

INCOMPLETE RESISTANCE:
REPRESENTATIONS OF PROSTITUTES AND PROSTITUTION IN
CONTEMPORARY BRAZILIAN AND MEXICAN FILMS

by

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ABSTRACT

Representations of prostitution are often used to negotiate changing meanings of gender and economy during times of turmoil. This dissertation examines the Brazilian films, *O Céu de Suely* (2006), *Baixio das Bestas* (2007) and *Deserto Feliz* (2008) and two Mexican films *El Callejón de los Milagros* (1995) and *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* (1996) to better understand how they deal with representations of prostitution in a rapid transition to neoliberalism. In order to better understand this process, I develop a concept called “incomplete resistance.” This term connotes the practice of denouncement without indictment. That is, the existence of prostitution and the conditions that compel women to sell sex are lamented, but without identifying the real underlying causes. Additionally, several of the films examined in this dissertation decry the conditions that lead women to be prostituted, but simultaneously encourage the viewer to take pleasure in the process. By contextualizing the films within the changing film industries of Brazil and Mexico, I seek to illuminate the connections between gender, prostitution films and governmentality.

INTRODUCTION

Dennis Altman, author of *Global Sex*, argues that prostitution is “central to any analysis of the sexual order- as is more generally the relationship of money and sex” (112). Sex and money involve exchanges of power and subordination that become more visible when we look at prostitution in particular. In terms of film, Teresa de Lauretis reminds her readers that an investigation of gender necessitates an understanding of its representations: “Thus, the proposition that the representation of gender is its construction, each term being at once the product and the process of the other, can be restated more accurately: *The construction of gender is both the product and the process of representation*” (*Technologies* 5).¹ Moreover, Russell Campbell explains that filmic representations of prostitution have been a popular means for negotiating women’s changing positions in society over time. He adds that images of prostitution reflect perceptions that are often contradictory:

Disturbed by woman and what she represents as the sexual other, men have found the fictional prostitute uniquely suited to embodying fantasies in which their acute desires and anxieties find expression. Because of the contradictory emotions she generates, she has come to occupy an equivocal position in the male imagination, both valued and vilified. (5)

In order to better understand the relationships between gender, power and representation, a closer examination of prostitution in film is crucial. With that in mind, the purpose of this dissertation is to analyze three Brazilian films, *O Céu de Suely* (2006), *Baixio das*

¹ Emphasis in original.

Bestas (2007) and *Deserto Feliz* (2008) and two Mexican films *El Callejón de los Milagros* (1995) and *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* (1996) to better understand how they deal with representations of prostitution and how those representations negotiate relationships of gender and neoliberalism.

Writing about prostitution in films is not nearly as sexy as one might think. This is certainly not the dissertation my mother wanted me to write. I discovered why she felt this way while shelving books with titles like *The Industrial Vagina* and *Whores in History* in my study carrel window and wondering if I could be arrested for watching some of the films in this dissertation while sitting in the library. I quickly discovered that writing about prostitution is almost never sexy, at least not to me. What is more, feminist debates over prostitution have become prickly, and any attempt to enter the discussion is not to be taken lightly. As my theory discussion elaborates, the on-going argument over prostitution and its meanings has led to a bitter divide. Although this divide at times seems stubborn and stale, that does not mean that it is resolved. In my discussions of the films themselves, the struggle over meanings of prostitution is very much alive. Film has provided a dynamic medium through which these debates are acted out on screen. At the same time, however, Russell Campbell observes that: “Predominantly, and unsurprisingly given that the film industry internationally has been male-dominated, prostitute characters in film are creatures of the male imagination. That is, though the characters are of course portrayed by women, the roles are usually written and the performances directed by men” (5). This is also the case in the five films examined in this dissertation, and is certainly a factor in the ways in which prostitutes and prostitution are represented.

This analysis of prostitution in contemporary Brazilian and Mexican films resulted from a series of observations. They began as I wrote papers for graduate classes, in which I sought to analyze filmic re-representations of history and myths in Brazil. As I researched for those projects, I noticed that prostitutes and prostitution figured heavily in filmic representations. Two key Brazilian examples that are worth mentioning are *Iracema* (1976) and *Guerra de Canudos* (1997). Jorge Bodansky and Orlando Senna's 1976 film *Iracema* re-tells the romantic foundational myth written by José de Alencar, in which an indigenous princess joins with a European conqueror, ultimately giving birth to their child.² This child serves as a symbolic first Brazilian mestizo, half indigenous and half European.³ Bodansky and Senna's modern interpretation substitutes the princess with an indigenous underage prostitute (around the age of 15) and her conquistador is a White truck driver from the south, who uses her for sex and then abandons her on the side of the road. Images of the highway, construction, conversations with locals and the radio's constant broadcasting of patriotic music make it clear that *Iracema* stands in for the abused, defiled, disadvantaged native people while her customer, "Tião Brasil Grande," is an obvious symbol of the government and classes that are destroying the Amazon region for their own benefit.

A more recent example is Sergio Rezende's epic *Guerra de Canudos* (1997), which re-envisioned the battles between the Brazilian national troops and Antônio Conselheiro's religious followers (1896-1897) through the story of a family divided. In

² For more analysis of *Iracema* (1976), see Pick, Zuzana. *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993 and Patricia Aufderheide's excellent "Cross-Cultural Film Guide" (Online) <http://www.library.american.edu/subject/media/aufderheide/iracema.html>, and Ismail Xavier's "El Dorado as Hell: Cinema Novo and Post Cinema Novo- Appropriations of the Imaginary of the Discovery." *Mediating Two Worlds*. Eds. John King, Ana M. López and Manuel Alvarado. London: BFI, 1993. 192-203.

³ Alencar's novel is still considered one of the foundational texts of Brazilian literature.

his poverty and desperation, the father of the family chooses to leave his modest home and lead the family in following Conselheiro to Canudos to form a utopian society. The oldest daughter of the family, Luisa, rejects Conselheiro and runs away, almost immediately turning to prostitution. Metaphors for denying patriarchal authority and the power of Christ abound throughout the film and Luisa's prostitution becomes a convenient representation of the violations perpetrated by the ruling classes.

Although these images are powerful and memorable, *Iracema* and *Guerra de Canudos* are only films, and initially, it may be difficult to see how they participate in a much larger system of representations. Both *Iracema* and *Guerra de Canudos* use prostitute characters to criticize authority, particularly in the form of the Brazilian national government, but at what price? As David William Foster argues in *Gender and Society in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*, filmic examinations of gender are often allegorical: "By this, I mean that personal issues of gender identity, gender conflict and crisis, threats to gender integrity, and gender transgression may all be a way of representing collective concerns that may or may not conventionally and customarily be identified via figures of gender" (8). In the case of *Iracema*, she may stand in for an entire population violated by capitalism and invasion. As the lost daughter, Luisa represents the victimized people of the region, literally and figuratively penetrated by the ruling classes.

In Mexico, Sergio de la Mora detects a similar practice in the representation of prostitution, particular in the Golden Age of Mexican cinema:

Seductive, often tragic and victimized, frequently brave and defiant, the figure of the prostitute- whether cast as a cabaretera, a rumbera, an exotica, or a fichera, depending on variants in the immensely popular genre- has shaped the erotic

fantasies of readers and audiences for more than a century, not only in Mexico but across the Americas. In a country that until the late 1950s did not permit explicit representations of sexuality or nudes in film, the prostitute stood in for sexuality and the pleasures and dangers incurred by modernity. (22)

Films such as these often project the results of rapid modernization onto the violated prostitute body, using femininity as a symbol in order to negotiate fears of vulnerability and anxiety at the penetration of capital.⁴

The danger here is that by investing so much meaning in these characters' bodies, by using them to *embody* acts of violation, they become symbols, and, for lack of a better word, un-become subjects. Mary Ann Doane identifies this process in "Film in the Masquerade," where she contends that: "The woman, the enigma, the hieroglyph, the picture, the image- the metonymic chain connects with another: the cinema, the theatre of pictures, a writing in images of the woman but not *for* her. For she *is* the problem" (228). As this dissertation will demonstrate in the following chapters, this often remains the case.

Impetus for this dissertation came from my experiences in studying feminist film criticism, performance theory and neoliberalism. To be honest, the connections were not immediately apparent to me. Feminist film criticism taught me to be suspicious of filmic techniques, even as they work so very hard to envelop us in their discourse. Scholars like Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey, among many others, have provoked feminist film scholars to read against the grain of films, to see what is hidden and to examine how women are framed. Claire Johnston urges us to fight the male gaze as it is produced in the act of filming itself, to empower images of women in order to disrupt patriarchal

⁴ More specific historical and contemporary examples of this are given in the chapter on Mexican films.

dominance. Performance theory has led me to see things as far more physical, to see the body in the frame and ask how discourse is acted out. Judith Butler incites me to ask how gender is ‘performed,’ whether on screen or in daily life.

When I began reading about neoliberalism, though, I initially saw very little connection. While writers emphasize that neoliberalism obscures the workings of capital, and particularly class, it is not readily apparent how neoliberalism also shapes and manipulates the creation and circulation of representations. Furthermore, well-known critics of neoliberalism, such as David Harvey, notoriously ignore gender in their analysis. I wondered if gender and neoliberalism had anything to offer each other, and how I could even begin to apply criticisms of neoliberalism to representations of prostitution. Then I discovered that the answer is in the neoliberalism itself. As a system that attempts to position itself as a neutral, market-based mentality, neoliberalism wants us to ignore gender and as a discourse, it intentionally distracts us from power inequalities that might disrupt the ‘free’ market or the entrepreneurial, free-actor mentality.

Russell Campbell, the author of *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*, repeats a quote from Marx: “Prostitution is only a *specific* expression of the *universal* prostitution of the worker” (309). This view is highly symbolic, though, and focuses on prostitutes for what they represent, not for who they are. As this dissertation reveals throughout, allegorical meanings are plentiful in representations of prostitution, most often at the expense of subjectivity. Another problem with Marx’s claim that prostitutes embody the plight of exploited workers is that prostitutes are not like other kinds of workers. As I elaborate in my chapter on theory, prostitution requires the

penetration of the female body, and the demand for this penetration is built upon meanings of gender and economy.

In the course of examining films on prostitution, I discovered that frequently the narrative seeks to denounce the conditions that compel or persuade women into prostitution while ignoring the structural causes of these conditions. Prostitution is often portrayed as a symptom. In order to better understand this process, I developed a concept called “incomplete resistance.” This term connotes the practice of denouncement without indictment. That is, the existence of prostitution and the conditions that compel women to sell sex are lamented, but without identifying the real underlying causes. In examining the symptoms of neoliberalism while allowing its discourse to go unquestioned, the resistance is incomplete. Furthermore, in several of the films examined in this dissertation the directors use the narratives of their films to decry the conditions that lead women to be prostituted, but simultaneously encourage the viewer to take pleasure in the process. This often takes place in the glorification of violence, as we shall examine in one case, or through the erotic display of nude women, as is present in others. I also reveal that in several of these films the director privileges the view of prostitution as a personal ‘choice’ (in the neoliberal sense), rather than as a result of class, race and gender conditions.⁵

⁵ Filmmaking in Latin America has a rich history of resistance, represented aesthetically and in terms of content. In particular, the movements of the 1960s and 70s termed “The New Latin American Cinema” were characterized by resistance against authoritarian repression, particularly by dictatorships. At the same time, however, these movements were largely funded by the State. As Julianne Burton argues: “The New Latin American Cinema is characterized by an inclination towards history and ethnography, by formal eclecticism and experimentation, by a desire to elucidate causes rather than merely to document effects” (51). In Mexico, among the generation of directors that led the wave of *auteur* cinema were graduates of the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos (CUEC, Est. 1963). Cacilda Rêgo points out in her essay on Brazilian *Cinema Novo* that filmmakers of that movement saw their art as political; the portrayal of alienation and concientization of the audience were a central concern (Rêgo online). For more on this,

Sergio de la Mora and Russell Campbell have already written extensively on representations of prostitution in film. De la Mora focuses on filmic productions of Mexico, particularly during the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema in his book *Cinemachismo*. When it came to contemporary films, however, de la Mora chose to analyze the film *Danzón*, which is an important film for several reasons, but does not take prostitution as a central theme. Russell Campbell includes a few examples from Latin America in his book, but admittedly does not have space to cover them in depth. Additionally, Campbell's work is highly limited in its approach to feminism and film, relying primarily on the narratives of the films and an analysis based in semiotics. By categorizing films under "types" of prostitutes, such as the "Babydoll," and "Working Girl," he does not succeed in sufficiently unpacking the structure of the filmic representations. Moreover, neither Campbell nor de la Mora adequately problematizes the connections between female sex work, gender performance and neoliberalism, which is what I have set out to do in this dissertation.

In her compelling book *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture and Neoliberal Governance in Vietnam*, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong asserts that: "Looking at writing and films within the context of economy and governance can supplement an understanding of neoliberalism and the ability of the market to generate a symbolic language based on the commodity fetish to make sense of both freedom and its differentiated governance" (xxviii). In this light, by examining contemporary Brazilian and Mexican prostitution films in this dissertation, my goal is a better understanding of the ways in which films are

see: Randal Johnson, *The Film Industry in Brazil: Culture and the State* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987) and Jesús Salvador Treviño, "The New Mexican Cinema." *Film Quarterly* 32:3 (1979): 26-37.

plugged in to a much larger system of economic, social and gender discourse. The theory chapter of this dissertation is titled “Prostitution, Neoliberalism, Representation and the Brazilian and Mexican Film Industries.” In this chapter I summarize two opposing feminist perspectives on the nature of prostitution and the importance of neoliberalism in these debates. I then discuss the importance of performance theory in understanding the role of female bodies in gender and film. My description of the Brazilian and Mexican transitions towards neoliberalism and the resulting effects on their film industries helps to connect filmic productions to actual money and policy and reveal the process of creating new governmentalities.

In the following chapter, “Brazil: ‘Realities’ of Prostitution,” I examine the recent films *O Céu de Suely*, *Baixio das Bestas* and *Deserto Feliz*. In that chapter I explain the various connections between these films, in their sources of funding, connections between their directors, proximity in release and also common themes. All three films take prostitution as their central theme, presumably with a critical eye, but my analysis demonstrates how often the films exemplify incomplete resistance in their overall effect. A closer look at the ways in which these films deal with violence, money and displays of female nudity elucidates this argument.

“Mexico: Melodrama Re-visited” compares the films *El Callejón de los Milagros* and *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?*, both released in the mid-1990s. While the first film utilizes melodrama to reproduce the classic fallen-woman scenario, the second uses innovative techniques and ironic juxtapositions to both question and appropriate these melodramatic performances. I conclude the chapter with a closer look at how these films compare to the Brazilian ones, both in terms of content and technique, and to what extent

they are able to resist the discourses that endorse prostitution. My conclusions ask whether the representations of prostitution discussed here lend themselves to incomplete resistance, and if so, to what extent. The question of subjectivity remains central. In the case of two of the films examined here, innovative technique and self-reflection help avoid the tendency toward incomplete resistance and suggest that feminist representations of prostitution are possible.

THEORY: PROSTITUTION, NEOLIBERALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE BRAZILIAN AND MEXICAN FILM INDUSTRIES

In any discussion of prostitution -or, for that matter, any feminist concern- it is impossible separate the material from the representational. They are so inextricably intertwined that to attempt to tease them apart would not only be impossible, but also inadvisable. For, as hard as feminists have fought to reveal the 'real' implications in the representation of women- be it on the screen, in literature, the law, or any other realm- it is impossible to ignore the role of the 'real' structures that both make these representations possible and depend on them for support. As Slavoj Žižek highlights in *Violence*, often our focus becomes fixated on what he calls 'subjective violence.' This is the most visible, physical violence, such as war. However, the immediacy of this type of violence may distract our attention from what he calls 'objective violence,' including 'symbolic' violence – embodied in language- and 'systemic' violence -embodied in economic and political structures (1-2). Žižek maintains that it is objective- including systemic and symbolic- violence that generates outbursts of subjective violence, supporting the contention that discourse matters in the 'real' world. It is for this reason that we cannot definitively determine whether representations of women as subordinate are the cause or the effect of their subordination. Since the two are so closely related, an attempt to separate them becomes a paradoxical chicken-or-the-egg riddle. The solution to the riddle does not lie in the origins, or which came first: representations or 'reality;' it lies in the on-going process and its perpetual results: representation supports subordination, which in turn promotes further representation of this subordination.

In the question of the representation of prostitution in film, discursive or symbolic violence signals the values being negotiated in society. Sergio de la Mora, author of *Cinemachismo*, explains:

Discourses on prostitution help unlock the complicated nexus of social relations that have historically shaped the private and public regulation of women's work, their sexual agency, and their assigned role as mothers of the nation. The figure of the prostitute is the emblematic social agent who embodies the anxieties, desires, and the contradictions generated by the transition from tradition to (post)modernity. (25)

De la Mora writes about Mexican films in particular, but the same process can be seen in prostitution films in general, and particularly in Latin America. A close examination of prostitution is, therefore, warranted. In this dissertation, I am dealing only with female to male prostitution and the figure of the female prostitute to which de la Mora refers. The gender power relations and dynamic of non-heterosexual prostitution, transgendered prostitution and male to female prostitution would certainly be different.

The purpose of this chapter is first to explore and investigate the varying and intersecting meanings of prostitution, to frame them within the neoliberal discourse, and to view them within the context of filmic representations. Second, I discuss the importance of neoliberalism in understanding the context of the contemporary Brazilian and Mexican films examined in this dissertation and the role of the state governments of these two countries in filmic production. This discussion will help to reveal the intersecting powers involved in creating and circulating these filmic discourses and their relationship to a broader context.

Prostitution: Definitions and Debates

Prostitution always already has multiple meanings. The first has to do with the exchange of money for sex, as Noah Zatz explains that “prostitution might be provisionally defined as attending to the sexual desires of a particular individual (or individuals) with bodily acts in exchange for payment of money” (279). In the context of heterosexual prostitution in which a woman sells sex to a man, Sheila Jeffreys demystifies that exchange and renders it more explicit by including “those practices ... in which men, through payment or the offer of some other advantage, gain the right to use their hands, penises, mouths or objects on or in the bodies of women” (2). Christine Overall extends this definition to include the condition of women that makes this exchange possible:

The practice called *prostitution* has two main features: first, it involves the actual activities of buying and selling sex services, using money or money equivalents; and second, it assumes and depends upon the socially constructed definition of women’s sexual activities as one type of buyable service or commodity for the benefit of men. (572)

It is this positioning of women as something that can be purchased and the implication of submission that lead to the more figurative meanings of prostitution. One definition in Webster’s Dictionary states that “to prostitute” means “to devote to corrupt or unworthy purposes: debase.” It is also extended to “a person (as a writer or painter) who deliberately debases his or her talents (as for money)” (935). More generally, prostitute is often the name for someone who sells something that supposedly should not be sold, or someone who undermines his or her own integrity for the sake of money.

To accuse someone of prostitution is generally considered an insult, because it implies submission and penetrability. It is no accident that many of the films examined in this dissertation use the word “puta,” both in Spanish and Portuguese, as a slur.⁶ Among men, it is meant to feminize the other person, while among women it often implies promiscuity. As Zatz points out, the use of such an affront is intended to criticize a woman that deviates from the patriarchal order: “The epithet ‘whore’ carries as many connotations of female sexual impropriety (in particular, having too many partners) as it does of commercial sex” (293). These multi-layered and interwoven meanings- submission, self-degradation, debasement, interference with the moral order- are inextricable from each other.

These connotations are tied up in and inseparable from patriarchy. Andrea Dworkin contends that this is because the one and only purpose of prostitution is to service male desires:

The word *whore* is incomprehensible unless one is immersed in the lexicon of male domination. Men have created the group, the type, the concept, the epithet, the insult, the industry, the trade, the commodity, the reality of woman as whore. Woman as whore exists within the objective and real system of male sexual domination. (388)

Sheila Jeffreys asserts that because of this, prostitution is an inadequate word to identify the practice of selling sex for money because it focuses on the actions of the seller rather than the buyer:

⁶ Its variations and euphemisms also seem endless, and range from the expletive, such as “whore,” to the evasive, such as “lady of the evening.” The variations in Spanish and Portuguese are as numerous as in English.

The word prostitution does not include the agents of the abuse, men, in the picture at all, and enables prostitution to be seen as something for which women are responsible and which women perhaps practise all on their own. The term prostituted women is useful in at least indicating that there is an agent involved.

