by no means exclusively) privatized, moving from the street to interiors, and from the large screen to the small screen, into the present moment.⁴²

Unwaged, episodic, affective, and generally exempt from the category of labor—in the tawdry universes of the *Boca do Lixo*, sex work became part of a broader canvas of what work might mean: up to a certain point. It fell to international feminist contemporaries of the *Boca do Lixo* filmmakers, however, to depict more rigorously how sex work illuminates how capitalism shapes daily life.⁴³ In redefining what work is and could be from a feminist perspective, a group of transnational activist-theorists operating at the edge of the Autonomist Marxism in the ‘70s and early ‘80s—among them, Silvina Federici, Leopoldina Fortunari, Selma James, and Mariana Dalla Costa—found in sex work a particularly salient demonstration of how capital puts gender to work: not as an aberration but as a potent example of capital’s invisibilization of women’s labor. Sex work, they argued, was part of a vast field of invisibilized, unwaged, and doubly exploited labor that radiated outwards from the home. Their language was stark and revelatory: “Capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking.”⁴⁴ In emphasizing how women’s labor is produced with and through capitalist modernity, in their use of the first person plural (a “we” over a “they”), in emphasizing “housework” over “housewife,” they pressed, from a very different direction than their contemporaries in the *Boca do Lixo*, on the metaphorical use of the prostitute and towards the metonymical purchase of sex work. Expanding upon the Autonomist critique of the wage as capitalism’s mode of legitimation, they revealed how the wage functioned as a screen, at once revealing and concealing, labor and exploitation. This meant exposing the “secret workshop” of women’s labor, in the home and in the bedroom where surplus value is produced but “leave[s] no visible trace.”⁴⁵ Their work

⁴² Cf. Aparecida Teles (2012), especially “Boca do Lixo: disputas”; on this phenomenon globally, cf. Bernstein (2014). The contemporary afterlives of the *Boca do Lixo* can be found on television: directly, in the nostalgic series “Como era gostoso...”; or in reality shows with their gyrating bodies and revelatory confessions about sex. See Daniel Caetano (2001), “Por dentro e por fora da pornochanchada.”

⁴³ While they have different emphases, these theorists are united around core issues; they had already begun to perceive an increase in the outsourcing of services that had heretofore been considered private, unproductive, unpaid—including personal training, child- and elder-care, sex work, and housecleaning.

⁴⁴ See Federici (2012, 19). Originally published in “Wages Against Housework,” 1975.

⁴⁵ Thus troping Marx’s language of occlusion and revelation in *Capital*, with its journey into the “hidden abode” of labor, to the twice-hidden abode of women’s work: hidden from us

has recently reemerged in both scholarship and activism as containing keys to think the present.⁴⁶ Arguably, it is their “lessons from the ‘70s” that proved to be most prescient in thinking contemporary Latin American cinema’s renewed interest in both sex work and domestic labor.

I began by arguing that contemporary cinema’s renewed interest in sex work has an unexpected legacy in the ‘70s, a key moment of crisis and renegotiation of how to imagine labor. The last decade has witnessed an extraordinary group of Latin American films that explore commodified personal services from the perspective of workers. Many of these contemporary films have focused on the relatively invisibilized body of domestic workers, up until recently one of the vanishing points of both labor laws and cinematic approaches to labor. A subset of these films is particularly interested in the relationship between domestic and sex work. Both require regular engagement with and proximity to the filth and fluids of other bodies, yet they are often depicted as occupying opposite ends of a moral spectrum. The sex worker is asked to repent, or at least acknowledge her exploitation, in a way that other low-wage service workers are not.⁴⁷ This demand moralizes sex work by forcing absolution through salvation by outside intervention or self-help; it is grounded in an individual reckoning rather than structural conditions. The opposition and oscillation between sex work and domestic work draws its discursive—and, in cinema, visual—power from the continued association between refuse and sex in the feminized world of disposable laborers. As we have seen, this analogy was invoked by both defenders and detractors of the *Boca do Lixo*, but it also extends into other forms of feminized labor in the global marketplace. It reveals how constructions of “dignified” work subtend not only a gendered metaphysics of labor but also material conditions that posit that making less money cleaning someone else’s bodily fluids is less exploitative, and more dignified, than having those bodily fluids touch your own body in other ways.