But a term which really demonstrates male responsibility does not yet exist. (141)

This focus on the actions of the prostitute rather than the client is what allows for such demoralizing and pejorative euphemisms to be applied to women that sell sex, and all come into play when prostitution is represented in film.⁷

Prostitution can be viewed as the enactment of the submission and penetrability of the female body under patriarchy. As Judith Butler notes, the performance of gender “renders social laws explicit” (397). Maggie O’Neill extends Butler’s ideas specifically to the realm of the female prostitute:

[T]he actual performance of doing sex work highlights the distinction between the gender being performed (stereotypical heterosexual, sexualized woman/whore) and the social organization of desire rooted in hegemonic heterosexuality and fantasies revolving around women/woman in the patriarchal imagination. (144)

This means, of course, that heterosexual - men purchasing sex from women- prostitution is invariably tied into the production of patriarchy and the performance of gender within.

Sex Work vs. Prostitution

In her writings on the representations of prostitution in Vietnam, Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong explains that some authors insist on the use of the term “sex work” instead of

⁷ As the following chapters will show, the films examined in this dissertation tend to highlight the seller of sex, rather than the buyer, maintaining the question of why women sell sex, rather than ask why men buy it.

“prostitution” in an effort to avoid the negative connotations involved in the latter. She reveals, however, that the political meanings in words like “prostitute” are not so easily avoided, and that circumventing a word is not the best way to challenge its implications. She elaborates that: “this strategy avoids what goes into the construction of these meanings in the first place ... By showing what goes into the commodification and problematization of prostitutes and prostitution, I hope that readers will question meanings rather than take them for granted” (xxv). Ultimately, as the quote from Sheila Jeffreys also emphasized, the choice to use one term or the other is political, in that opposing groups in the debate over prostitution have adopted certain terms in order to better manipulate the discourse surrounding them. In keeping with the argument made by Nguyen-Vo, I have chosen to use the word ‘prostitute’ throughout this dissertation, as the adoption of the term ‘sex work’ implies adherence to the theory promoted by contractarians, which I will explain in more detail in this chapter. By using the word, I intend to unpack its varying meanings, rather than ignore the power involved in discourse.

In order to investigate the intersection of prostitution and film, it will be necessary to incorporate some current discussions surrounding prostitution. Strong debate persists, especially within the feminist scholarly community, about the nature, practice and effects of what some have called “sex work.” It has become crucial for feminists to examine the differences and similarities between prostitution and other kinds of work under capitalism, and how prostitution participates in gender construction. Because of the strong moral debates on prostitution, it is essential that this discussion focus on structures of power, rather than judgments of the actions of individuals.

Although the debate is highly complicated, a basic dividing line separates two positions on prostitution.⁸ Dennis Altman writes in *Global Sex*:

There is a bitter division between those who argue that human rights should mean the end of prostitution (understood as “sex-slavery” to use Kathleen Barry’s phrase) and those who argue that adults should have the right to use their bodies to make money and should be protected from exploitation and danger in making use of that right. (101)

Some feminist theorists, often called radical feminists, view prostitution as the result of the continuing dominance of women by men and argue that it can have no possible benefit to the individual who practices it or to society. This side of the debate rejects the idea that prostitution is an entirely voluntary act and emphasizes the gender and economic inequalities that uphold it.

On the other extreme, contractarians, who are also sometimes called liberal feminists, assert that prostitution can and should be legitimated as a form of work. In this case, the client and prostitute agree to a contract in which the service of sex is exchanged for payment as in any other commercial transaction. Contractarians frequently argue that the oppressive measures applied by the State, with the intention of abolishing prostitution, are the true examples of patriarchal control. They further argue that these measures frequently harm the very women they seek to protect, and thus contend that women sex workers should not be infantilized by unsolicited protective measures. Some contractarians go on to describe a possible utopian future in which patriarchy will no longer play a part in the issue and all those –including men and women- who wish to sell

⁸ For more on this debate between Contractarians and Radical Feminists, see the essays in *Prostitution and Pornography*, Jessica Spector, Ed. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006.

sexual services will be free to do so without prejudice.⁹ Sibyl Schwarzenback summarizes the position:

Once we acknowledge our Puritan heritage in general, and our critical attitude toward female promiscuity in particular, for what they in fact are – lingering prejudices-, and once we recognize that the need for sexual gratification is as basic a need as that for food and fresh air (and hence should be readily available), our opposition to commercial sex will vanish. (211)

This perspective assumes that by liberating antiquated attitudes towards sex in general, commercial sex can become a legally recognized form of employment with all of the rights that can come with it, such as unionization, protection from abuses, insurance and other benefits. Contractarians believe that prostitution is not inherently destructive to women, although some do recognize that its current form is the result of uneven power relations between men and women. Their solution to this is complete legalization and legitimization, freeing sex workers to organize and exercise the same rights as other workers. Some liberal feminists, such as Shannon Bell, seek to rescue the prostitute identity through historical analysis and post-modern performance art, while others, such as Laurie Shrage, ask readers to imagine prostitution in a context free from patriarchy and moral impositions.¹⁰

⁹ For more details on these debates see Carole Pateman's. "Defending Prostitution: Charges Against Ericsson." *Ethics* 93:3 (1983) 561-565, and Christine Overall's "Reply to Shrage." *Signs* 19:2 (1994) 571-575.

¹⁰ For more on these perspectives, see: Bell, Shannon. *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994, and Shrage, Laurie. *Moral Dilemmas of Feminism*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

On the other side of the debate, Carole Pateman views the question in a more pragmatic light, and describes prostitution as one result of the intersection of gender relations and capitalism:

The problem of prostitution then becomes encapsulated in the question why men demand that women's bodies are sold as commodities in the capitalist market.

The story of the sexual contract also supplies the answer; prostitution is part of the exercise of law of male sex-right, one of the ways in which men are ensured access to women's bodies. (55)

The question, then, is not one of sexual nature or of biologically- driven desire, but of what Christine Overall calls "the social definition of women's sexuality as a desirable commodity" (572). This "commodity," as Overall and Pateman describe it, is inseparable from the body itself. Pateman argues that, unlike other types of labor, prostitution demands the presence of the female body: "[T]o use the prostitute's 'services,' her purchaser must buy her body and use her body. In prostitution, because of the relation between the commodity being marketed and the body, it is the body that it up for sale" (562). Some theorists, such as Laurie Shrage and Lars Ericsson have likened prostitution to other 'services,' such as massage or psychotherapy, which are intimate and perhaps unpleasant for the provider, but are ultimately like any other type of work.¹¹ It is vital to recall, however, that unlike other professions, prostitution requires varying types of penetration of the female body. It is this submission and transgression of the boundaries of the female form that make prostitution unique. Also, given the inseparability of

11 For more on Contractarians, see for example Lars Ericsson's "Charges Against Prostitution: An Attempt at a Philosophical Assessment." *Ethics*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (Apr., 1980), pp. 335-366 and Laurie Shrage's "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution?" *Ethics*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (Jan., 1989), pp. 347-361.

sexuality, the human body and gender construction, prostitution is certainly not like many other kinds of work.

As the debate between contractarians and radical feminists demonstrates, prostitution is an on-going concern in discussions of feminism, whether in the interest of criticizing, moralizing or legitimizing. Prostitution is often called “the oldest profession,” implying that it always has, and consequently, always will exist. However, this view seeks to create continuity and to erase contextual particularities, indicating that prostitution is an historical inevitability. As Noah Zatz clarifies:

Such talk obscures the differences in social and cultural context- differences in economic organization, normative sexual practices and the relationship between sexual practices and identity, between economic practices and identity and so on- that shape the significance and structure of prostitution within any particular historical space. (278)

In this citation, Zatz correctly connects the symbolic with the real, demonstrating that one must consider contributing factors in order to see how prostitution is practiced and represented. Part of what is unique about prostitution in the films examined in this dissertation is the ways in which it is constructed in discourse, as I discuss in detail in the following chapters.

For the purposes of this project, the issue is not so much the ways in which prostitution has changed over time, but rather, the ways in which it has been framed. What is clear from the on-going debates between theorists such as Pateman and Ericsson is that conflicts over the meanings of prostitution have their roots in economic and political theory. The way in which labor is perceived is central to the issue;

fundamentally, it often comes down to whether the connections between gender and labor are viewed as separable. Contractarians, or liberal feminists, employ the language of neoliberalism in order to support their views on prostitution as work while radical feminists oppose this approach. In order to better understand this perspective, some discussion of neoliberalism and its relation to prostitution will be essential.

Neoliberalism and the Fallacy of “Choice”

Neoliberalism is the attempted penetration of capital into all aspects of life. It seeks to make money the ultimate measure of good. According to David Harvey, neoliberalism is “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Developed in the 1970s in resistance to Keynesian economics, neoliberalism was actively promoted by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Regan in the U.S. and in U.S. interests abroad in the 1980s and by other administrations continuing to the present.¹² A key part of neoliberalism is the adherence to the ideology of “free” markets, but also includes other elements, such as privatization, deregulation and cuts in government spending, particularly on social programs (Thacker 59). Wendy Brown clarifies that neoliberalism favors the interests of businesses above all:

In popular usage, neo-liberalism is equated with a radically free market: maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic de-regulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to

¹² For more details on its development, see the works by Duggan, Harvey and Brown cited in this section.

business and indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long term resource depletion and environmental destruction. (3)

By focusing on “freedom”- primarily of citizens, but also of companies- neoliberalism pushes responsibility for human well-being onto the individual and obscures systems of oppression. It supposes that money is the great equalizer, and attempts to conceal inequalities that often preclude access to material goods.

Although neoliberalism appears at first glance to be a hands-off approach on the part of the governing, in reality it requires extensive government participation, as Aihwa Ong explains:

Neoliberalism is often discussed as an economic doctrine with a negative relation to state power, a market ideology that seeks to limit the scope of activity of the governing. But neoliberalism can also be conceptualized as a new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as non-political and non-ideological problems that need technical solutions (3).

This recasting of problems serves to obscure their true origins and the interests of contributing parties, resulting in policies and practices that seek to treat the symptoms of poverty and inequality rather than the problem itself. In this way, the system of neoliberalism is allowed to continue widely unquestioned, and without indictment.

Government support of neoliberalism facilitates its penetration and imposition into various corners of society. Because of this, over time, the belief system of neoliberalism begins to seem natural, and as Lisa Duggan explains in *The Twilight of Equality?*: “Neoliberalism’s avatars have presented its doctrines as universally inevitable and its operations as ultimately beneficial in the long term- even for those who must

suffer through poverty and chaos in the short term. In other words, neoliberalism is a kind of secular faith” (xiii). According to Duggan, this is one reason why neoliberalism has so seamlessly inserted itself into political agendas, and successfully brought both the Right and Left into its mindset (42). The result is that questions of class, race, age and gender are often relegated to the realm of “culture” or “ideology,” with both sides often failing to perceive their unbreakable link with economics. David Harvey stresses that “Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (3). Neoliberal thought has penetrated even the ideologies that initially sought to resist it, integrating its own logic into many political perspectives.

Although prostitution certainly pre-dates, the current economic circumstances at the very least exacerbate its problems and facilitate its continuation. Prostitution fits elegantly into the neoliberal ethic, which insists that absolutely everything, including access to the human body, is up for sale. As Wendy Brown explains, under neoliberalism, all human activity is submitted to the realm of the market:

Not only is the human being configured exhaustively as *homo economicus*, all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality. While this entails submitting every action and policy to considerations of profitability, equally important is the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action, conducted according to a calculus of utility, benefit, or satisfaction against a micro-economic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality. (9)

This assigning of economic value to absolutely everything extends to and penetrates the human body. It becomes a kind of governmentality that does not rely on direct or overt reinforcement to ensure its continued influence on human action. Taitu Heron argues that prostitution under neoliberalism assigns monetary value to human beings and human bodies:

[The prostitution and sex] industry is based on the systematic violation of human rights, for it requires a market in commodified human beings and the complicity of pimps and clients who are prepared to buy and sell women and children. It is only one among many varied instances of the commodification of all of life which is a defining characterization of current neoliberalism, a pattern which hits at the core of human agency and robs one of the dignity inherent in each human being on one hand, and diminishes positive use of agency on the other (93-94).

Heron demonstrates that neoliberalism effectively robs individuals of free will.

Conversely, neoliberalism's doctrine simultaneously attempts to argue the opposite: that individuals have more agency in a free market system. The representation of prostitution as an entirely free choice is a confusion brought on by *prima facie* acceptance of neoliberal ethics. Because neoliberalism intentionally equates market freedoms with individual freedoms, it obscures extenuating circumstances that influence the supposedly free decision to engage in prostitution.

Neoliberalism's individualizing tendencies stress personal responsibility for problems that, in sharper focus, are caused by the system. By placing responsibility entirely on the individual, neoliberalism seeks to excuse itself as the cause of inequalities. The system attempts to accomplish this by emphasizing personal freedoms in the form of

“choice.” Far from liberating, these so-called freedoms are a means of governmentality. Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong reasons that “liberal governance persuades and controls by positioning the individual subject’s freedom to choose” (viii). Furthermore, by stressing the importance of “freedoms,” particularly of the market, neoliberalism ironically argues that it increases equality, assuming that money is the great equalizer, divested of interest in class, race or gender. This tension is played out particularly in discussions of prostitution.

It is this question of choice that is so problematic in the arguments of contractarians, and its use highlights neoliberalism’s penetration into feminist theory. For the contractarian argument to stand, one must assume that sex work is a free choice. The sex worker that contractarians seem to imagine in their arguments is an independent woman, who makes a cost-benefit analysis, sees an opportunity for increasing her income and decides to become a kind of sexual entrepreneur.¹³ Sheila Jeffreys identifies the problem with this view: “In particular, ideas of choice or consent transform the sex of prostitution from being a class condition of women to one of the personal choice of the individual” (136). This individualizing tendency obscures systems of power. It ignores patriarchy, conditions of poverty, drug addiction, family abuse, education, a lack of infrastructure, trafficking in women and children, the international pornography industry, political conditions and any other possible contributor that would compel women to enter prostitution. The falsehood perpetuated by the contractarian argument is that “choice” is entirely free and that is the exercise of one’s own power. While this may be the case in an extremely small number of places, in most cases, prostitution is practiced out of necessity

¹³ When theorists such as Laurie Shrage argue that the need for sex is biological, they also imply that men deserve to choose from a variety of sexually attractive women in order to purchase access to their bodies.

rather than desire. This is what leads Christa Wichterich to conclude: “Prostitution is the choice made by those who have no choice” (63).

Neoliberalism burns the “choice” candle from both ends when contractarians assert that the desire for sexual variety is natural and that, consequently, individuals (presumably male) have a certain biological need for access to prostitutes. In this case, the supposed male right to choose to buy sexual services relies on the “choice” of others to supply them. Upon closer examination, this is clearly the male sex right disguised as a neutral or common sense economic theory. The supply of penetrable bodies is generated by the demand for them, and this demand is represented as innate, implying to a certain extent that they are beyond the individual (male’s) control.¹⁴ Some contractarians compare the need for sex with other basic needs, such as food and shelter. This was made clear in the quote from Sibyl Schwarzenback earlier in this chapter. As Carole Pateman explains, however, sexual desire is not the same as other biological impulses: “There is also one fundamental difference between the human need for food and the need for sex. Sustenance is sometimes unavailable but everyone has the means to satisfy sexual appetites to hand” (61). As this rather humorous train of logic clarifies, the need for physical sexual contact does not equate to the need for submissive bodies. Nevertheless, it is in this way that neoliberalism attempts to obscure the structures of power that uphold gendered hierarchies.¹⁵

¹⁴ This logic cannot be an acceptable argument in favor of prostitution as it could also be used to justify things that feminists roundly reject, such as rape and child molestation. Desire is not equivalent to biological need or right.

¹⁵ The issue of female sexual gratification has often been brought up in debates on prostitution. In *The Idea of Prostitution* Sheila Jeffreys anticipates and answers this question in part: “Prostitution, of course, is not an ‘orientation.’ The right to choose to love someone of the same sex is not an appropriate comparison to the right to choose to be used as the raw material in a massive capitalist sex industry” (130).

Film and Gender: Bodies on Screen

It is within the context of patriarchy, the on-going debates amongst feminists and within the frame of neoliberalism that the films examined in this dissertation position their representations of prostitution. The analysis of these films will give better perspective on the ways in which representations of prostitution identify the intersections of economy and gender. David William Foster indicates that gender is “absolute ground zero for most human societies” and central to understanding culture because it is always already, or in his words, “never not” present. Additionally, he remarks that gender “is always present in the way in which language like Portuguese obliges gender identity to be evoked unavoidably in each and every speech act” (7). Of course, the same can be said of Spanish, which also incorporates gender into the words themselves.¹⁶

As I will explain in detail in the following section, gender is ingrained in the structure of filming. This is why it is so important to analyze films in general, and the prostitute film in particular. Mas’ud Zavarzadeh argues that films are never neutral or innocent: “Films are not merely aesthetic spaces but political ones that contest or naturalize the primacy of those subjectivities necessary to the status quo and suppress or privilege oppositional ones” (5). In this way, films participate in the discourse surrounding prostitution, and more generally, gender. They provide a means for promoting, resisting, questioning or ultimately upholding dominant discourse.

Zavarzadeh implies that the films require the spectator to adopt the dominant view. On

¹⁶ The gender that identifies words as masculine and feminine in language is not necessarily the same gender that applies to human beings. However, the way gender is represented in these words plays into cultural representations.

the other hand, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam suggest that spectators are able to interpret films from a variety of perspectives:

The spectator comes to the cinema psychically disposed and historically positioned. The viewer of hegemonic cinema might consciously support one narrative or ideology, yet be subliminally seduced by other fantasies proffered by the text. Thus we cannot posit a simple polarity between ceaselessly resistant, politically correct spectators on the one hand, and cultural dupes on the other (351).

The ways in which spectators interpret films will depend at least partially on the way in which the film's argument is structured and on the background and prior knowledge of the audience receiving the message. It is possible, as bell hooks has noted, to take an 'oppositional gaze.' This ability to read against the grain, or to read in the margins of a film is important because while some prostitute films often make violent representations of gender more visible, but that does not necessarily destabilize them.

Since prostitution is so embedded in patriarchy, it is difficult to imagine a feminist prostitute character. Sallie Marston defines patriarchy as "the unequal distribution of power and resources in a society based on sex and gender" (233). I would extend this definition to include the violence inherent in this process. As Teresa de Lauretis elaborates in *Technologies of Gender*, "[T]he representation of violence is inseparable from the notion of gender, even when the latter is explicitly 'deconstructed' or, more exactly, indicted as 'ideology.' I contend, in short, that violence is engendered in representation" (33). The mere submission of the body to male desires in exchange for

money as projected on the screen seems to make resistance to these violent constructions unlikely.

Performance theory will be particularly helpful in this investigation because it does not only take into account the explicit narrative told by the dialogues or actions in film (or theater, or political manifestations or any other type of performance), but rather applies a lens that helps us to see the combination of meanings and representations in interaction. As Diana Taylor explains, “Embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing” (3). The human body is at the heart of performance theory, and because of this, performance theory is an indispensable tool when analyzing representations of gendered bodies. Mary Anne Doane explains that “the body is always a function of discourse” (226). The prostitute film is not possible without the presence of the gendered and, in this case, female body.

According to Judith Butler, gender is enforced and repeated on the human body through stylized repetitions. She explains that the body is bearer of meaning that is “fundamentally dramatic:”

By dramatic I mean only that the body is not merely matter, but a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities. One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one’s body and, indeed, one does one’s body differently from one’s contemporaries and from one’s embodied predecessors and successors as well. (“Performative Acts” 393)

Prostitution is a clear and explicit execution of performed gender performance, for it relies on the presence and performance of the female body within its patriarchal (and

penetrable) role. Carole Pateman clarifies this by explaining that in the act of prostitution, the body is inseparable from the work being done:

When sex becomes a commodity in the capitalist market so, necessarily, do bodies and selves. The prostitute cannot sell sexual services alone; what she sells is her body ... to use the prostitute's 'services,' her purchaser must buy her body and use her body. In prostitution, because of the relation between the commodity being marketed and the body, it is the body that it up for sale. (562)

In prostitute films what is being sold is not the body itself, but images of the body in the act of being bought and sold. As Janet Wolff argues, it is not only the presence of the body, but also the politics of the way in which it is displayed that are important: "Again, this raises the question of whether, or how, women can engage in a critical politics of the body, in a culture which so comprehensively codes and defines women's bodies as subordinate and passive, and as objects of the male gaze" (415). Films generate continuous and ever-changing exchanges of looking. In the act of prostitution in film, an individual pays for sex, and we (the audience) pay to watch. In the case of heterosexual prostitution, in which a man pays a woman for sex, therefore, there is a double, or perhaps even triple, penetration. First, there is the discursive penetration of the Phallus (Phallic power, i.e. patriarchy), and the far more literal penetration of the phallus (penis).¹⁷ As Mary Ann Doane explains, the penis and the phallus are inseparable: "There is a sense in which all attempts to deny the relation between the phallus and the penis are feints, veils, illusions. The phallus, as signifier, may no longer *be* the penis, but any effort to conceptualize its function is inseparable from an imaging of the body" (28).

¹⁷ Of course, there is literal and figurative penetration in male-to-male prostitution as well; however, that is not my focus in this dissertation.

When the image is projected for the audience's pleasure, there is again another level of penetration in the form of the gaze.¹⁸

The gaze is generated not only by what is displayed, but also by how it is represented. In order to understand the ways in which a film constructs its meanings, we must take into account the narrative, and also the structures, such as sound, framing, camera angles, and the bodies themselves. Stylization is crucial in representations of prostitution, and often the gaze is overwhelmingly male. Mary Devereaux explains the male gaze: "In figurative terms, to say that the gaze is male refers to a way of seeing which takes women as its object. In this broad sense, the gaze is male whenever it directs itself at, and takes pleasure in, women, where women function as erotic objects" (337). Since prostitution films represent women in their objectification, it is common for filmmakers to similarly objectify them by eroticizing their circumstances.

The multi-layered intersection of gazes generated in viewing prostitution films (and in all films, for that matter) can best be explained by Laura Mulvey's description of the "three different looks associated with the cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (447). The film, therefore, generates continuous and ever-changing exchanges of looking. The most difficult question posed when we acknowledge these multiple forms of visual penetration is whether, and how, it is possible to resist patriarchal discourse, cinematically speaking, within these constructs.

¹⁸ Of course, why we watch is not always clear. Not everyone watches a film with the intention of taking pleasure in the images. For example, one may watch a film that represents prostitution in order to condemn abuses, to see a different perspective, to admire the artistic value, etc. At the same time, from an economic standpoint, the seller does not care as much why one purchases a film, only that they do purchase it.

There is particular danger in failing to address aspects of structure in filmic texts, as Mary Ann Doane elaborates in “Film and Masquerade”: “Cinematic images of woman have been so consistently oppressive and repressive that the very idea of a feminist filmmaking practice seems an impossibility. The simple gesture of directing a camera toward a woman has become equivalent to a terrorist act” (223). In this observation, Doane highlights the phallic nature of the camera and the patriarchal structure of classic film. A further interpretation of Doane’s hypothesis here would be to say that directing a camera without questioning form is not an effective method of resisting dominant discourse. Claire Johnston cautions feminist film makers specifically against this type of filming:

Women’s cinema cannot afford such idealism; the ‘truth’ of our oppression cannot be ‘captured’ on celluloid with the ‘innocence’ of the camera: it has to be constructed / manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film. (29)

Johnston raises a vital issue in women’s cinema by questioning whether it is possible to resist patriarchy while using the same entrenched techniques of filming that have stereotyped and oppressed women in cinematic representations of the past, and the present. This is why it is crucial that we examine not only the story told by the narrative and dialogue, but also the way in which the story is represented. Without critically examining the construction of the film, it is all too easy to have strong female characters say one thing while the overall effect of the film undermines their resistance.

This real concern, particularly for the poverty and abuse that lead to prostitution, as contributed to its increasing portrayal. However, this is not the only incentive.

Although prostitution is the central topic or problem examined by these directors, it is important to note that it is both the subject of their filming and the functional allegory.

Ismail Xavier explains allegorical filming:

In allegory, the narrative texture places the spectator in an analytical posture while he or she is facing a coded message that is referred to an 'other scene' and not directly given on the diegetic level. The spectator's willingness to decode finds anchorage when this 'other scene' is signaled as being the national context as a whole. (16)

For several of the films examined in this dissertation, prostitution is the problem in itself, and it also stands in for an array of other issues. In some cases, it represents the violated body (politic) as well as the penetrability and vulnerability of certain populations, usually poor women. Prostitution may additionally represent a certain selling out, feminization, or giving up in the face of adversity. It is important to remember that because the female body often stands in as a representation of the nation, region or people, prostitution may imply a failure to protect the vulnerable against perceived invaders, such as industrialists, predatory capitalism or sexual tourists. This allegorical process is made possible through gendered violence. Using the example of rape, Teresa de Lauretis explains how violence is engendered:

When one first surveys the representations of violence in general terms, there seem to be two kinds of violence with respect to its object: male and female. I do not mean that the 'victims' of such kinds of violence are men and women, but

rather that the object on which or to which the violence is done is what establishes the meaning of the represented act; and the object is perceived or apprehended as either feminine or masculine. An obvious example of the first instance is ‘nature,’ as in the expression ‘the rape of nature,’ which at once defines nature as feminine, and rape as violence done to a feminine other (whether its physical object be a woman, a man, or an inanimate object)” (42).

Because of this, the representation of prostitution also brings with it a host of symbolic meanings, such as the enactment of sexual fantasies, the threats to patriarchal moral order, or the destructive nature of neoliberalism. It may stand in for everything from rape (both literal and metaphorical), to the destruction of ‘traditional values,’ to voluntarily debasing oneself for economic reasons.¹⁹ In this way, characters within the film serve as stand-ins for presumably much larger problems. This process often comes at the expense of their subjectivity, however.

Film, Gender and Neoliberalism

The initial sections of this chapter have revealed that prostitution itself is not new. Its current centering on *homo economicus*, however, and the ways in which we frame discussions surrounding prostitution, are relatively new. Up to now this investigation has demonstrated the importance of neoliberal discourse in shaping the arguments of contractarians, ultimately revealing the fallacy of the concept of free choice when applied to prostitution. The section that follows highlighted the importance of the politics of representation of the body in prostitution films, and the ways in which prostitution is often utilized allegorically to denounce other problems. The next step will be to connect

¹⁹ One of the clearest examples of this allegorical tendency in Brazil is the 1976 film *Iracema*, in which a young, indigenous girl’s abuse is juxtaposed with the deforestation and other abuses of the Amazon region.

these concepts with each other to show what, exactly, prostitute films are trying to *do* within the context of neoliberalism and the politics of the body.

In the act of prostitution the penetration of the female body is up for sale. In prostitute films, representations of the penetration of the female body are up for sale. In some cases, these representations seek to reflect the conditions of women that work as prostitutes in order to denounce them. In others, it may be a representational space in which society can manifest its desires for actions that are otherwise considered unacceptable, as Mas'ud Zavarzadeh argues:

If, for instance, the desire to dominate women (for ideological reasons) is no longer acceptable to the liberal consciousness of the middle class, the deep desire of a patriarchal order to control women finds its expression in the symbolic enactment of this desire in the space of a margin where the liberal imagination enacts its cultural fantasies through the mediation and agency of others. (203)

In her examination of social realist films in Vietnam, Nguyen-Vo Thu-Huong argues that the representation of prostitution as the inevitable result of capitalism serves as a kind of governmentality. According to her analysis, a social realist film acts in a journalistic sense like an exposé, revealing social problems and “realities” that exist beneath the surface of neoliberal economics (215).²⁰ She sees the filming of social ills as an investment on the part of the market:

[This] profitable enterprise has been to capture this underside of market freedom in some symbolic order, to give audiences orienting meanings in social fantasy.

This is where popular culture intersects with the terms that government has been

²⁰ Nguyen-vo is speaking specifically about the situation in Vietnam after the opening of the markets to neoliberal policies. However, the method of using film for denouncement can be appropriately applied to other situations.

using to control market realities as it increasingly relies on different modes and techniques of governing for the exigencies of the neoliberal global economy.

(216)

At the same time, however, these representations seek to reveal more than to denounce. They often focus on the personal rather than the systematic causes of prostitution, individualizing the problem and avoiding the political causes.

Mexican film director Carlos Hagerman suggests that documentary films are beginning to fill in for the shortcomings of journalism.²¹ Where newspapers and television stations no longer invest money in in-depth reporting, documentary films have an opportunity to tell more detailed and personal stories. That being said, documentary and fiction films are in no way immune to the pressures of the market, and the ways in which they represent prostitution continue to contribute to the symbolic order, as described by Nguyen-Vo. These representations of prostitution serve as a means for disseminating discourse on gender and economics in the transition to neoliberalism. In order to better reveal the politics of representation at play, the next section will give some insight into the deployment of neoliberal economics in Brazil and Mexico and the role of the national governments of these countries in cinematic production.

Neoliberalism in Brazil

The most recent applications of neoliberal economics in Brazil were imposed in the last fifteen years or so by the governments of Presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. Although this recent dominance of neoliberal policies or similar agendas may seem new, it is far from it. As Tom Lewis explains, pro-capitalist

²¹ These comments were made by Mr. Hagerman at the Documentary Film Panel Discussion at the Tucson Cine Mexico film festival in Tucson, Arizona, March 6, 2011.

policies originating during the Brazilian dictatorship, resulting in the “economic miracle” of the 1970s. Although the “miracle” temporarily led to a sharp increase in foreign investment and production, they did not have an even effect on the distribution of wealth. Lewis emphasizes that the last decade of neoliberal policies has only exacerbated this effect and subsequently increased poverty and suffering among the lower classes:

The human toll of a decade of unbridled neoliberal globalization in Brazil is staggering. Almost 17 percent of the population—27.7 million Brazilians—still lives on less than a dollar per day. Fully 25 percent of Brazilians live below the official poverty line ... Fifteen million unemployed people inhabit Brazil’s large urban centers, while 25 million rural workers struggle to survive in temporary agricultural jobs ... The wreckage of neoliberalism is visible everywhere. (online)

Alfredo Saad-Filho and Maria de Lourdes Rollemberg Mello describe the lack of success in the neoliberal policies enforced by Fernando Henrique Cardoso and continued by Luis Inácio Lula da Silva during what they call the “neoliberal decade,” 1994-2005. The purported intention of neoliberal policies is to foster equal opportunity and fair competition. In reality, the application of neoliberalism in Brazil has led to increasing unemployment, a gradual transfer of money from the public to the state in the form of taxes, an overall decrease in relative household income, and an even wider disparity between the rich and poor (Saad-Filho and Mello 110).

As a system of upward distribution of wealth, neoliberalism represents all unemployment as voluntary and the inability of lower classes to thrive as a question of individual failures, rather than systematic oppression. Marilena Chauí reveals this tendency in Brazil in the year 2000 in her questioning of the validity of the 500-year

celebration of the “discovery.” She asserts that Brazil’s authoritarian society seeks to maintain a hierarchal structure while simultaneously representing itself as beneficent and cordial. To this end, those who are unable to benefit from the system are seen as at fault for their own failures: “The existence of those without land, without homes, of the millions of unemployed is attributed to ignorance, to laziness and the incompetence of the miserable” (93).²² This intensifying of inequality brought on by neoliberal policies is apparent in all three films examined in this dissertation. The protagonists come from the lower or agrarian classes and struggle to earn enough money to survive, particularly because they are women. All three films are a means to make visible the problem of regional poverty and inequality, and their gendered effects. Furthermore, their neo-realist filming styles seek to contradict more romanticized or exotic versions of north eastern life as somehow quaint and traditional; they opt instead to focus on the difficulties of daily experience in harsh economic and environmental circumstances. As previously mentioned, prostitution not only results from these conditions, but also serves as a convenient trope for filmmakers to utilize in representing the effects of neoliberalism. This allegorical use extends far beyond the individual characters in the film in order to symbolize neoliberalism’s figurative economic prostitution of the nation for its resources. At the same time, however, the films’ resistances are often incomplete, as in some cases they represent prostitution as an entrepreneurial choice, they eroticize the female body or they focus on the individual, rather than systematic causes of prostitution.

The running of bordellos, pimping and exploitation of children are illegal in Brazil. To a certain extent, prostitution by individuals is tolerated, provided it does not

²² “A existência dos sem-terra, dos sem-teto, dos milhões de desempregados é atribuída à ignorância, à preguiça e à incompetência dos miseráveis.”

take place in certain spaces. However, as Christa Wichterich explains, prostitutes in Brazil are not given the same protections as other kinds of workers. This situates its legality and legitimacy as always-already in question: “In Brazil as in Germany prostitution is not illegal, but it may become criminal at any moment because it is not recognized as involving a relationship of employment” (63). The Brazilian national government has pledged to eradicate underage prostitution; however, due to the potential of bringing in far more money than other endeavors or types of work, prostitution and trafficking have remained prevalent (Finger 1196). Although the national government launched an anti-trafficking of minors campaign in 2003, in 2005 the national Director for AIDs Policy, Pedro Chequer, rejected a \$40 million U.S. aid package when he refused to sign a statement condemning prostitution in general (Kaplan 2005).²³ Although slavery and the exploitation of minors are recognized as crimes, other types of prostitution are seen as a matter of free choice. The Brazilian Northeast, where the films in question take place, is a popular tourist destination for national and international travelers, including sexual tourists. However, the bulk of this activity is limited to the large, coastal cities. While much ethnographic research has been done on prostitution in cities such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, relatively little is available on more rural areas, especially in the interior. Generally, prostitution is still widely represented by the government and media sources as a social problem, often connected with drugs, AIDs and particularly the abuse of children.²⁴

²³ The government’s stance is somewhat ambiguous. While some kinds of prostitution are condemned, others are allowed and, some may say, even encouraged. Prostitution to tourists also helps to indirectly support the hotel, travel and hospitality industries, making it an important player in many local economic structures.

²⁴ The most recent accounts of prostitution in the *Diário do Nordeste* have been associated with criminal networks. < <http://diariodonordeste.globo.com/>>

These issues have led to an increasing interest on the part of Brazilian filmmakers in prostitution and its representations. In an interview with the Academia Brasileira de Cinema, Paulo Caldas, director of *Deserto Feliz*, was challenged to explain why he opted to include a German sex tourist in his representation of a prostitute protagonist in Recife:

... one of the intentions of the film is to put the problem of sex-tourism as a responsibility not only of Brazil, but also of the country that exports the sexual tourist. This is a question of culture and education. It wasn't me who chose a German. It was the Germans who chose the prostitutes of Recife (online).²⁵

Caldas goes on in the interview to explain that certain Brazilian cities have higher incidences of sex-tourists from different parts of Europe, and that businesses near the beach target such tourists with advertisements in their own languages. It is clear that the three Brazilian films examined in this project attempt to reflect these problems within the context of neoliberalism.

The State and Film

Because of the close connection between the Brazilian film industry and the state, and the state's support of neoliberal economics, a deeper understanding of their interrelations will facilitate the analysis of the films produced. The three Brazilian films examined in this dissertation have all benefited in some way from direct or indirect state support for the Brazilian film industry. The trajectory of Brazilian cinematic production has been characterized by several scholars by the evolution of state involvement and its

²⁵ “[...] uma das intenções do filme é colocar o problema do sexo-turismo como responsabilidade não só do Brasil, mas também do país que exporta o turista sexual. Essa é uma questão cultural e de educação. Não fui eu que escolhi um alemão, foram os alemães que escolheram as prostitutas de Recife.”

tension with the industrialized and often foreign cinema.²⁶ Carlos Diegues explains: “Despite the fact that market forces are respected throughout the civilized world, in any country with at least a reasonable film industry the State always intervenes to some extent to keep it going ... It very rarely assumes the role of entrepreneur or investor but almost always acts as mediator or regulator” (29). It is because of this involvement that state support has been and continues to be an integral factor in film production levels in Brazilian national productions. Historically, as government participation increases, so does production.

In “The Rise and Fall of Brazilian Cinema, 1960-1990,” Randal Johnson explains that the state has been a major regulator and source of funding since the 1930s, with particular increases in the 1960s and 1970s – the era of *Cinema Novo*- and continuing in various forms until the present. This support has often been protectionist, as in the case of screen quotas instituted by Getúlio Vargas. These requirements, which mandated that a certain amount of screen time be dedicated to nationally-produced films, were an attempt to shield national cultural production from the overwhelming capitalist forces behind imported studio films, primarily from the United States (367). In the case of *Cinema Novo*, the movement perhaps most-analyzed in Brazilian film history, state funding initiatives and screen quotas helped visionary filmmakers bring representations of poverty and social problems to the national screens through funding and regulation. So, although leftist filmmakers’ association with an authoritarian state may seem counterintuitive, the actual result was a proliferation of filmmaking in the era of *Cinema*

²⁶ Cinema Vera Cruz exemplifies an exception to this state involvement, when from about 1949-1955, investors and directors attempted to compete with international imports on a technical level by creating large-scale studio productions. Although the endeavor was briefly successful and led to the production of numerous films, it ultimately did not survive. For more on Cinema Vera Cruz, see Galvão, Maria Rita. “Vera Cruz: A Brazilian Hollywood.” *Brazilian Cinema*. New York: Columbia UP, 1995. 270-280.

Novo.²⁷ Despite the success of state intervention and support, this involvement has occasionally acted as a crutch, allowing filmmakers to develop artistic but highly unsuccessful films that make little or no profit and are seen by relatively small audiences (Johnson *Brazilian Cinema* 36). Additionally, as Carlos Diegues argues, the state support of production often ignores the need for a better system of distribution.²⁸

Another key issue in the relatively small audiences for nationally-produced films is on-going dominance of Hollywood blockbusters in the Brazilian market. Antonio Traverso laments that: “Sadly, an overwhelming majority of the contemporary Brazilian film audience, especially the young, have never seen a locally made film after several generations of sustained Hollywood consumption” (169). This is partially due to the fact that foreign films have extensive promotion and distribution resources, and that television is both more widely disseminated and easier for audiences to access. It is because of these two strong competitors with Brazilian national films, Hollywood and television, that state support is one key determiner of the success or failure of the industry.²⁹

State support for the national film industry has adjusted to politics and economics over time. Most recently, a series of changes in the way the state relates to the film industry has resulted in rapid decreases and then subsequent increases in production. In a

²⁷ Of course, there have been many discussions of the association between the military dictatorship and Cinemanovistas as an ‘ironic compromise.’ Space does not allow here for an extensive discussion of whether the dictatorship’s strategy was strategic incorporation of the left. For more, see: Johnson, Randal. “Introduction: *Cinema Novo*, the State, and Modern Brazilian Cinema.” *Cinema Novo x 5: Masters of Contemporary Brazilian Film*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1984. 1-12..

²⁸ In reference to the Audiovisual Law, which offers incentives for private investment in film production, Carlos Diegues asserts that “today everyone is aware that the crux of the issue at the heart of the film industry is distribution and not production” (26).

²⁹ This depends on how one defines “success.” While the Lei Audiovisual has increased film production, it has not necessarily brought national film box-office numbers to the same level as the audiences of imported films. ANCINE makes the box office numbers for Brazilian films available on its website: <http://www.ANCINE.gov.br>.

sweeping move to entirely eliminate state involvement in cinematic projects, President Fernando Collor de Mello dissolved Embrafilme and other state investment in the Brazilian film industry in 1991 (Dennison and Shaw 204). In one swift action, Collor eliminated the governmental support agencies and the Sarney Law, which had aided in securing private funding for independent film projects since the era of *Cinema Novo*. This new agenda thrust Brazilian filmmaking into the unregulated market and sought to position cultural products as simple commodities, subject to the same market forces as any others. Luiz Zanin Oricchio, author of *Cinema de Novo*, explains that the result of this final abandonment by the state dropped Brazilian national film production to “practically zero” (25). Randal Johnson argues, however, that the entities eliminated by Collor had become ineffectual in the preceding years, and that film production was already rather low when the government withdrew the last of its support (“The Rise and Fall” 364). It is clear now that this move by Collor’s administration to cast off cultural investments did not immediately result in a competitive, thriving market for film production, but rather subjected Brazilian national directors to even harsher competition, particularly from Hollywood. Because of this, in *The New Brazilian Cinema*, José Álvaro Moisés argues effectively for the importance of state support in the Brazilian film industry, particularly in its most recent manifestations.