Contemporary Latin American film often questions this opposition by showing characters engaging in both forms of work, refusing to ascribe a greater legitimacy to one or the other. Bernieri’s *Alanis*, for example, has its protagonist try out and choose sex work over domestic work. Whether performing a trick or cleaning a toilet, Alanis’s

by capital, but also neglected by Marxists themselves. See Fortunati (1996, 97); Kathi Weeks (2011), *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*.

⁴⁶ For contemporary returns to these theorists, see especially Weeks (2011); Anca Parvulescu (2012), “Import/Export: Housework in an International Frame.”

⁴⁷ Many workers move between both kinds of work, domestic and sex work. See Parvulescu (2012); Castillo (2012); Grant (2017); Despentis (2010).

work is drudgery and exploitation but not, the film suggests, any more than other forms of low-paid work. There is nothing spectacular or titillating about the extended scenes of sex work in *Alanis*. One is singularly uncomfortable in its duration, the other squirmingly grotesque; in both we are asked to share the title character's boredom, frustration, and exertion, but no more than when she briefly performs domestic labor. Nor does the film indulge in the self-flagellation typical of films about prostitutes. The *Boca do Lixo* films frequently walked the razor-thin line that separates domestic work from sex work, but they generally played it alternately for laughs and titillation, as in the maid who finds herself in the employer's bed (e.g., *Como É Boa Nossa Empregada* [Ismar Porto and Victor di Mello 1973]). In contrast, contemporary films dwell there, implicitly aligning themselves with the tradition of Federici, Fortunati, and other feminist Marxists of the 70s.⁴⁸

The contemporary films that interest me here thus question the assumption that sex work must be accompanied by a ritual of purification: the anguished-mirror interrogation sequence that is one of the icons of cinematic and televisual approaches to the prostitute; the tearful confession; or, in narrative terms, the staging of an 'empowered choice' regarding their labor. In her analysis of the twinned relationship of housework and sex work, *The Archane of Reproduction* (1980), Leopoldina Fortunati wrote, "Many women enter [sex work] by their own decision, inasmuch as anyone can ever really 'decide' in a capitalist society" (Fortunati 1996, 63). Like their predecessors in the *Boca do Lixo*, many of the sex workers of contemporary Latin American films decide: they are precarious entrepreneurs, contingent laborers, micro-*empresarias*. Yet the options afforded to them are already circumscribed; they decide as much as anyone can decide under capitalism: this too is their metonymical purchase.

For neither the outsourcing of social reproduction nor the incorporation of large numbers of women into wage labor (proletarianization) has significantly shifted the gendering of low-paid, unpaid, or otherwise 'unskilled' labor in the 21st century.⁴⁹ It continues to function starkly along class lines, as well as in regional, racial, and national terms, for most of the world. Culling up the alternate position that sex work took on

⁴⁸ See the dramedy *Domésticas* (Fernando Meirelles and Nando Olival 2001), which recounts the daily lives of a group of domestic workers in São Paulo, one of whom decides to try sex work. While the film refuses to show it—in contrast to its rhythmic montages of window-washing, floor-scrubbing, dog-walking—it nevertheless recalls the *Boca do Lixo*'s provocation of the deeply entrenched belief that domestic work is morally superior to sex work.

⁴⁹ The expectation that women entering the paid workforce in larger numbers would eradicate sex work did not pan out; shaped by migration, immigration and urbanization, sex work has become more extended, specialized and stratified.

and off screens in the '70s, these contemporary films thus suggest that it is not the Global North but the Global South that may offer us cues for the present. As scholars and journalists employ both terms like “feminization” and “Brazilianization” to describe the contemporary state of global labor, films like *Alanis*, *Dólares de arena*, *O Céu de Senly*, and others, train our eyes on the lived experiences of gendered bodies at work. Invested in the specificity of their sex worker protagonists, and in cinema’s capacity to capture bodies as they work, they nevertheless demand that we consider them as workers, as part of a broader reshaping of what it means to name and imagine labor, and what has been left out of this naming.⁵⁰ Rather than capitulating to the *impossibility* of naming or imagining, or of abandoning the concept of worker, they urge us to pursue its expanding definition at the edges of what a worker does and experiences, rather than who she is.

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⁵⁰ See Michael Denning (2007), “Representing Global Labor.”

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