As Moisés explains, most recently new funding and support measures have tried to remedy some of the damage caused by the dissolution of Embrafilme. The Audio-Visual Law, which “grants [Brazilian] investors discounts of 100 per cent of the amount of their income tax invested in long feature films,” has been widely credited with the resurgence of Brazilian film production in recent years (Moisés 10). Additionally,

ANCINE (Agência Nacional do Cinema) and individual city and regional governments have sought to promote cultural production in their areas. Since the establishment of these new incentives, investment in the private sector and the government's budget for film production have increased dramatically. These new investments are widely credited with inspiring the *Retomada*, a resurgence in Brazilian film production and quality, beginning in 1995 with Carla Camuratti's film *Carlota Joaquina*, and resulting in the production of several successful films that gained international and national recognition, such as *Cidade de Deus* and *Central do Brasil*.³⁰

Given the attractive incentives the Audio-Visual Law provides to businesses that invest in cultural production, it is not surprising that the primary sponsors of all three films examined in this chapter are large companies.³¹ Petrobras, the state-run Brazilian energy company, is the first supporter mentioned in the credits of all three films.³² This is to be expected, as Petrobras is a major contributor to Brazilian cultural production, not only film.³³ Additionally, Petrobras has founded several film festivals and awards in

³⁰ The Secretária do Audiovisual, José Álvaro Moisés, states that "between 1995 and 2001 the country produced 167 feature-length films, compared to fewer than 30 in the first years of the previous decade" (Moisés in Oricchio *Cinema de Novo* 27). Oricchio cites further details, such as the increase in spectators from 400,000 in the period of 1990 to 1994 to 25 million between 1995 and 2000. The original data cited are from *Folha de S. Paulo*, May 24, 2002. For additional information, see the ANCINE website, which provides numbers on the amount of money contributed to each film under each article of the Lei do Audiovisual from 1995-2008 as well as private funds, audience numbers and other information: <http://www.ANCINE.gov.br/media/SAM/2008/SerieHistorica/1111.pdf> and <http://www.ANCINE.gov.br/media/SAM/2008/SerieHistorica/1106.pdf>

³¹ ANCINE's website states that one of its primary goals is to develop a strong and self-sustaining film industry by encouraging private investment. More on ANCINE can be found at: <http://www.ANCINE.gov.br/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?sid=53>

³² In the case of *Baixio das Bestas* and *O Céu de Suely*, the DVD cover begins with "Petrobrás apresenta" and then the name of the film.

³³ The company's website states: "Petrobras seeks to contribute to the augmentation of access for citizens to cultural goods and to the formation of new audiences." Furthermore, it claims to be the "largest patron of Culture in Brazil." For more, see: http://www2.petrobras.com.br/portugues/ads/ads_cultura.html and <http://www.petrobras.com.br/minisite/cultura/cultura-brasileira>.

order to promote and support its cinematic investments. All of this activity contributes to Petrobras' cultural capital as a major patron of the arts, a factor that is prominently highlighted on its websites and indicated in the appearance of the Petrobras logo in the opening credits of all three films discussed in this chapter.³⁴

Martha Sosa, producer of well-recognized Mexican films such as *Amores Perros* and *Presunto Culpable*, remarks that multi-national businesses have reached a point at which they realize that they must address their social responsibilities. She elaborates that films are powerful tools of communication, and so the question of benefit to the investor is not so much the number of tickets sold (monetary profit), but rather the number of viewers.³⁵ Slavoj Žižek elaborates arguments on the nature of violence that can help to illuminate this process. He theorizes in *Violence* that large corporations- which he personifies in figures such as George Soros and Bill Gates- often “give away with one hand what they first took with the other” (21). In this way, corporate beneficence is a means for obfuscating the real, structural causes of oppression, namely class, race, gender and other differences. Rather than appear as villains, large corporations appropriate cultural production as a means for a re-invention of their image as philanthropic heroes:

Charity is the humanitarian mask hiding the face of economic exploitation. In a superego blackmail of gigantic proportions, the developed countries ‘help’ the undeveloped with aid, credits, and so on, and thereby avoid the key issue, namely their complicity in and co-responsibility for the miserable situation of the underdeveloped. (22)

³⁴ Petrobrás has mixed capital, but is still predominantly controlled by the national Brazilian government.

³⁵ These comments were made by Ms. Sosa at the Documentary Film Panel Discussion at the Tucson Cine Mexico film festival in Tucson, Arizona, March 6, 2011.

Here Žižek is referring to dominant countries, but the same dynamic applies with corporations, such as Petrobrás. The company's website touts its contribution to culture and highlights its support of the arts in various forms, such as theater, capoeira exhibitions, film production and archiving, among others. Furthermore, the company's website implies full awareness of the issue highlighted by Žižek: "This largely diverse and wide-ranging way of thinking about Culture is only possible because we do not separate our businesses' profitability from our socioenvironmental commitment: they walk hand-in-hand" (Online). Self-promotion through cultural patronage allows Petrobras, and other companies that follow suit, to cultivate a positive reputation and simultaneously downplay the environmental and economic abuses necessary in order to do so.

While the company's promotional materials emphasize its beneficence, it is important to remember that powerful economic factors are also at play. The films it sponsors serve a two-fold benefit for the company. As I mentioned above, Petrobras is credited as the primary contributor to the film, effectively advertising the company and increasing its cultural capital. Second, the company recovers up to one hundred per cent of its investment in tax breaks from the national government. In terms of image, there is an added benefit. In terms of the narratives of the films themselves, the companies involved are able to condemn social problems, such as poverty and prostitution, allowing Petrobras and the State to position themselves as the denouncers, rather than the perpetrators of such problems.

Petrobras is not the only company that has contributed to the films studied in this chapter. BNDES (Banco Nacional do Desenvolvimento), the state-run national

development bank, is credited in both *O Céu de Suely* and *Deserto Feliz*, while Chesf (a hydroelectric company) is acknowledged in the credits of *Baixio das Bestas*.³⁶ The primary companies involved in this cultural investment are closely linked to the state and it is the state that determines which projects are eligible for funding, inextricably tying together the state and cultural production, although perhaps in a less obvious manner than with previous systems of state support.

Additionally, towns, states and municipalities that facilitate filming or contribute to film productions are also often credited. Funcultura, the state of Pernambuco's foundation for culture contributed to *Baixio das Bestas* and *Deserto Feliz*. Although both films portray highly negative images of the state, they also address important social issues, such as underage prostitution, child abuse, and uneven development. It seems that the investment on the part of the state will at least result in raising awareness of these problems both nationally and internationally, as well as bring recognition for the northeastern film directors who seek to address them. Also, the economic impact of any filming in the region is always important. Film crews must be housed and fed on-site, and locations are often rented for filming, all of which contributes to the local economy.

The new system of tax rebates and indirect government support filtered through business fit in with the current neoliberal model of investment in culture. Rather than directly invest, the state primarily co-opts its own industry to participate and assumes much of the risk. The government regulates this process, but to a certain extent

³⁶ It is worth noting that many of the prostitution activities in the films center around gas stations, which would draw to mind Petrobras, and that one scene of *Baixio das Bestas* is acted out on a dam, which brings Chesf to mind. These spaces seem to be coincidental, however; direct criticism of their sponsors is not apparent in the films.

encourages the market to choose which cultural products are valid and valuable.³⁷ The result is still a complicated system in which cultural commodities must compete on a variety of levels – aesthetic, social, political, economic- to be accepted by the state and then for funding and, ultimately, for their place in the market.³⁸ Under the policies currently in place, state support encourages investment and minimizes the risk to investors by guaranteeing at least the return of their contribution in tax breaks. However, this obscures the discernment with which projects are chosen for funding. Rather than apply overt censorship, the process allows the “market” to choose what projects to fund. All three of the Brazilian films examined here credit ANCINE and the Lei do Audiovisual as patrons.

Mexico and Neoliberalism

Callejón and *¿Quién diablos...?* were both released in the years following the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the Chiapas Revolution and the subsequent 1994-1995 Peso Crisis. However, it is important to note that Mexico’s inclusion in NAFTA was not the beginning, but rather the culmination of a series of State-initiated transitions toward neoliberal policies, initiated in partially in response to the 1982 debt crisis. Beginning in the early 1980s, strategic

³⁷ Interestingly, this new system of patronage may serve to obscure the power dynamics at play in who chooses which projects are valid and why. At a recent conference, a presenter insisted to me that Petrobrás could not possibly be rejecting films contrary to its interests because that would be seen as “censorship,” so they must be funding projects fairly and evenly, regardless of content. Considering that ANCINE determines which projects are valid to begin with and then Petrobrás may choose among them, it is unlikely that this process is neutral.

³⁸ Films must apply for funding under the Lei do Audiovisual. If the project is not approved, there are no tax incentives. ANCINE and its policies are predominantly protectionist as well. International projects may receive funding, but the tax break to the foreign country is less than to national ones. The complete law can be viewed at: http://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/LEIS/L8685.htm

partnerships between the national government and industry sought to open Mexican markets to outside trade in a process called “apertura” (Hufbauer and Schott 3).

In reality, policies that promoted a so-called “free market” failed to alleviate inequalities, as some had claimed they would, and instead exacerbated already-existing tensions between classes and ethnicities (Thacker 76-77). Furthermore, these changes have led to what some call a ‘feminization’ of labor (Kelly 3). Exacerbating these problems, the Mexican national government dismantled several important social programs and cultural investments in order to free up the market and make itself appear more appealing to foreign investors.³⁹ This led to increasing poverty, particularly among female-headed households (Kelly 5).⁴⁰

In a different, but parallel context, *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* was filmed in both Mexico and Cuba in the period from 1995-1997, a time known as Cuba’s “Special Period.” This consisted of Cuba’s opening up to global capital following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ensuing financial crisis on the island. Vincenzo Perna explains that the government was desperate to revive its economy, leading to a relaxing of certain restrictions:

The beginning of the *periodo especial*, as it was euphemistically called, brought to Cubans material problems and spiritual suffering in every possible aspect of their lives, and marked dramatic social changes. To try to revive the country’s

³⁹ Many programs and entities dedicated to the support of cinema were among the casualties. I discuss this element in more detail in the following section.

⁴⁰ Although prostitution is legal in some instances in Mexico, both Patty Kelly and Gustavo Fondevila argue that government regulation seeks to control and moralize the work of prostitutes. See Patty Kelly’s *Lydia’s Open Door: Inside Mexico’s Most Modern Brothel* and Fondevila’s article “Ambigüedad Social y Moral Pública en las Decisiones Judiciales,” *La Ventana*, No. 30, 2009. It is regulated on a state-by-state basis, such as in a special program in Tijuana that seeks to control the spread of sexually transmitted infections. See, for example, “A New Law in Tijuana Regulates the Oldest Profession,” *New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2005, p. 3.

waning finances, the government turned to tourism and introduced a series of previously inconceivable economic reforms, softening its position on ideological matters. (54)

However, Perna also clarifies that the relaxing of certain ideologies did not signify a complete abandonment of the government's revolutionary ideology, leading to extreme contradictions in the theory and economic reality for Cuban citizens. Deborah Martin emphasizes the tensions that emerged as a result: "[T]he Cuban state began to prioritize international tourism, and in 1993 made it legal for ordinary Cubans to hold dollars, measures which both shifted the relationship of Cuba to the outside world and introduced internal contradictions to the discourse of Cuban socialism" (348). Much like the Mexican government's opening to international trade, the Cuban state sought to maintain certain "revolutionary" values while simultaneously allowing for economic exchange. Both Martin and Perna connect this new investment in international tourism with significant increases in prostitution in Havana, often called *jineterismo*. *Jineterismo* implies a more casual form of occasional prostitution rather than a full-time profession.⁴¹ Although technically prostitution is illegal, not to mention contrary to the Revolutionary values promoted by the state, Martin and Perna both mention that it is generally tolerated by authorities. The influx of international tourists offered the opportunity for poor women and girls to supplement their income by picking up foreigners and entertaining them, showing them around and by having sex with them, and according to Catherine Moses,

⁴¹ Martin cites a study done by Catherine Moses on the government's use of images of young Cuban women to promote tourism. Moses, Catherine. *Real Life in Castro's Cuba*. Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1999.

the Cuban national government capitalized on this by including sexualized images of Cuban women in tourism materials.⁴²

Mexican Film Industry

The film industry is a powerful producer of discourse, and because of this, much like the Brazilian government, the Mexican State has an extensive history of involvement in this industry. The Mexican films investigated in this dissertation have benefited in at least some way from this funding and involvement. Cinema has historically been used by the Mexican State as a means for creating and distributing ideas about national identity in an attempt to consolidate power. Since the Mexican Revolution, the State has played a central role in determining what representations would make it onto the screen, and these images have often served to uphold revolutionary values and the political vision of the ruling party. Darryl Catherine observes that “Mexican cinema has closely paralleled the political agenda of the nation because since its emergence as an industry it has been funded and regulated by the Mexican federal government” (293). Andrea Noble highlights in *Mexican National Cinema* that in the 1930s “the state started to take a keener interest in the cinema as an aesthetic form that could promote national values ...” (14). The resulting state investment partially contributed to emergence of the Mexican cinematic Golden Age, which Noble locates as approximately 1935-1955 (15).⁴³

⁴² Deborah Martin makes this claim “Spectatorship, Performance, Resistance: Carlos Marcovich’s *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?*” (18). Here she is citing Catherine Moses’s *Real Life in Castro’s Cuba*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2000. In the section on *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* I offer a more detailed discussion of the intersections of the Cuban Special Period, prostitution and Perna’s analysis of Timba music.

⁴³ Noble is citing Carlos Monsiváis in this classification. She also explains that the Golden Age resulted from a number of factors, including World War II and Mexico’s relationship with the United States during that time period, as well as the talent and dedication of prominent directors, and the establishment of the Banco Cinematográfico in 1942.

In the 1980s, which Andrea Noble calls “one of the country’s darkest moments” in film history, cinematic production decreased sharply due a series of neoliberal reforms, including the dismantling and defunding of the Banco Cinematográfico (established in 1942) and other State-sponsored support for cinematic production (20). David Maciel summarizes the converging set of circumstances in the 1980s that led to the decline in these six points: 1) crisis of private cinematic businesses/ enterprise, 2) the loss of public, primarily attributable to audiences’ preference toward foreign film, 3) obstacles to distribution and exhibition, 4) State politics, including excessive censorship, 5) the terrible economy and 6) the proliferation of video (79-80).⁴⁴ Maciel further emphasizes that sharp inflation of the cost of a movie ticket drove crowds away from the theaters.⁴⁵ The emerging popularity and accessibility of television certainly played a part in this decline as well.

It was during this time, in 1983, that IMCINE, the Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía was established as part of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (Conaculta), under the Department of Education, in order to promote Mexican cinematic production. Cinematic regulation had previously been categorized under national security. Maciel explains that this “change was more than symbolic, since it meant that cinema finally would be regulated by functionaries in charge of culture and education and not by those whose priority is the preservation of ‘national security’” (81).⁴⁶ Sergio de la Mora points out, however, that despite the government’s official removal of cinema from the realm of national security, as well as the move to privatize

⁴⁴ Maciel’s article is in Spanish. This is my summary and English translation of his main points.

⁴⁵ Maciel cites an increase from one peso, six cents to an average of 25 pesos (80).

⁴⁶ “Dicho cambio fue más que simbólico, ya que significó que el cine finalmente sería regulado por funcionarios a cargo de la cultura y la educación y no por aquellos cuya prioridad es la preservación de la ‘seguridad nacional’”

cinema and encourage filmmakers to acquire their own funding, the State is still very much involved in this meaning-making industry:

Conaculta's inclusion of audiovisual media as part of the national cultural patrimony underscores how film continues to be a key site for staging and preserving narratives of national identity and for producing and reproducing the hegemonic political system ... Government control in this area also underscores the intention of the State to reshape the national identity in collaboration with the local power elite and transnational corporations (39)

IMCINE's website upholds this view by emphasizing the organization's intent to support cinema as a promoter of 'national' culture by: "Contributing so that the national cinematographic activity has a preponderant role in the cultural sphere of the country that *strengthens the values, customs and ways of life of our nation.*"⁴⁷ Of course, this statement does not define who, exactly, determines the boundaries, participants and interests reflected in the nation. In reference to Mexican cinema and melodrama, Susan Dever stresses the importance and power of representation as in the transnational context:

Given the stakes of today's global capitalism, the sovereignty of nations and citizens has never been more at issue. Superpowers forge third-class, extra-national citizens both within and outside their political borders in order to extract tribute to the multinational, corporate state through the exploitation of labor. Representation ... increasingly has to do with how power is articulated, consolidated, legitimated and proportioned. (8)

⁴⁷ Emphasis in original. For the complete list of goals, see: <http://www.imcine.gob.mx/el-instituto.html>.

Given these realizations, it is clear that cinema is not neutral or a mere form of entertainment, but rather, an apparatus for developing and communicating perceptions of national and international identities. De la Mora clarifies that IMCINE provides up to 60% of the funding for film projects while the directors must secure the other 40%, except in cases of first-time filmmakers (40). This level of investment would suggest that the Mexican State maintains a strong influence in cinematic production for films that seek its backing.

Mexico's administration began to open itself to the incorporation of neoliberal economic policies beginning in 1982, resulting in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which took effect in 1994 (Thacker 57). Andrea Noble calls this move from protectionism to 'free' trade and resulting backlash, most notably from the Chiapas Revolution of the ELZN, part of the process of aperture (116).⁴⁸ The shift toward open markets promoted by the governments of Mexican presidents Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gortari between 1982 and 1994 - and facilitated by negotiations with the private industries- necessitated corresponding cultural productions.

In the context of neoliberal economic policies, cinema takes on some of the burden of representing Mexican 'national' values both to its own people and to the outside. As Catherine demonstrates, the films of the 1980s and 1990s "reflected the changed politics of the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who sought to position the nation to enter an increasingly international, globalizing world" (293). The State's move to open the country to neoliberal economics and enhanced international trade led to a need for representations that reinforced these changes:

⁴⁸ A more in-depth discussion of aperture, both in the Mexican and Cuban contexts, and its relation to melodrama, is in the Mexican film chapter.

Under the directorship of Ignacio Durán Loera (1988—1995), the Mexican Film Institute bolstered the exhibition of Mexican cinema nationally and abroad, even as it aggressively pursued the production of new films reflecting changing cultural attitudes toward women, gender roles, and alternative lifestyles. (293-4)

In this light, Sergio de la Mora views the New Mexican Cinema as a response to the government's need to redefine the nation under the banner of neoliberalism:

It is not by chance that the veritable renaissance in Mexican film culture (in production, exhibition, and scholarship) coincided with the signing of NAFTA and the privatization of a large number of State-owned businesses, including banking and telecommunications, all part of the putative benefits of Mexico's opening itself up to global and U.S. transnational economic investment. (144)

Both *Callejón de los Milagros* and *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* can be considered part of this film 'renaissance,' and both received support from the Mexican state, along with private investment. *Callejón* recognizes Alfredo Ripstein and Alameda films along with several state-run contributors, such as IMCINE, the Fondo de Fomento a la Calidad Cinematográfica and the University of Guadalajara. *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* acknowledges IMCINE, but also several other contributors, such as Yolanda Andrade, El Error de Diciembre, Génesis, Estudios Churubusco Azteca, Betaimagen Digital, Resonancia and the Hubert Bals Fund (of the Rotterdam Film Festival).⁴⁹ Much like the case of the Brazilian films discussed in this dissertation, the Mexican government and private investors stand to gain cultural capital, both through investing in cinema, and also through affiliating themselves with projects that win national and international awards.

⁴⁹ Both *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* and *Deserto Feliz* benefited from the Hubert Bals Fund and a more extensive discussion of the implications of this funding will take place in the Conclusions chapter.

Sergio de la Mora explains the political results: “Awards at national and international film festivals served both to legitimate Mexican cinema of the 1990s and to reconfirm the State as one of its principal promoters” (142). By stimulating a ‘new’ Mexican cinema, particularly one that represented ‘new’ Mexican values under the umbrella of neoliberalism and that evidenced the success of programs that sought to integrate state support with private investment, films such as *Callejón* and *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* participate in the projection of a ‘new’ Mexico in the process of *apertura*. Maciel summarizes the themes most often encompassed by these films:

In the new productions the images of stability in the conventional family practically disappear from the scene. More so these films reflect the disintegration of the traditional family and its values. The search for new formulas, the necessity to put forward individual interest and the loss of optimism toward the future seem to be the norms that guide the characters in these new filmic productions. (87) ⁵⁰

This movement toward individualism and self-interest certainly reflect the incorporation of neoliberal values. However, as we have seen, it is not only content that matters. That is to say that it is not only narrative of the films that serves to make meaning, but also their place within the system of discourse production through cinema. Along with this, a closer examination of the narrative and structural elements of these films will serve to better reveal the ways in which they dialogue with and sometimes contradict the ‘new’ images of Mexico.

⁵⁰ “En las nuevas producciones las imagines de estabilidad de las familias convencionales prácticamente desaparecen de escena. Más bien estas películas reflejan la desintegración de la familia tradicional y de sus valores. La búsqueda de nuevas fórmulas, la necesidad de poner por delante el interés individual y la pérdida del optimismo hacia el futuro parecen ser las normas que guían a los personajes de estas nuevas producciones filmicas.”

Some Conclusions

As I have explained, neoliberalism exacerbates the already-problematic intersection of capitalism and gender that supports prostitution. When prostitution is projected on the screen, the discourses surrounding gender and prostitution are ‘for sale’ to audiences, and these representations both reflect and participate in debates about prostitution. Additionally, it is crucial that we remember that filmic productions about prostitution interact with and contribute to meanings generated in the sex industries, which include prostitution and pornography. Although this dissertation examines specifically feature films, which include ‘art’ films, Lynda Nead reminds us that these films do not exist in a vacuum, but rather participate along with other elements that contribute to the sex industry:

Although conventionally art and pornography are set up in this oppositional relationship, they can be seen instead as two terms within a greater signifying system that is continually being redefined and that includes other categories, such as obscenity, the erotic, and the sensual. All of these terms occupy particular sexual and cultural spaces; none of them can be understood in isolation since each depends on the other for its meaning. (Nead 325)

As I argued earlier in this chapter, it is important to remember that the representation of sex for sale on the screen participates in and contributes to the discourses circulating about neoliberalism and the roles of women. Sheila Jeffreys labels these intersections the “Industrial Vagina,” in an effort to connect the meaning-making industries with the selling of actual sex and human trafficking. Nguyen-Vo’s research on prostitution films in Vietnam serves as an important reminder of the importance of films in negotiating shifting meanings of market freedoms and women’s bodies. In the case of the films

examined in the following chapters, the State and other entities have often promoted images that reflect a neoliberal ethic, thereby participating in the on-going process of governmentality. By closely examining the films in the chapters to come, this process will become more visible.

BRAZIL: “REALITIES” OF PROSTITUTION

Prostitution is a hot topic in Brazil, particularly among filmmakers. The three films examined in this chapter came out one after the other in the span of three years. They have all been widely awarded at film festivals, and one, *O Céu de Suely*, was selected for a showcase screening by Cinema Tropical at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in 2011. This sudden proliferation of representations of prostitution speaks to a certain anxiety over its existence, its meanings and its position in Brazilian society.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the Brazilian films *O Céu de Suely* (2006, dir. Karim Aïnouz), *Baixio das Bestas* (2007, dir. Cláudio Assis) and *Deserto Feliz* (2008, dir. Paulo Caldas), their relationships to gendered representations and to neoliberalism and the ways in which these relationships are enacted through filmic techniques. The films analyzed in this project often propose to portray social issues in a realist light, opting for documentary-like techniques and “realistic,” unpolished representations in order to bring perceived social ills to the forefront. By following all three protagonists in *O Céu de Suely*, *Baixio das Bestas* and *Deserto Feliz* in their transition from non-prostitutes to prostitutes, the directors seek to denounce prostitution as a result of poverty, gender discrimination and sexual abuse. At the same time, as I will argue, these directors tend to rely on conventions that privilege the male gaze, which as Mary Devereaux explains, is a gaze that takes the woman as object. This production of conflicting messages is one aspect of what I call “incomplete resistance.”⁵¹ In the case of *O Céu de Suely* and *Baixio das Bestas* aestheticize the female body, asking the audience

⁵¹ For a detailed explanation of “incomplete resistance,” see the introductory and theory chapters of this dissertation.

to take pleasure in abuse while attempting to simultaneously reject exploitation. While *Deserto Feliz* avoids this form of representation, it does focus on aesthetic concerns over politics.

It is my contention that these three films embody a re-envisioning of the nation through a neoliberal lens. What makes them different from previous films is their incorporation of neo-realist, or as Nguyen-vo calls them, new social realist elements. The clear goal of these three films is to criticize the poverty and discrimination resulting from the imposition of neoliberal economics on Brazil as a whole. They also call attention again to the ‘forgotten’ regions, or those that do not fit easily into the modernizing national goal. They embody the problem through female prostitute characters, who stand in for the literal abuse of women, but also for the penetration of capital and the abuse of an entire region. The prostitution and rape of their bodies represent the feminization and exploitation of these communities. This form of representation often comes at the expense of their subjectivity, meaning that these women are primarily used as metaphors, as tropes or as symbols.

I will further argue that *Suely* and *Baixio*, although critical, constitute a denouncement without indictment because they focus primarily on the personal, rather than the structural aspects of neoliberalism.⁵² These films individualize the problem of neoliberalism by narrowing their focus on single character as analogy, rather than a system of oppression. The end result is three films that criticize the consequences of neoliberalism without examining its underlying structures.

⁵² This ambiguous connection with neoliberalism may be attributable to the fact that the filmmakers are artistic entrepreneurs themselves, seeking investment to support their small-scale projects and adapting to the styles and subject matter that brings investment and awards.

The Films

The three films examined in this section have significant characteristics in common, the first of which is the use of prostitutes or prostitution as a central theme. *O Céu de Suely* (2006, Dir. Karim Aïnouz), *Baixio das Bestas* (2007, Dir. Cláudio Assis) and *Deserto Feliz* (2008, Dir. Paulo Caldas) are contemporary films that all take place in the Brazilian Northeast, and all have male directors, but feature female protagonists. All three films exhibit notable adaptations of neorealist film techniques.

Each film features a rural setting either for part or for all of the film and highlight both the economic and social difficulties encountered in these spaces. *Deserto Feliz* and *O Céu de Suely* focus on the *sertão*, the arid backlands made famous in part due to Euclides da Cunha's *Os Sertões (Rebellion in the Backlands)*. This journalistic account traced the Battle of Canudos, a confrontation between the Brazilian national authorities and the millenarian movement led by Antônio Conselheiro, which ended in 1897 with the destruction of the town and massacre of its inhabitants. As Luiz Zanin Oricchio explains, *Os Sertões* has become emblematic of inequity in Brazil: “[*Os Sertões*] is compulsory reading when it comes to discussion Brazil’s social inequality, and the *sertão* in which it is set has become a space- a physical, imaginary and symbolic space- where the country’s contradictions are expressed with the maximum intensity and impact” (140).⁵³ It is using this same backdrop that the directors examined in this chapter film the implications of prostitution.

⁵³ For more information on the connection between the Guerra de Canudos and contemporary rebellion, such as the Landless Peasant Movement (MST- Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra), see Paulo Emílio Matos Martins and Allene Carvalho Lage’s paper presented at the *VIII Congresso Luso-Afro-Brasileiro de Ciências Sociais*: “Canudos e o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST)” (2004).

Online: http://www.ces.uc.pt/lab2004/inscricao/pdfs/paine147/PauloMartins_AlleneLage.pdf

Approximately one century after the War of Canudos, the northeastern region has continued to function as an allegorical space, particularly for filming Brazilian poverty, throughout the *Cinema novo* movement in films such as *Vidas Secas*, later films such as *Bye, Bye Brazil*, and during the recent *retomada* in the road films such as *Central Station* and *Caminho das Nuvens*. While *O Céu de Suely* and *Deserto Feliz* focus specifically on the *sertão*, *Baixio das Bestas* features a different geographical region, a *zona da Mata*, which is the narrow area between the coast and the *sertão* and has been used to grow products such as sugar cane, fruits and tobacco, due to its more humid climate. Although *Zona da Mata* is distinct from the *sertão*, many of the problems featured by the filmmakers, such as incomplete modernization, widespread unemployment and the exclusions and abuses against certain groups are similar. In these cases, both the *sertão* and the *Zona da Mata* are regions utilized by filmmakers as a space for filming alternatives to national identities., which seems to imply that the modernizing vision of Brazilian neoliberal economic policies have not led to improvements for the poorest inhabitants of these regions.⁵⁴

In the case of *Baixio das Bestas*, Cláudio Assis utilizes a rural town in Pernambuco as a stand-in to allegorize victimization perpetuated by sugarcane agriculture throughout the nation. The allegory extends beyond just the town to the prostitutes themselves, who serve to represent the abused, victimized, ‘raped’ land and people of the *zona da mata* and similar places. In an interview with *Revista Quem*, Assis makes the argument that these abuses occur “[n]ot just in Pernambuco, but the monoculture of

⁵⁴ According to Ivana Bentes and Luiz Zanin Oricchio, contributors to *The New Brazilian Cinema*, Brazilian film producers and directors are currently experimenting with a return to the Brazilian rural northeast. Bentes and Oricchio refer specifically to films of the *Retomada*. Much like *Cinema Novo*’s use of the *sertão* to embody poverty and struggle, these films focus outside of the cities in order to show the ‘other’ Brazil and to question or re-envision Brazil as an imagined community.

sugarcane that is repeated in São Paulo, Minas Gerais and exploits the human being. The film makes an inquiry of Brazil. I believe that we only manage to be globalizing when we talk about our own village.”⁵⁵ Assis carefully distinguishes his film from others that focus on the *sertão*, emphasizing that the *sertão* and the *zona da mata* are not the same place. Many of the implications, though, are very similar. Assis’s film highlights the effect of poverty and the abuse of the poor through the rapes, murders and abuses perpetrated against his characters. In a similar manner, *Deserto Feliz* draws connections between the illegal trade in exotic animals and the trafficking of women in Recife. The resulting parallel stories focus on the abuse of the weak, be they animal or human, and the impossibility of happiness for the characters involved. Karim Aïnouz takes a similar approach by locating his film in a real town in the northeastern interior of Ceará called Iguatu. Rather than invent a fictional location, Aïnouz utilizes the built environment and films on location in the northeast, lending his film a realist tone and connecting it directly with the space in question.

The way in which the three filmmakers have chosen to represent prostitution in the northeast could be best described as neo-realism, or perhaps, neo-neo-realism.⁵⁶ Structurally, the three films share several commonalities. They all chart the narrative as the journey of their protagonists from non-prostitutes into prostitutes, focusing on the

⁵⁵ “Não só de Pernambuco, mas da monocultura da cana-de-açúcar que se repete em São Paulo, Minas Gerais e explora o homem. O filme faz um questionamento do Brasil. Acredito que só conseguimos ser globalizantes quando falamos de nossa própria aldeia..”

⁵⁶ Antonio Traverso connects Brazilian cinema to Italian neo-realism in the era of *Cinema Novo*, and also to some films of the *Retomada*, such as *Central Station*. He highlights the following characteristics: “films’ observational and often raw documentary style; next, the filmmakers’ commitment to the exploration of political, sociological and historical themes; and finally, the production approaches, which often include the use of scripts based on true life stories, authentic locations and nonactors playing themselves” (166). In this quote, Traverso is speaking specifically of the earlier films of the *Retomada*, but the criteria he provides apply even more significantly to the recent films discussed in this chapter.

character development of the individual in her environment, rather than take a broader approach. This is highlighted in frequent silences and close-ups on the protagonists' faces in all three of the films, particularly in moments of introspection. Assis's and Caldas's films could be called studies in silence, in which images dominate and dialogue is sparse and often awkward, much like in the hallmark *Cinema Novo* film, *Vidas Secas*, or Bodansky and Senna's 1976 film *Iracema*. While dialogue is generally much more frequent and far more polished in *Baixio das Bestas*, Auxiliadora, the protagonist, rarely speaks, and the camera often focuses on her face when she is silent. The effect conveys the mutability of the poor and disadvantaged, especially women, but is also a neo-realist filming technique for demonstrating the impenetrability of the subject. No voice-over or omniscient narrator communicates the characters' thoughts or intentions to the audience. Those who temporarily gain limited voice are subsequently silenced or disregarded in the narratives. Dora and Bela are raped and presumably murdered for their verbal defiance in *Baixio das Bestas*. Hermila Guedes's character, Pâmela, is told to shut up by Jessica (the protagonist) after she complains about being raped by her father and rejected by her mother in *Deserto Feliz*. Hermila/Suely's character spends long periods in silence, staring into space or wandering through Iguatú. This silence implies both an impenetrability of the protagonists themselves, but also an inability to express their thoughts and feelings. They are both mute and muted.

Intersections between the Three Films and their Directors

The similarities are to be expected, considering the connections between the films' directors and the relatively short periods of time between their releases. Aïnouz, Assis and Caldas all spent at least part of their formative years in the Brazilian northeast,

although not necessarily in the rural regions in which they film. Additionally, they have a history of collaboration or are connected to each other through their work on other films and projects. Karim Aïnouz and Paulo Caldas, for example, were co-writers for the Marcelo Gomes film *Cinema, Aspirina e Urubus* (2005). Hilton Lacerda, who is from Recife, has worked as a writer with Cláudio Assis on *Amarelo Manga* (2002) and *Baixio das Bestas* and with Paulo Caldas on *Baile Perfumado* (1997).⁵⁷

Karim Aïnouz was born in Fortaleza, Ceará and earned a degree in Architecture from the University of Brasília and a master's degree in Cinema from New York University. He began his film career primarily in the United States and won a grant from the New York State Council for the Arts for his short film *Seams*, in which he travels to Brazil to interview his aunts. He has won numerous film awards for his short films as well as feature-length films and has also worked as an assistant director on some American films.⁵⁸ According to Folha.com, Aïnouz is currently living in Berlin, where he lived in 2004 on a grant from the German Academic Exchange Service. He is now working on another feature-length film, *Praia do Futuro*, which will take place in Fortaleza, Brazil, and Berlin, Germany. He was interviewed for a short film for the Festival do Minuto 2008, in which he was asked to define what it means to be *Nordestino* (Northeastern). Some of his most notable comments were: “It is the land of the poor cousin of Brazil” and “It has a culture that is so genuine, so transparent, that is so

⁵⁷ Not much information on these directors is available in published books and articles because of their relatively recent emergence as directors of feature films. Most of the biographical information summarized here is available online on websites for cinema festivals and clubs as well as some newspaper interviews.

⁵⁸ For more on Karim Aïnouz's biography, see:

<http://www.hist.umn.edu/hist3424/lecture%20outlines/seams.html>,

<http://www.adorocinemabrasileiro.com.br/personalidades/karim-Ainouz/karim-Ainouz.asp>, and

<http://www.berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/gast.php?id=937>

different from other places in Brazil.”⁵⁹ Of course, this perception of the northeast is highly romanticized and fails to recognize the complicated nature of any identity.

Cláudio Assis grew up in Caruaru, Pernambuco, which is located in the interior of the state. His first feature-length film was *Amarelo Manga* (2002), which won various awards. His early background is primarily in acting, but he began directing with short films and collaborations. He also served as vice president for ABD (*Associação Brasileira de Documentaristas*).⁶⁰ His public persona is provocative. In an interview with Moviola Digital, he responds to his interviewer’s choice to address him in the formal (o senhor) with “*O senhor* is a son of a bitch and you can put that down there.”⁶¹ Another example is his introduction of the film *Baixio das Bestas* at the film festival *Curta-se 7*, in which the room was overflowing with spectators. Assis’s perception is that his film has been given a tiny room because it is Brazilian. After saying “Foda-se” (Fuck it) several times, he says: “In your own country...you are thrown out in the field (thrown away)... and they say I was violent.”⁶² Like his films, his public appearances seem to be designed to generate controversy and to shock his audiences.

Paulo Caldas was born in João Pessoa, Paraíba and began his career in Pernambuco. His first feature-length film was *Baile Perfumado* (1997). He gained experience as a documentary filmmaker with *O Rap do Pequeno Príncipe contra as Almas Sebosas* (2000). He contextualizes his filmmaking within the history of Brazilian

⁵⁹ “É a terra do primo pobre do Brasil” and “Tem uma cultura que é tão genuína que é tão transparente que é tão diferente de outros lugares do Brasil.” The entire clip is available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynP2DbtGOkk>

⁶⁰ For more on Cláudio Assis’s biography, see: <http://www.wspbrasil.com/cpc/diretores.htm>

⁶¹ Interviewer: “O senhor falou que tinha um filme que ia fazer...” Assis: “Senhor é a puta que o pariu, pode colocar isso aí.” <http://movioladigital.blogspot.com/2007/11/entrevista-com-cludio-assis.html> (Although “Cláudio” is misspelled in the web address, this is the correct direction to the article online.)

⁶² “No seu próprio país...você é jogado no canto...e dizem que eu fui violento.” The video of his tirade is available on youtube.com: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh2I1KVgJaE>

cinema in an interview with *Diário de Pernambuco* when he explains that *Deserto Feliz* is “much more an artistic reflection than a denouncement.”⁶³ He goes on to explain that he tries to negotiate the political and artistic in his films. In the same interview, Caldas explains that he has never lived in the *sertão*, but that he loves to film there.

There are notable similarities shared amongst the three films produced by these directors. They are all feature length, and although they may not be box office successes, they have either won critical acclaim or several film festival awards, meaning that they have been widely viewed at least by certain communities. *O Céu de Suely*, *Baixio das Bestas* and *Deserto Feliz* also share overlapping actors, most notably Hermila Guedes, who plays a prostitute in all three films. In *O Céu de Suely* she is the protagonist, and in the other two she plays supporting roles. After her participation in the first two films, Guedes commented in an online interview with Omelette.com that “now I am dying of fear, because they are two very similar characters, two prostitutes, one urban and the other from the interior.”⁶⁴ The fact is not lost on Guedes that she may be type-casted as the Northeastern prostitute character again in the future. This prediction becomes reality when she again plays a central prostitute character in the third film. Guedes’s participation in the three films may relate to her physical characteristics. She is tall, slender, fair skinned, and buxom: ideal characteristics for the ‘typical’ prostitute

⁶³ “É muito mais uma reflexão artística do que uma denúncia.” The interview in its entirety is available at: http://www.diariodepernambuco.com.br/2008/11/28/viver1_1.asp

⁶⁴ “Agora estou morrendo de medo, porque são duas personagens muito parecidas, duas prostitutas, uma urbana e outra do interior.” <http://www.omelete.com.br/cinema/omelete-entrevista-hermila-guedes-atriz-de-o-ceu-de-suely/>

character.⁶⁵ She is also able to speak in a Northeastern accent, which is required in order to lend the films authenticity.

The intersecting use of actors, however, extends beyond Guedes's rolls. Zezita Matos appears in both *O Céu* and *Baixio* (as a grandmother and as a madame/pimp, respectively), as does Marcelia Cartaxo (as a mother-in-law and as a prostitute, respectively).⁶⁶ João Miguel plays two very different characters in *O Céu de Suely* and *Deserto Feliz*; in the first, he is the ex-boyfriend of the protagonist, and in the second, a trafficker of illegally captured exotic animals and an implied love interest of the central character. What these actors certainly share is a willingness to participate in film projects with emerging directors, and of course, the necessary Northeastern accent. *O Céu*, *Baixio* and *Deserto* also feature relatively unknown actresses for their protagonists.⁶⁷

All three films are particularly notable for their explicit incorporation of sexual, physical and psychological forms of violence, while juxtaposing these with a (somewhat limited) nostalgia for 'traditional' values and family structures in the Brazilian northeast. Although they track the stories of individuals, it is clear that the films intend to criticize a much larger problem. It seems unlikely that the production of these three films on prostitution within a few years of each other, all in the Northeast, could be mere coincidence.⁶⁸ Of course, the overlapping actors and collaborative nature of the

⁶⁵ One example of this sensual *mulata* figure can be found in the 1983 film *Gabriela*, starring Sônia Braga.

⁶⁶ Cartaxo is perhaps best known for her role as Macabéia in *A Hora da Estrela*, in which she played a poor northeasterner in the big city. Her portrayal was widely praised and won several awards. All of her subsequent roles as a northeastern woman necessarily draw this original portrayal to mind.

⁶⁷ When Hermila Guedes starred in *O Céu de Suely*, she was not widely known. She has become more recognized since then, but in the other two films has played secondary characters.

⁶⁸ These are not the only films that feature prostitution in the recent years. Sergio Rezende's epic film-turned miniseries, *Guerra de Canudos* (1997) retells the story of the Canudos rebellion through the experiences of a prostitute protagonist. Rudi Lagemann's *Anjos do Sol* (2006) features a Northeastern girl sold by her parents as a domestic servant, but eventually imprisoned as a sex slave somewhere in the

directors' shared history together implies that prostitution has long been a shared focus for them all, although they see it from different perspectives. Considering that *Deserto Feliz* was a co-production with Germany, while *O Céu de Suely* was co-produced with France, these films certainly have serious implications in terms of spectatorship. They both serve to draw attention to the issue of prostitution and poverty, but also repeat the exporting of images of exoticism and backwardness that have so often characterized portrayals of Latin America in Europe. In terms of national spectatorship, this may again project the northeast as the Other in terms of Brazilian national identity.

"A Night in Paradise:" O Céu de Suely

O Céu de Suely, released in 2006 and directed by Karim Aïnouz, is ironically translated for the English-speaking market as *Love for Sale: Suely in the Sky*.⁶⁹ In reality, what the protagonist is selling is not love, but rather a "night in paradise," a euphemism for sex. The film follows Hermila / Suely as she returns to her Northeastern Brazilian home town after a failed attempt at making it in the big city of São Paulo.⁷⁰ She soon discovers that her husband, who is the father of her infant son, does not plan to join her in Iguatu, as he promised. Feeling trapped and isolated in this relatively small town in the

Amazon region. Alice de Andrade's *O Diabo a Quatro* (2004) and Eric Eason's *Journey to the End of the Night* (2006), (an American production filmed in Brazil with some Brazilian actors) feature prostitution in the large cities of the south.

⁶⁹ Céu translates both as sky (a possible reference to the eternally blue skies of Ceará, where the film takes place) and heaven (an ironic citation of the ordeal the protagonist undertakes to free herself from that place). A more accurate translation, therefore, would have been something equivalent to Suely's Heaven.

⁷⁰ Hermila is the given name of the protagonist, while Suely is her self-chosen character name, which she uses when selling her raffle tickets. Because she is constantly negotiating the two identities, I use them both when referring to her character.

Northeastern Brazilian interior, she works odd jobs and eventually decides to raffle herself for one night in an effort to raise enough money to leave again.⁷¹

Hermila / Suely is a kind of entrepreneurial prostitute, who discovers that she can greatly increase her income by promoting her exclusivity. By raffling her sexual services and access to her body instead of working openly as a prostitute, she constructs herself as a prize. However, in doing so, she does create an indirect exchange in which her sexual services are purchased and eventually consumed. The protagonist rationalizes her decision by manipulating semantics and changing her name, attempting to avoid being labeled as a prostitute, since she is aware of the societal norms she is traversing.

O Céu de Suely is the second feature-length film released by Karim Aïnouz, who was critically acclaimed for his first film, *Madame Satã* (2002). Despite its lack of success at the box office, where the film sold approximately 73,000 tickets overall and ranked below the top 15 domestic Brazilian films of 2006, *O Céu de Suely* was widely awarded in national and international film festivals (Vinícius 2007).⁷² Hermila Guedes, the actress who plays the protagonist with same first name, was awarded best actress by the Havana Film Festival, Prêmio Contigo Cinema, Cinema Brasil Grande, São Paulo Association of Art Critics, the Rio de Janeiro International Film Festival and others. Aïnouz was also awarded or nominated for best director, or for best film at most of the

⁷¹ Portions of this section as well as other sections of this dissertation will be published in my forthcoming article, "Incomplete Resistance: *O Céu de Suely*" in Vol. 11, No. 4 of *Feminist Media Studies*.

⁷² According to ANCINE, the Brazilian government's film agency, the total domestic audience for *O Céu de Suely* was 73,892 people. This is relatively small, even compared to more popular domestic films, such as *Se eu fosse você*, which had over 3.6 million viewers nationally, according to ANCINE. According to the online publication *Filme B*, the top-ranking film in Brazil for all of 2006 was *Ice Age 2* (an animated U.S. production) at over 5.5 million viewers. (*Filme B* N° 477, Ano 10, 8/1/2007 Online: <http://www.filmeb.com.br/informe/477/n477.pdf>)

same festivals. It is clear that, although the theatrical audiences were relatively small, the film has been widely recognized among national and international critics.

A close examination of ways in which this film portrays prostitution in its relation to capitalism and how it constructs gendered performance will help illuminate its contradictory messages. The first is that prostitution is a last resort made necessary by harsh economic realities in the Northeast of Brazil. At the same time, however, savvy marketing is the key to success. The second message is far more complicated, and deals with the eroticization of the female body as it is performed and put on display for the male gaze. The audience is asked to regret the circumstances of the protagonist while simultaneously taking visual pleasure in her sensual display. These two messages conflict and interact with each other as the film plays out. I call this interplay of messages, or the conflict between the overt narrative message of the film and its filmic structures “incomplete resistance.”

The on-going debates on the nature of prostitution as sex work are readily evident in *O Céu de Suely*. Hermila/Suely must engage in this debate in order to preserve her exclusivity and maintain some amount of control in negotiating with potential raffle customers. In doing this, she maintains herself as an exclusive prize rather than a product that can be consumed multiple times. The ways in which she and her prospective clients manipulate the language used to describe her reflect, to a certain extent, the language of contractarians. That is, they maintain that prostitution is a service provided by an empowered free agent, rather than a form of abuse maintained by patriarchy.⁷³ One excellent example emerges between Hermila / Suely and three potential raffle customers.

⁷³ At the same time, however, she attempts to separate herself from her prostitute persona by taking on a “nome de guerra,” or prostitute name.

One man refuses to pay the 15 reais (U.S. \$9.00) ticket price up front and suggests she take 7.50 up now, and 7.50 after he “tries the goods.” She counters with the argument that when you buy a ticket for a whisky raffle, you pay all at once. He responds that he knows what he is getting when he buys whisky -a product- because he is familiar with the taste. Another man suggests that it is like a taxi ride- a service-, and that you do not pay according to whether you liked the ride, but whether or not it got you to where you were going. It all comes down to the question of what she *is*, and what she is *selling*, which will determine her price. This negotiation is deeply imbedded in the politics of neoliberalism, as Taitu Heron’s denunciation of the commodification of human bodies demonstrated in the previous chapter. As she explains, the buying and selling of women and girls for sex relies upon the assignment of economic value to human interactions, which are rooted in gendered constructions.

Ultimately, the analogies made by Hermila/ Suely and her clients are fundamental to the negotiation process and the way in which Hermila / Suely constructs her reality. Is she offering a product or a service? Her sales pitch seems to suggest the latter, as ‘uma noite no paraíso’ implies action. At the same time, ‘paraíso’ may serve as a euphemism for her own body, or perhaps the sexual organs themselves and the pleasure she can provide. The phrase becomes her primary marketing strategy, and makes her offer sound all the more exotic and enticing in an effort to attract more customers. At the same time, she deliberately avoids labeling herself or allowing others to label her as a prostitute, both in order to maximize her profits and keep her personal life and this business endeavor separate. Her attitude further upholds the idea that she is in control of the situation and that she is consciously making a choice to sell her assets, albeit, under some duress.

Hermila / Suely seems to be aware of the social constructs surrounding prostitution and attempts to control or manipulate the discourse, but has limited success. The idea of the raffle is, in part, an attempt to invert male dominance by making the sex a prize rather than product. She further distances herself from common prostitution by offering this raffle only once. In this way Hermila/ Suely can convince herself that she is not a prostitute, and she can greatly multiply her income. To a certain extent this strategy is economically and psychologically effective, but at times Hermila / Suely seems unable to believe her own rationale. When she explains her scheme to her aunt, she has trouble convincing her that it is like any other kind of raffle:

Hermila /Suely: I'm going to raffle myself. Get rich, buy a house for myself and Mateus, Mateuzinho.

Aunt: Man, woman, kind of a whore's (fucking) idea is that?

Hermila / Suely: Whore nothing. Whores do everyone. I'm just going to do one guy. I don't want to be a whore. I don't want to be any damn whore.⁷⁴

Despite Hermila / Suely's resistance to being labeled as a whore (puta), the organization of the film leads the spectator to view her as a prostitute. Perhaps most significantly, the title of the film uses her chosen prostitute name rather than her given name. The film is sequenced by her arrival in Iguatu, subsequent decision to raffle herself, the act of servicing her customer, and her departure. In this way, her transition from non-prostitute to prostitute is the primary concern and driving force of the narrative. The film is titled *O*

⁷⁴ All English translations of the Portuguese dialogue in the film are my own. In the case that double meanings or plays on words exist, I elaborate their meanings in the footnotes.

Hermila: Eu vou me rifar. Ficar rica, comprar uma casa para mim e Mateus, Mateuzinho.

Tia: Puxa, mulher, que idéia de puta é essa?

Hermila: Puta nada. Puta trepa com todo mundo. Só vou trepar com um cara. Não quero ser puta não. Não quero ser porra nenhuma.

Céu de Suely, not *O Céu de Hermila*. By privileging Hermila's 'nome de guerra,' or prostitution name, the film irrevocably links Hermila to prostitution. Additionally, Hermila / Suely's motivations are apparent in the scene when she asks a bus station attendant for a list of prices so that she will know how much money she will need for bus fare in order to get "As far away from here as possible."⁷⁵ Shortly thereafter, Hermila / Suely decides to raffle herself in the scene that directly follows a conversation with Georgina about how much she charges for her sexual services:

Hermila / Suely: How much do you make?

Georgina: For what?

Hermila / Suely: A trick (a program).

Georgina: An hour? An hour is 20. Why?

Hermila / Suely: And if it was everything?

Georgina: Everything... the whole night, complete service? I don't know, for me it would be about 60, 70, but you'll have to give the ass and cuddling.⁷⁶

Following this initiation into the financial aspect of prostitution, Hermila / Suely is inspired by the idea of making much more than she has been able to earn raffling bottles of whisky and washing cars, and decides that she can strategically increase her income.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ "o mais longe daqui."

⁷⁶ Hermila: Quanto é que tu ganha?

Georgina: Hein?

Hermila: Programa.

Georgina: Uma hora? Uma hora é 20. Por quê?

Hermila: E se for tudo?

Georgina: Tudo [...] a noite inteira, serviço completo? Sei lá, meu. Bota aí uns 60, 70, mas ia ter que dar o cú e dormir abraçada.

⁷⁷ It is essential to remember, however, that this is a one-time opportunity that Hermila / Suely has because she is not already a prostitute. No one would buy a ticket from her friend Georgina because she has already been sold so many times, while Hermila / Suely promotes herself as exclusive in an effort to drive up the

She then propositions her first customer in the very next scene. Despite her attempted re-organization of the system, the timing of her decision links her scheme undeniably with prostitution.

Hermila/Suely is successful in making far more money than the average prostitute. This portrayal supports neoliberal economic model that has contributed to her poverty in the first place. This becomes clear in the way in which the film represents the matter of choice, an essential element in the argument of contractarians and supporters of neoliberal economics. Hermila/Suely works several jobs, including washing cars, which is typically done by men.⁷⁸ Unable to make enough money to leave Iguatu, she “chooses” to raffle herself. In this way, Hermila/Suely’s raffling of her sex to a certain extent obfuscates the conditions that make prostitution one of very few options for women.

The effectiveness of her entrepreneurial scheme is emphasized in brief shots of the protagonist counting a large stack of money or giving it away to her family. As soon as she begins selling raffle tickets, she also starts shopping for things like clothes and shampoo. In such a brief time and with far less labor than she exhibited while washing cars, she has managed to save a significant amount of cash. Her own aunt seems to find her success in attracting so many men empowering: “Your raffle was a success. And the men are all for Hermila and Hermila crapping on them.”⁷⁹ This attempted inversion of the system represents Hermila / Suely as highly-desired and even revered, far from being an average prostitute. In contrast with Georgina, the common streetwalker,

price. Additionally, her relative whiteness as well as her body type afford her the opportunity to raffle herself whereas other women would not necessarily earn as much money.

⁷⁸ Georgina comments on this during the film, saying that she has never seen a woman washing cars before.

⁷⁹ “Tua rifa foi um sucesso. E os homens todo mundo para Hermila e Hermila cagando pra eles.”

Hermila/Suely is represented as something of an entrepreneur by working smarter, not harder. At the same time, however, this financial success does not remove Hermila / Suely from the constructs that make prostitution possible. The protagonist may be making far more money for one night than Georgina makes in a month, but that does not destabilize the system itself.⁸⁰ Quite the contrary, it effectively argues that prostitution can be a lucrative investment, and that the difference between a common prostitute and a raffle-prize is marketing. This mentality serves to support the idea of the “free” citizen created by the neoliberal doctrine, as Aihwa Ong explains:

Neoliberal policies of ‘shrinking’ the state are accompanied by a proliferation of techniques to remake the social and citizen-subjects. Thus, neoliberal logic requires populations to be free, self-managing, self-enterprising individuals in different spheres of everyday life – health, education, bureaucracy, the professions, and so on. The neoliberal subject is therefore not a citizen with claims on the state but a self-enterprising citizen-subject who is obligated to become an ‘entrepreneur of himself of herself.’ (Ong 14)

By raffling herself, rather than simply engaging in standard prostitution as Georgina does, Hermila/Suely successfully achieves this neoliberal ideal. Sheila Jeffreys explains that this shift in representations of prostitution serve to uphold the neoliberal ideal: “They began to use terms such as ‘agency’, ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘rational choice’ to describe the experience of prostituted women. These approaches are a public relations victory for the international sex industry” (*Industrial* 14). In this sense, Aïnouz is not disrupting the neoliberal and patriarchal system at all in his film, but rather showing how manipulating

⁸⁰ This negotiating of terms raises the broader questions regarding prostitution: What is the difference, for example, between a street-walker and a call-girl? Is making more money necessarily more ‘empowering,’ or is it just the same process?

and participating in the system can result in some temporary financial success, and therefore, reproduces the discourse of neoliberalism.

The credibility of these images may be enhanced by the film's neo-realist style. The film marginalizes the protagonist in relationship to her environment. Hermila / Suely is frequently positioned on the margins of the screen when outdoors and alone and the sheer size of the sky and landscape make her appear insignificant by comparison. She often appears on the side of the road, with the road occupying the center of the shot, perhaps in reference to her overriding desire to leave the region and her failure to integrate into its society. It also calls into mind the economic development of the region from which she has marginalized.⁸¹

This result is due in part to the way in which the film constructs a 'reality' for the viewer. *O Céu de Suely* does not make any effort to draw the viewer's attention to the camera or the construction of the film itself. Quite the contrary, the film deemphasizes the presence of the camera and constructs a window-on-reality quality, effectively naturalizing the gaze. The shots are stable, and the structure linear, which afford the viewer the luxury of passive watching without requiring much effort.

It is easy to forget that *O Céu de Suely* is not a documentary, although documentaries are also subjective constructions. The dialogues appear 'realistic' in their awkwardness and in the long pauses. The lighting is very low, mostly owing to the film being made inside of existing buildings in the actual town of Iguatu, rather than on a separate set. The cuts between shots tend to be direct, but fading in and out between scenes emphasize continuity. The majority of the music in the film is ambient, except for

⁸¹ One example of a film of this type is Jorge Bodansky's 1976 film *Iracema*, about an indigenous girl who becomes a prostitute. The road and capitalist development are central elements of this story also.

the occasional insertion of the film's theme, which is a series of bell tones, similar to a lullaby. Close-ups on characters' faces during moments of introspection seek to create identification between the personalities on the screen and the spectators. Also, and perhaps most notable, is the use of the actors' real first names as their character names. Hermila is played by Hermila, João by João, and so on. However, the names Hermila and Georgina take on as prostitutes, Suely and Jessica, do not reflect the actual names of the actresses. This further distances the prostitute role from the actual individual and emphasizes its performative aspect. In combination, these techniques build up a strong verisimilitude from which it is difficult to escape. Karim Aïnouz recognizes this approximation to reality in an interview with a Brazilian entertainment website: "The film has a desire, the whole time, to play with and appropriate the real. But it also has a desire, larger than that one, that is to say that there is no real, everything is a construction. The film is not neo-realist, it is hyper-realist in this sense" (Omelette.com).⁸² Although Aïnouz views the film as a series of constructions, it is difficult to detect this when viewing the work as a whole. The resulting verisimilitude generated by these techniques make the film appear perhaps less representational than representative.

"It's the Smell of the World Rotting:" Baixio das Bestas

Cláudio Assis's 2006 film *Baixio das Bestas* (Bog of Beasts) is an exercise in allegory that utilizes prostitutes and prostitution to demonstrate the effects of unmitigated capitalism, particularly the sugarcane industry, on the population and land in the *Zona da*

⁸² Karim Aïnouz, interview with Marcelo Hessel: "O filme tem o desejo, o tempo inteiro, de brincar e se apropriar do real. Mas tem também um desejo, maior do que esse, que é dizer que não tem real, é tudo uma construção. O filme não é neo-realista, ele é hiper-realista nesse sentido. O realismo é uma construção."

Mata (“Forrest Zone”).⁸³ The Zona da Mata portrayed in this film is a predominantly rural region in the Northeastern Brazilian state of Pernambuco. The narrative of the *Baixio das Bestas* centers on Auxiliadora, a young teenager whose grandfather exploits her by forcing her to pose nude for truck drivers at the local gas station.⁸⁴ Her appeal to her audience lies in her youth, sexual immaturity and rumors that she is a virgin. The son of the town’s richest family, Cícero, meanwhile participates in violent orgies and beatings of prostitutes with his cousin, Everardo, and a gang of other men. After watching her pose nude at the gas station several times, Cícero becomes obsessed with Auxiliadora, and eventually kidnaps and rapes her. Realizing she is no longer a virgin, her sexually abusive grandfather rejects her, and is trampled by a mob shortly thereafter. Auxiliadora then becomes a prostitute at the same gas station where her grandfather used to exploit her.

Baixio das Bestas is the second feature-length film directed by Cláudio Assis. Although it was seen by smaller Brazilian audiences than most commercial films released in the same year, it won numerous awards, including best actor for Mariah Teixeira (Auxiliadora) and best supporting actor awards for most of the supporting cast. It was also awarded best film at the Brasília Festival of Brazilian Cinema, the Cinema Brazil Grand Prize and the Tiger Award at the Rotterdam International Film Festival.⁸⁵ Because of this, there are several interviews with the director and other critical discussions of the film available.

⁸³ The term “besta” can be translated as “beast,” but can also indicate stupidity and brutishness.

⁸⁴ The character’s age is 16 years old. According to *O Globo*’s online culture magazine, the actress who portrays Auxiliadora, Mariah Teixeira, was 22 years old during the filming.

⁸⁵ According to the Brazilian National Cinema Agency (ANCINE), the total domestic audience for *Baixio das Bestas* was 48,844 viewers, which is relatively few when compared to the approximately 2.4 million viewers of *Tropa de Elite*, released the same year.

The unequal power structures exacerbated by neoliberal economics are particularly played out in the abuse of the female body, which serves a primarily allegorical purpose in *Baixio das Bestas*. The film is conspicuous for its explicit incorporation of sexual, physical and psychological abuse of women by men. The allegory emerges from the prostitutes that live on its margins, all of whom serve to represent the abused, victimized, penetrable, and ‘raped’ land and people. The trajectory of Auxiliadora’s experience serves to reinforce this by emphasizing her virginity, the abuse of her body and her eventual transition to professional prostitution. According to Assis’s interviews, he intends to criticize the exploitation perpetrated by the sugarcane industry, which extends back some 500 years.⁸⁶ During that time, extending to the present, wealthy landowners have consistently exploited the rural poor as laborers, as men have exploited women through sexual abuse.⁸⁷

The primary rapists in the film are what Assis calls “agroboys,” who are the sons of wealthy landowners. Assis invests his representations of the poor and underrepresented in the female characters in *Baixio*, who all either begin or end up as prostitutes. In this way, he utilizes the victimized and raped female body to allegorize the destruction of an entire region but avoids any criticism of the structures of labor that have perpetuated domination. The “agroboys” maintain their access to the female body through violence,

⁸⁶ The history of sugar mills and slavery are inextricably interwoven in Brazil. Stuart Schwartz’s detailed investigation of the sugar plantations in colonial Bahia can give some insight into the background behind Assis’s representation. Schwartz describes an elite, land-owning nobility reigning over dominated classes, such as slaves. However, in Schwartz’s account, colonial hierarchies were far more nuanced than they are often represented. For more on colonial sugar plantations see: Schwartz, Stuart. *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985.

⁸⁷ Kit Sims Taylor writes, for example, that “The history of sugar in northeastern Brazil is the history of the dominant class manipulating social, political and economic institutions so as to expropriate the maximum possible surplus from the rural workers” in *Sugar and the Underdevelopment of Northeastern Brazil*. Gainesville: U. of Florida P., 1978, p. 157.

implying that the land and its people are violated, penetrated and abused by the dominant class.⁸⁸ Aesthetic experimentation, however, is somewhat limited. The result is a film that highlights the *Zona da Mata* as an unstable, brutal and unpredictable place, while insufficiently questioning the politics of gender that are integral to the filmic structure.

The Northeast that Cláudio Assis imagines in his film is one that has been almost entirely forsaken by civilization. Several still, black and white, distorted images of the abandoned *usina* (sugar mill) play like a slide show, enhanced by industrial music. The shots are stable, but at diagonal and from the ground up, giving the structures an imposing and almost monstrous quality, particularly when juxtaposed with the gentle skies in the background. The grainy texture contributes to this effect. In a later scene, two of the film's characters discuss the offensive stench of the mills:

“Are you sensing a strange smell?”

“It must be from the sugar mill.”

“Go on, man! I don't even know what is the smell that comes out of the sugar mill? It is the smell of the world rotting.”⁸⁹

To emphasize the continuing importance of sugarcane, there are several shots of men working the fields and of trucks hauling cut cane. Assis also includes images of the cane

⁸⁸ *Baixio das Bestas* shares its allegorical tendencies and many other characteristics with Jorge Bodansky and Orlando Senna's 1976 film, *Iracema: Uma Transa Amazônica*. For further reading on the use of allegory in that film, see Pick, Zuzana. *The New Latin American Cinema: A Continental Project*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993 and Xavier, Ismail. “Iracema: Transcending Cinema Verité.” *The Social Documentary in Latin America*, Julianne Burton ed. Pittsburgh: University Press, 1990.

⁸⁹ “Está sentindo um cheiro estranho?”/ “Deve ser da usina.” / “Conversa homem! Eu nem sei o que é cheiro que sai da usina? Isso é a podridão do mundo.”

remnants on fire after harvest.⁹⁰ The rising flames and crackling sounds have a distinctively hellish quality.

Baixio das Bestas is an extremely violent film. What sets this particular film apart from other violent films is its focus on sexual and gendered violence, exhibited through incest, child molestation, verbal and physical abuse, forced or coerced prostitution, exploitation and rape. These elements have led some critics to accuse Assis of misogyny. His reply has been that *Baixio das Bestas* intends to condemn the abuse of women.⁹¹ However, upon closer analysis, it is clear that the film ultimately fails to question the male gaze and patriarchal filmic techniques. Displaying violence on the screen is not necessarily equivalent to denouncing it. While the some elements of *Baixio* and the many interview commentaries made by Assis denounce gendered violence, the filmic structure often contradicts this message. This tension between often oppositional meanings in prostitute films is a clear example incomplete resistance.

Assis's representation of gender roles is extreme. There is only one female character in the film that is not involved in prostitution. The majority of the male characters in the film are perpetually drunk or on drugs, and abusing women sadistically. The prostitutes who work in the brothel take delight in the downfall of Bela, the first of Everardo's victims, and show no concern for when she is raped and beaten; on the contrary, they encourage it and even revel in it in a later scene. Assis explains in one interview that his intention was to demonstrate the evil nature of the region's inhabitants:

⁹⁰ This procedure is sometimes called "burning the stubble" in English, and is a means of clearing the leftover crop to prepare the land for replanting in the next season.

⁹¹ In one interview, Assis states: "I'm not machista. I make a denunciation of violence against women." (Não sou machista. Faço uma denúncia da violência contra a mulher). The interview was published in *Revista Quem* by Graziela Salomão, August 4, 2009. Online: <http://revistaquem.globo.com/Quem/0,6993,EQG1535805-3428,00.html>

“After all of this, you still want good people to exist there. It won’t do. There is no escape for them. This film is an alert so that we look at these people, so we think about the validity of this monoculture” (Assis in Bezerra 27).⁹² Assis’s determinist view avoids any kind of sympathy or interest in the characters he has created. This strategy also makes it difficult for the audience to find any redeeming qualities in those represented by the film. Paradoxically, he seems to be rejecting the region himself as he criticizes its rejection by society.

Despite Cláudio Assis’s assertions that his film condemns patriarchy, the gaze established by *Baixio* is overwhelmingly male. It is important to recall that, although the actual spectator may be female, the gaze that is set up by the filmic techniques is often still male. In the case of *Baixio*, the film trajectory centers primarily around the character of Auxiliadora as she is exploited, raped and then becomes a prostitute. Upon close examination of the way her role is constructed in the film, the male gaze becomes evident.

Phallic power is exercised in its most extreme form in the three rape scenes.

Monique Plaza emphasizes the importance of gender in the act of rape:

Men rape women because women as a class belong to men as a class. Men have appropriated the bodies of women. Men rape what they have learned to consider is their property, that is to say, individuals of the other/opposite sex class, the class of women (which, I repeat, can also contain biological men). (182)

In addition to the gendered differences, the economic differences are also clear. Everardo and his friends have more money and family connections, and therefore have the ability

⁹² “Depois de tudo isso, você ainda quer que existam pessoas boas ali. Não dá. Não existe mais saída para eles. Esse filme é uma alerta para que olhemos para essas pessoas, para pensarmos sobre a validade dessa monocultura.”

to coerce and force women, in a tradition of the ruling elite that has endured for some 500 years.⁹³

The economic differences are further highlighted in a scene in which Cícero runs over a cyclist while driving with Everardo. Immediately after the accident, Everardo pushes Cícero to drive away, shouting: “Esta é a monocultura do pai da buceta!” The subtitles interpret this as “This is the monoculture of cock and cunt.” Although the cyclist is male, this statement intends to feminize him. The cyclist survives, leading one of the gang members to comment that the poor are hard to kill. Everardo responds: “Poverty is worse than cancer. There could even be a good part of the world, but it goes around destroying everything. When you see, it already got you in the lung. Poverty is what is going to socialize the world!”⁹⁴ Although these comments position Everardo’s gang as the dominant economic class, they do not explain the violence perpetrated specifically against women. In the case of the cyclist, his near-death is a careless accident, rather than an intentional attempt to harm him. When Everardo and Cícero rape their victims, however, they clearly do so in order to terrorize them and to reinforce their own masculinity. Again, Assis’s narrative does not connect intentional violence with the region itself as much as with the female body. By trapping his allegory in this way, he limits his capacity for criticism. These limitations become apparent in the three rape scenes, in which the male gaze remains dominant.

⁹³ Assis implies the power of family connections partially in the portrayal of incest. There is a strong homoerotic connection between Cícero and his cousin, Everardo. This is emphasized through their group sex and frequent simultaneous masturbation. Cícero also seems to have an incestuous connection with his mother, whom he grabs and holds to himself while his pants are undone. Auxiliadora’s grandfather is said to also be her father, and he also abuses her sexually. These encounters emphasize the perpetuation of the abuse of women and of the family ties that prevail over time.

⁹⁴ “A pobreza é que nem um câncer. Pode ter até parte boa no mundo mas vai destruindo tudo. Quando tu vê já pegou no pulmão. A pobreza é que vai socializar o mundo!”

In the first example, Everardo (Matheus Nachtergaele) rapes Bela during an orgiastic party. Although she is a prostitute, she refuses to engage in anal sex, angering Everardo. At camera at his eye level, we see him force her into a room and onto a bed, but as the sexual assault begins, the camera shifts position to a shot from above (a fly-on-the-wall effect). As he rapes her, she screams as if being stabbed, and the crowd cheers him on, encouraging him to “take her.” By initially refusing to make her body available to Everardo, thereby attempting to exercise power in choosing her own customers and acts, Bela (Hermila Guedes) disrupts the patriarchal system which demands that prostitutes submit. She is then ‘punished’ in a violent assault, both in the rape itself and the subsequent beating. It becomes clear that this punishment is not only sexual, but also an expression of phallic power when Everardo then kicks Bela in the head repeatedly, shouting: “Die, whore, die!”

In the second rape scene, the act of (presumably vaginal and then anal) penetration is by an object. After Dora is taken to the cinema by several of the men, she tells Everardo that the group sex he wants will be expensive. She is then held by the three men, who slap her and detain her while Everardo gets a pole.⁹⁵ Richard Dyer explains that it is essential to remember the connection between the phallus and the penis:

The phallus is not just an arbitrarily chosen symbol of male power; it is crucial that the penis has provided the model for this symbol. Because only men have penises, phallic symbols, even if in some sense possessed by a woman ... are always symbols of ultimately male power. (274)

⁹⁵ This pole appears to be a broom handle or something like it. It could, however, be symbolic of sugar cane.

Because Dora has already consented to sex for money (unlike Bela), Everardo invents a much more exaggerated example of phallic power. He goes beyond her consent by using this object to penetrate her against her will. The importance of the penis/phallus connection is made extremely clear by Assis's use of shadow to depict the rape. While holding the stick out, Everardo positions it at the same level as his genitals, making it an outsized stand-in for his own body part. The scene takes place on the stage of the Cine Atlântico, with the shadows projected on the cinema's screen, highlighting the performative aspect of her violation.⁹⁶

The third rape scene occurs in two parts. First, Auxiliadora's grandfather sends her to the gas station to pose nude again, but without him. The owner of the station restaurant takes charge of her display, collecting the money and informing the men that they are now permitted to touch her (for a price). One such man pays to fondle her breasts and another to thrust his hand between her legs, much like her grandfather did in a previous scene. Both instances are shown in close-up with high-key lighting, giving the camera-voyeur full visual access to the event.

On her way home from the gas station, Auxiliadora is then kidnapped by Cícero, who rapes her by the side of the road. He alternately assaults her and points his gun at her. He then leans back against his truck and takes a drink from his bottle of alcohol, positioning the gun over his genitals, visually connecting the phallic power of the gun to the phallus. Although the scene is back-lit by the headlights of Cícero's truck, high-key lighting in the front of the scene allows for full view of what is taking place. Again, the

⁹⁶ The name of the theater also brings interesting connotations. First, the town is far from the coast, so the name is somewhat ironic. Additionally, it calls to mind Atlântida, a production company that became particularly known for *Chanchadas* (low-budget comedies) in the 1950s. For more see John King, *Magical Reels*. London: Verso, 1990.

camera is positioned as if in a hiding place, somewhere in the bushes, watching without being seen.⁹⁷

Women in *Baixio das Bestas* are raped, both figuratively -as representatives of a region- and literally, as women. In the case of Auxiliadora, her rape is juxtaposed with the burning of the sugarcane remnants. In terms of the film's narrative, the useful (profitable) cane has been removed, and the remaining stubble is disposed of, much like his characters dispose of their victims after abusing them.⁹⁸ Both Bela and Dora disappear from the narrative completely after being attacked. We do not even know if they have survived. In this way, we (the audience) are spared the discomfort of having to deal with any of the consequences of the violence we witness. Like the 'agroboys,' we are allowed to forget the victims, rather than be forced to confront them. We are called to witness the graphic nature of the act, but never the aftermath. For the women in the film, their rapists treat them like trash by discarding them after abusing them, and the filmmaker treats them in a similar manner by throwing them out of the narrative after they have served their allegorical purpose. The bodies of the women raped in this film are, in a way, doubly sacrificed: in their representation as prostitute victims, and in terms of the film's narrative. Considering that the primary purpose of the women in the film is to allegorize the suffering of the region, this leads us to ultimately question: is Assis

⁹⁷ It is important to note that all three women are raped from behind. This emphasizes their feminization by their attackers in that they are bent over and forced to submit. This also evidences that the act is not only sexual, but also a demonstration of dominance. David William Foster refers to this in *Gender and Society in Contemporary Brazilian Cinema*: "One could speculate that the anal rape of women is to signify them as degraded men: in a sexist society, overvalued men are valueless when degraded as women, who are undervalued to begin with" (117-118).

⁹⁸ The audience is never told whether the agroboys' prostitute victims live or die after their rapes. This stands in contrast to the male cyclist victim Cícero hits with his car. He presumes his victim to be dead and later discovers that he is alive. This level of concern seems to mainly stem from fear of punishment, something he and Everardo never express in relation to their female victims.

making a point about the abuse of women in the *Zona da Mata*, or abusing women in order to make a point about the *Zona da Mata*?

Rather than indict the villainous abusers in his narrative, the structure of the film empowers them. The first example of this is a scene in which Everardo (Matheus Nachtergaele), perhaps the most criminal of the gang of rapists highlighted in the film, breaks the ‘fourth wall’ of the cinema and addresses the camera directly. With his face illuminated by a spotlight from above, he states: “You know what is the best thing about the cinema? It’s that in the cinema you can do what you want.”⁹⁹ This rather heavy-handed reference to the cinema has a double meaning. Within the boundaries of the film, the cinema is a building, the Cine Atlântico, in which Everardo’s friends loiter, drink, smoke, watch pornographic films and masturbate. It is the place where he and two other men take Dora to rape her. It becomes the headquarters for their violent acts in the film, and is referred to sarcastically by Bela (one of the two women later raped by Everardo) as a place to go if you like getting thrashed. Its meaning, however, extends far beyond its cinematic representation, implying that the statement by Everardo is a message from the director to the audience. Near the end of the film, Everardo sits on the steps of the Cine Atlântico as it is taken apart by workers. He is clearly frustrated that this space in which he enjoyed free-reign is being taken away. Its demolition may more broadly symbolize the destruction of Brazilian national cinema. In one interview with Moviola Digital, Assis laments the film’s inability to compete with imports (online). At the same time, however, he fails to acknowledge that he has produced a film that is so graphically violent that it is sure to alienate any broad audience.

⁹⁹ “Sabe o que que é melhor do cinema? É que no cinema tu pode fazer o que tu quer.”

Everardo's statement- that in the cinema you can do whatever you want- is certainly a reference to the cinema as the filmic production itself, or cinematic representation, implying that this statement by Everardo is a message from the director to the audience. This is further emphasized by the fact that Everardo is located in the projection room of the cinema when he makes this statement, not on stage or in the audience. This positions him as the projector of images, the controller of the cinematic text, much like Cláudio Assis directs the film itself. It is from here that Everardo drives the other characters' actions and declares his philosophies on the nature of poverty and the cinema. By making the cinema (theater) the location where his sadistic characters enjoy free reign over the bodies of women, Assis implies that he – as director- benefits from a similar liberty to enact violent fantasies in the cinematic world he creates. This argument is further supported in one of the final scenes of the film, in which Assis inserts himself into the frame by playing the role of a truck driver at the gas station where Auxiliadora is prostituted. In this scene, his character pats Auxiliadora on the rear end and comments on her attractiveness and sexual skills, sealing the connection between his fictional creation and his own experienced reality.¹⁰⁰

Despite Cláudio Assis's claims that his film seeks to denounce the 'reality' in the Northeast, its structure uses the male gaze to suture gendered violence and the region together. Although the images are shocking in their content, the format of the film relies on exploitative filmic techniques, thereby making its intended resistance incomplete. Assis chooses to privilege sensual display of the female body over subjectivity, ultimately undermining his own intended denouncement.

¹⁰⁰ Assis also inserts himself into the frame in his first feature length film, *Amarelo Manga* (2002), where he crosses the street and approaches one of the film's protagonists, Kika, who is an Evangelical Christian. He whispers in her ear, "Modesty is the most intelligent form of perversion." (As subtitled in the film).

“Who Ever Saw a Whore Dream?:” Deserto Feliz

Deserto Feliz (2008), directed by Paulo Caldas, fits into the current trend of northeastern prostitute films in terms of content, but its style is notably different. Like the other films mentioned in this chapter, it had a relatively low viewership, but was widely awarded at film festivals. *Deserto* won several awards at the Gramado and Guadalajara film festivals, and was nominated for the Cinema Brasil Grand Prize and the Rotterdam Film Festival Tiger Award.¹⁰¹ Although *Deserto Feliz* deals in very similar subject matter to that of *Baixio das Bestas* and *O Céu de Suely*- such as rape, violence, underage prostitution, poverty and gender roles- its approach is noticeably different. The film is a co-production between Brazil (Camará Filmes) and Germany (Noir Film), and won several festival awards, including Best Director at the Guadalajara Film Festival, the Audience Award in the Brazilian Film Competition at the Gramado Film Festival, among others.

Deserto Feliz tells the story of Jessica, a 15-year-old girl who lives in a rural area. After she is raped by her stepfather, she begins working as a gas station prostitute and eventually runs away to Recife in search of a better life. She lives in a tiny, filthy apartment with a small group of sex workers, some of whom dream of marrying a rich foreigner and leaving their lives of poverty. Jessica realizes this ambition by meeting Mark, a wealthy German, who takes her back to Berlin with him. Notwithstanding her

¹⁰¹ Because of this last nomination, the film was first distributed from the Netherlands in Portuguese with Dutch subtitles. It was difficult to even find a copy of the film for sale, much less one distributed from Brazil, which gives some idea of the film’s limited audience. According to ANCINE, the total number of tickets sold for the film in Brazil amounted to only 6,395. This is an extremely small audience, even compared to the other films included in this chapter. No data are available on international ticket sales and DVD sales and rentals, however, making it nearly impossible to estimate the total audience of the film.

seeming good fortune, however, Jessica remains alienated, detached, and unable to find happiness, primarily because of her lack of independence. Despite living the ‘dream’ of dating a foreigner and leaving Brazil, Jessica remains disillusioned.

This particular film makes use of neorealist, and what Nguyen-Vo Thu- Huong calls social realist, techniques to depict on-going problems exacerbated by neoliberal economics. It is clear that the film is a denouncement of the economic and gendered conditions of the Brazilian northeast, which precipitate the protagonist’s entry into prostitution. The most obvious signs of social realism are the use of a story line that lacks a traditional narrative trajectory and has no happy ending. Caldas communicates part of this through the dialogue of his characters, particularly in the statements of Pâmela, played by Hermila Guedes.

After Jessica’s move to the city, she is shown living with three other girls in the Edifício Holiday in a small room with 4 beds. Despite the dirty and clearly poor circumstances, the four roommates giggle and joke with each other as if they were at a slumber party. In this situation, Hermila Guedes and the others fantasize about marrying a “very, very white” gringo (foreigner) and living somewhere else. Pâmela says, “I don’t want to die a Brazilian, no.”¹⁰² This intersection of childlike dreaming with the clear reality that these women are prostitutes highlights the grim reality of the film for the audience. It also criticizes the country as a whole, as Pâmela does not say that she does not want to be poor, or a woman. Rather, she perceives her plight as primarily linked to their location and nationality.

The director’s search for authenticity in conveying the social message is most visible in the storyline itself, which seeks authenticity in its representations. If we take

¹⁰² “Não quero morrer como brasileira não.”

into account the investigations conducted by Christa Wichterich, the narrative of prostitution developed by Caldas is rather accurate:

Prostitution is the choice made by those who have no choice; such is the conclusion from a survey of prostitutes in Recife, a boom town of sex tourism. In most cases, it was an experience of violence in the family or in a circle of acquaintances that first drove the women into commercial sex work. They are helped to get through the 'programme with a gringo' by the dream of a 'fairy prince', preferably from Germany, and by drugs that deaden their feelings of repulsion. More than half the girls had already been once to Europe with a client, in the hope that a marriage might come out of it. Of those who remained, quite a few would learn that marriage is no protection against discrimination, violence or even prostitution. (63)

By dealing directly with the very real problem of prostitution in the northeast, Caldas avoids the tendency to sensationalize or romanticize the situation. The plot follows the same patterns identified by Wichterich above, and it does not seek to show exception, but rather to confirm what is observed in studies and research. This is highlighted in Jessica's imaginary journey to Berlin with Mark, her German client-turned-lover. In the first scene of the film, we see Jessica sitting on a bed in a hotel room with Mark sleeping in the background. The film then goes back to Jessica's origins in the *sertão*, only returning to this pivotal moment later in the film, shortly before Mark takes her to Germany with him. After her frustrating and isolating experience in Germany, the final shot of the film depicts the same room for the third time, only rather than take Jessica with him, Mark packs his suitcase and walks out of the room, leaving her behind. The

repetition of the scene leads the audience to question whether Jessica was really ever in Germany at all, or if it was a kind of dream sequence. If it is, then it seems to be the realization of Pâmela's remark: "Who ever saw a whore dream?"¹⁰³ What stands out is not so much the fact that they dream, however, but that Jessica's dream is so far from ideal. Clearly, this dream shatters the image of a European Prince charming and demystifies the workings of gender. Ultimately, Jessica's fantasy has the bitter taste of reality.

Social realities are further played out in the director's careful use of symbolic space, particularly through the use of iconic landmarks, but also through the traditional dichotomy between the coast and the interior. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the sertão is frequently defined by its 'otherness' or its difference from the coast. The coast is often portrayed as the modernizing space, while the sertão is unruly, backward and dangerous. To a certain extent, *Deserto Feliz* upholds this binary. Although she works as a prostitute, Jessica is never shown being beaten or raped in Recife. Furthermore, she enjoys the company of her roommates, particularly Pâmela, who is considerably less content than Jessica. Their frequent visits to the beach demonstrate that they have access to certain public spaces and leisure time to enjoy them. It is also in the city that Jessica sees in a television newscast that her step-father has been arrested for animal trafficking in her former town of *Deserto Feliz*, further distancing her new life of partying from her former life in the *sertão*. It is meaningful that when she observes this news story, she is in the process of having her hair straightened. As she adapts to the city, exercising her disposable income and changing her look, she sees

¹⁰³ "Quem já viu puta sonhar?" Because there are no English subtitles available for this film, all of the translations of dialogue are my own.

Deserto Feliz as a distant and backward place. At the same time, however, this new ‘freedom’ still exists within the confines of the poverty and exploitation she experiences in the city.

Iconic landmarks also serve an important role in the social symbolic meanings of the film. Jessica and three other women live in the Edifício Holiday, an apartment complex Robert Levine described in 1970 as “notorious” (115). The high-rise building sits relatively close to the waterfront and has a distinctive curved shape, which allows for views of the ocean. Recent news stories reveal the reputation of Edifício Holiday (sometimes called Prédio Holiday) as a hide-out for criminals, prostitutes and drug dealers.¹⁰⁴ It is difficult to find numbers on exactly how many people live in the building; however, one researcher estimated in 2005 that there were close to three thousand people living in 476 apartments.¹⁰⁵ One article on *Deserto Feliz* describes the building as “a type of vertical favela inhabited by prostitutes and inlaid in the noble neighborhood of Boa Viagem” (Cine Reporter online).¹⁰⁶

By filming in the Edifício Holiday, Paulo Caldas interacts with the socially constructed set of meanings already applied to that place, and its reputation as an epicenter for prostitution and other undesirable activities. It is clear that the Edifício Holiday stands out both as a marker of poverty and marginality, but also a symbol that

¹⁰⁴ Globo.com reports make two references to the building in 2009, one for the recovery of a 16-year-old runaway from another state, and one for the arrest of a crack dealer. One report by the civil police of Pernambuco associate the building with a brutal murder committed by a prostitute and another woman over some crack. In general, it is clear that the building’s reputation is primarily that of being a home for criminals.

¹⁰⁵ A blogger named Flaviana Chiappetta did a study of the building in 2005 and found the inhabitants to be far more welcoming than their newspaper portrayals.
<http://aquempossainteressar.blogspot.com/2005/11/edificio-holiday.html>

¹⁰⁶ “espécie de favela vertical habitada por prostitutas e encravada no bairro nobre de Boa Viagem.” Boa Viagem is a tourist destination in Recife. This implies that the Edifício Holiday represents a blemish in the middle of this postcard-like setting.

can be recognized by those familiar with its meanings. The low-light and occasionally unstable shots in close quarters further serve to support the film's authenticity, as Cine Reporter notes: "they smell like a hard, desperate reality that truly exists" (online).¹⁰⁷ By filming on-site in this iconic space, the film gains a strong credibility for portraying the problem of prostitution in its real locations, much like a documentary. In this way, Caldas seeks to 'document' an existing problem through fictional representations that incorporate elements of the real.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, by making the Edifício Holiday Jessica's home in Recife, the director contributes to and confirms the building's existing representations as a "real" space for prostitution and drugs.¹⁰⁹

Another iconic landmark stands out in the second half of the film: the Fernsehturm, or television tower, located in the Berlin district known as the Alexanderplatz. As Jessica stares melancholically out of the panoramic windows of Mark's apartment, she can see the television tower clearly in the distance. It is clear from the immediate surroundings and the set-up of the apartment that Mark lives in an affluent section of Berlin. The tower in the background was built by the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the 1960s. Its height and visibility from a long distance marked it as a symbol of technological achievement for the GDR while Berlin was still divided into sectors. Its ability to rotate and its panoramic windows give a full view of the surroundings, making the structure a kind of panopticon.¹¹⁰ At the same

¹⁰⁷ "cheiram a uma realidade dura e desesperançada que existe de verdade."

¹⁰⁸ In the conclusions of this dissertation, there is a much more detailed questioning of the relationships between documentary and fictions filmmaking and their implications.

¹⁰⁹ All three films discussed in this chapter incorporate drug use in some way. However, the drug use is not portrayed as a cause of prostitution, but rather a way of dealing with poverty and sadness. The exception is the "agroboys" in *Baixio*, whose violent behavior also includes heavy drug use.

¹¹⁰ I am using the term "panopticon" as described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. New York: Vintage, 1975.

time, its purpose is to transmit images (television), meaning that it is constantly watching as it is being watched. This is significant in that Jessica seems to have only two options for entertaining herself in the apartment: staring out the window at the tower, or staring blankly at the television. The tower's shape is unmistakably phallic, symbolizing the power of the GDR, but also the masculine technological achievements that erected it. This constant phallic symbol hovers over Jessica as she is essentially trapped.¹¹¹ It is through this view that the director signals to the audience Mark's wealth and the fact that they are in Berlin, which is never overtly mentioned in the film. The U-shape of the Edifício Holiday in Recife represents a kind of feminine space, full of Jessica's friends, and the location of her happiest moments, while the television tower in Berlin is far more masculine and cold.

Paulo Caldas uses these very real and symbolic spaces to address the problem of human trafficking explicitly in the film. Although Jessica seems to go willingly, she has very limited choice in the decision to move to Berlin. In a scene in the bar "Amazonas," Mark and his German traveling companion discuss how to obtain a false passport for Jessica. She is not at all involved in the conversation, as it is presumed that she will go willingly. In this way, Mark does not only purchase sex, but also her whole body. Trafficking makes explicit the implications of prostitution. As Carole Pateman explains, "The prostitute cannot sell sexual services alone; what she sells is her body ... to use the prostitute's 'services,' her purchaser must buy her body and use her body. In prostitution, ... it is the body that is up for sale" (562). Although the implied dream of these women is to marry a foreigner and move away, the reality is that a change in

¹¹¹ The Alexanderplatz became the location of anti-authoritarian demonstrations later in the GDR, culminating with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989. However, Jessica cannot see the plaza, only the tower that thrusts up from it.

location does not disturb the power dynamic already in place between prostitute and customer.

This point is further emphasized in that Jessica's situation certainly parallels the trapped condition of trafficked animals. Like the armadillo captured by her step-father early in the film, she is an exotic specimen, especially when she is brought to Germany. This is emphasized in her relationships with captive animals. In *Deserto Feliz* she taunts the armadillo as it tries to escape from its enclosure. In Berlin, she often walks through Mark's neighborhood to a goat pen. There, she presses food through the wires and looks into their eyes. In both cases, Jessica is unable to relate to the human beings in her life (in the sertão her mother and step-father and in Berlin her boyfriend), and so she bonds herself to these captive animals, whose literal cages symbolize her more figurative sense of confinement.

The neorealist filmic techniques used by Paulo Caldas serve to underscore the social message being conveyed. Jessica's dissatisfaction and inability to control her own destiny is reflected extensively in the structure of the film. A greenish or grayish filter gives the majority of the film a sickly and polluted quality, particularly when the characters are indoors. Caldas explained in an interview with *Diário de Pernambuco* that his focus was to dull the image: "The actresses that interpret the prostitutes, for example, don't use red lipsticks because we wanted to control the colors and escape from that cliché" (Online).¹¹² Furthermore, the use of semi-documentary techniques- such as handheld cameras and a lack of supplementary lighting- give the film an unstable quality, which overtly avoids the Hollywood ideal of the objective, distant steadicam. Extreme

¹¹² "As atrizes que interpretam as prostitutas, por exemplo, não usam batons vermelhos porque queríamos controlar as cores e fugir desse clichê, mas é claro que elas usariam o vermelho na vida real."

close-ups allow for an intimate examination of the character, but do not permit the viewer to forget the presence of the camera. Additionally, prolonged silences and the sparse use of dialogue allow the focus to remain on Jessica's relationship to her environment and her general feeling of alienation wherever she goes. These aspects of the film, as well as others, demonstrate that Jessica's situation is dictated by her position in society, and that position remains subordinate, particularly throughout her encounters with men.

However, by attempting to address a social problem in such a stylized manner, Caldas occasionally undermines his own narrative. As Rodrigo de Oliveira explains, the director's choice to attach the camera to Mark in some scenes, rather than attach it to the protagonist, means that "his camera identifies much more with the exploiter than with the exploited" (online).¹¹³ Caldas explains techniques like this one:

It is much more an artistic reflection than a denouncement. In the 60s and 70s, the Brazilian cineastes defended the political engagement in a much more radical form. The marginal films more concerned with aesthetics became discriminated because of this. I feel part of a generation that struggles with this question in a much more open and free manner (Caldas in *Diário de Pernambuco* online).¹¹⁴

At the same time, it is impossible to separate the commentary Caldas's film is making from the aesthetic techniques used. While they may seem to be distinct, feminist film theory clearly reveals that the social and representational are inextricably linked. As Teresa de Lauretis explains: "Thus, the proposition that the representation of gender is its construction, each term being at once the product and the process of the other, can be

¹¹³ "...que sua câmera se identifica muito mais com o explorador que com a explorada."

¹¹⁴ "É muito mais uma reflexão artística do que uma denúncia. Nos anos 60 e 70, os cineastas brasileiros defendiam o engajamento político de forma mais radical. Os filmes marginais mais preocupados com a estética chegavam a ser discriminados por isso. Me sinto parte de uma geração que lida com essa questão de maneira mais aberta e livre."

restated more accurately: *The construction of gender is both the product and the process of representation*” (5). By depicting prostitution with neorealist techniques, Caldas emphasizes the political as well as representational. It is possible that his decision to affix the subjective camera to Mark (both in the form of a camera that shows Mark’s face in close-up as he walks, and as a kind of shoulder-cam) is a means for drawing attention to his place as manager of the narrative for the second half of the film. By adopting Mark’s gaze so bluntly, the director reveals the power of his position in the film, and his ability to control Jessica and her destiny. It is impossible, in this case, to disintegrate the ties between aesthetic technique and social criticism.

Discussion of the Female Nude

The three films in this chapter incorporate varying levels of display of women’s bodies. However, the ways in which these bodies are displayed play heavily into the underlying message. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger draws a distinction between nakedness and nudity as they pertain to artistic production and consumption. Central to Berger’s understanding is the display of the female body for the viewing pleasure of a masculine spectator: “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become nude” (54). He goes on to say that the protagonist of nude art does not appear in the image itself, but is the spectator himself: “He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there” (54). This is certainly the case as Lynda Nead argues, the female nude in artistic representation is an affirmation of patriarchal control of the female body:

Thus, pictures of the female nude are not *about* female sexuality in any simplistic way; they also testify to a particular cultural definition of male sexuality and are part of a wider debate around representation and cultural value. The female nude is both a cultural and a sexual category; it is part of a cultural industry whose languages and institutions propose specific definitions of gender and sexuality and particular forms of knowledge and pleasure (334).

The display of the nude woman is integral to the filmic structure of prostitute films.

When a man chooses to ‘purchase’ the services of a prostitute, what he is buying is visual and physical access to the female body. In the context of contemporary film, when we purchase a movie ticket or DVD, we also pay for certain visual access.

In the case of *O Céu de Suely*, the protagonist (Hermila Guedes) is white, with black hair that has been partially dyed blonde. She is 22 years old and slender. Her grandmother describes her in one of the early scenes as “chesty.” She has a different appearance from the other women in the film, and in the region, in that she is comparatively tall, and relatively white. This difference draws the attention of her potential clients, and therefore, she is desirable as a prize / prostitute. There are three scenes in which Hermila / Suely appears nude. While Hermila / Suely’s actions may seem to resist patriarchy elsewhere in the film, in these scenes the filmic structures revert back to classic techniques, in which the female form takes center stage for the viewing pleasure of the male gaze.

While the character is strong, the film eroticizes her body by positioning it as an object of desire. The first nude scene in the film is in a sexual encounter with an old boyfriend, who will again become the protagonist’s lover. Under full light, she stands

topless in front of him. Hermila/Suely's side and back are to the right corner of the frame while he faces in her direction. His face and line of sight are clearly visible. He reaches forward and massages her bare breast for several seconds. At this moment, the gaze of the male character, João, and the gaze of the spectator intersect on Hermila / Suely's bare breast. This triangle of gazes, in which Hermila / Suely is on display for the visual pleasure of all does not seek to resist classic cinematic technique, but rather privileges the male gaze above others.

The final scene in which Hermila / Suely appears nude is when she spends her "night in paradise" with the man who won her raffle. He requests that she dance nude for him. Suely's disinterest in doing so is clear in her facial expressions; however, her body takes the center of the shot. Although it is clear that Hermila / Suely does not enjoy the sexual encounter with her customer, it is the visual/erotic display of her body and his gaze that mostly affect her. It is this sexualized coding that destabilizes the resistance to patriarchy that her dialogue attempts to achieve. Hermila / Suely does not remain the subject of her own narrative, as she insists in her statements, but rather she is converted into an object of desire both for the male characters and for the audience by these scenes. This is further evidenced by subjective camera angles. It is her face we see, her breasts being massaged, and her nude form duplicated in the mirrors on the wall.¹¹⁵ At the same time we hear the sounds of her client grunting and moaning. The visual complements the audio to combine an erotic display of the female body with sexual pleasure of the man. In both her encounter with her boyfriend and in her dancing for the raffle winner,

¹¹⁵ It is important to mention that the raffle winner is not unattractive or physically abusive. His body helps to uphold the patriarchal heterosexual prostitute transaction by complementing the female body on display.

Hermila /Suely's nude body is angled slightly toward the camera, ensuring a full frontal view of her nude form for the audience.

Hermila / Suely is never nude alone, nor does she appear nude in any scene that would deromanticize or desexualize her body. Additionally, Hermila very rarely acts as a mother to her son. Significantly, near the beginning of the film, she explains to her grandmother that she is not breast-feeding her baby because her milk dried up. Therefore, in the context of the film, her breasts' primary purpose is sexual.

Another key example of corporeal performance is the character Georgina, who, despite being a prostitute, never appears nude in the film. This may be because she is a prostitute from the very beginning of her role in the film, whereas Hermila / Suely crosses the boundary into prostitution, giving her more voyeuristic appeal. Much like the raffle-winner, the audience 'wins' full visual access to the protagonist's nude form.

Baixio das Bestas makes similar use of eroticized female nudes, again without questioning the male gaze. The ultimate effect undermines the implicit criticism of the narrative by asking the audience to denounce abuse while simultaneously taking visual pleasure in it. The exploitation of Auxiliadora's body, the question of her virginity and her physical rape are the primary elements that carry the plot forward. The first scene in which Auxiliadora is nude takes place in a church courtyard near the gas station. She is initially clothed, standing on some kind of makeshift stage. Her grandfather approaches her and removes her clothes while she remains passive. In this example, Auxiliadora's exposed body occupies most of the shot and then the camera pans out to reveal a larger image of the scene, ultimately locating itself in the same position as the many voyeurs who have paid to watch Auxiliadora pose nude. While she is located at the center of the

shot, under full light, her audience- comprised entirely of men- is on the margins, concealed in the shadows. The structure of this scene positions the viewer from the same perspective as one of the many voyeurs, ultimately making their gazes parallel. On the margins of the shot, it is clear that the men viewing Auxiliadora are masturbating. This effect is repeated in a later scene, but with the difference that the camera begins from the position of the viewer, and then moves slowly in toward Auxiliadora, like a man walking through the field in order to get a better look.

The gaze of the camera never unites itself with Auxiliadora's gaze. Quite the contrary, she often appears with her head bowed, and her hair obscuring her face, blocking her line of sight altogether. In one scene in which Auxiliadora is walking home, the camera is positioned behind the sugar cane, as if it were a stalker, watching her without her knowledge. The framing of the shot makes it seem as if the sugarcane stalks are actually prison bars, and Auxiliadora is in a cage. In another shot, Auxiliadora bathes herself in a river, allowing the spectator a prolonged view of her body, but without the implicit vague criticism of her gas station displays. Mary Ann Doane argues that it is this type of positioning of the spectator-as-voyeur that forces adaptation to the male gaze:

A machine for the production of images and sounds, the cinema generates and guarantees pleasure by a corroboration of the spectator's identity. Because that identity is bound up with that of the voyeur and the fetishist, because it requires for its support the attributes of the 'noncastrated,' the potential for illusory mastery of the signifier, it is not accessible to the female spectator, who, in buying her ticket, must deny her sex. (23)

It is not Auxiliadora with whom the spectator is meant to identify; she is on display. Rather, it is Everardo, by far the most abusive and violent of the characters, that controls much of the narrative. He is also the only character in the film to break the fourth wall and address the audience directly and it is his phallic power that is constantly being reaffirmed through violence and rape. Auxiliadora, by contrast, is primarily deprived of voice. By contrast, the two prostitutes who are raped by Everardo speak frequently, until they are silenced when they pass out as a result of his abuse, and then subsequently disappear from the narrative.

Assis again privileges the male gaze in the first scene that takes place in the 'cinema.' As the group of young men (including Cícero) discuss sex, drink beer and talk about beating up their girlfriends, they alternately masturbate while looking at pornography. The porno films are not being displayed in the theater; rather, the characters are looking at the negatives from the reels themselves. At one point we see Cícero state: "I love this film" and the shot cuts to the film actually running. It depicts several women having sex with one man, a demonstration of phallic power that is repeated during the orgy that Everardo directs. The insertion of pornography and the displays of nudity throughout *Baixio* and *Suely* remind us that these films are not disconnected from the larger meaning-making industry, which includes pornography. Carole Pateman argues that female nudity is key to this industry:

The general display of women's bodies and sexual parts, either in representation or as live bodies, is central to the sex industry and continually reminds men-and women- that men exercise the law of male sex-right, that they have patriarchal right of access to women's bodies. (61)

In the display of the porno clip in *Baixio*, for several seconds the spectator views the moving film as if through Cícero's eyes. He is subject and women are his objects. This adaptation of vision is never afforded to any female character in the film.

While Assis may argue that he is criticizing patriarchy, the structure of the film establishes and maintains male dominance throughout, first by privileging phallic power. One clear example is highlighted in the scene in which Cícero and his cousin Everardo (the ring-leaders of their group of carousing, drinking, drug-using and rapist friends) stand at the edge of a man-made waterfall, naked and presumably masturbating. After they finish, they both take out pistols and 'fire off some shots,' making bets and picking out targets for each other. The handgun Cícero uses in this scene is likely the same weapon he uses to kidnap and rape Auxiliadora in a later scene, inextricably linking phallic power with violence against women. It is essential to note that while Everardo and Cícero are briefly naked in the film, their genitals are only shown in camera shots from above. In contrast, all of the nude women in the film are shown in steady shots from the front. As Doane explains, the penis and the phallus are inseparable: "There is a sense in which all attempts to deny the relation between the phallus and the penis are feints, veils, illusions. The phallus, as signifier, may no longer *be* the penis, but any effort to conceptualize its function is inseparable from an imaging of the body" ("Women's Stake" 28). By refusing to display male nudity in the way he has displayed female nudity, Assis solidifies phallic power in his male characters, protecting the men from the vulnerability and penetration that comes with exposure to the inter- and extra-diegetic gazes.

In contrast with the other films discussed in this chapter, *Deserto Feliz* opts to avoid sensationalism and erotic displays of the female body. This is exemplified in an early scene in the film, in which Jessica is taking a shower. Only her head is visible, and an extreme close-up shows that her eyes are closed. The shot does not take an angle that would allow the audience a view of her full body. By focusing on the subjectivity of the protagonist- through the close-up of her face, her silence, the sound of the water and her closed eyes- the director achieves intimacy without sensual display. In one scene in the film Jessica's bare breasts are visible, but it is while she is briefly changing clothes, rather than in a sexualized context.

In sharp contrast with the typical sensual display of the female body, in one scene, the male body is displayed in grotesque fashion. After servicing a male client named Hans, Jessica plays with his camera, jumping on the bed and saying "Smile, Hans," effectively taking control of her view of him. His large stomach and hairy form take up the majority of the foreground and Jessica's playful statements seem almost taunting. She, on the other hand, is partially clothed, and clearly enjoying the opportunity to play with the camera and subject him to her teasing. At the same time, it is still clear that her client maintains the financial power in the situation, although the framing of the scene temporarily inverts the hierarchy.

It is the desire for Jessica's body that is being criticized through the acts of Mark in the film. In one scene with Mark, Jessica lays naked, either asleep or passed out on the bed. The camera angle gives only an obscured view of her form. The clear close-up view is of Mark as he repeatedly inhales cocaine. The shot focuses on his red, watery eyes and mucous running from his nose. He then turns to look at Jessica's body and

masturbates.¹¹⁶ In this case, he does not use her body physically, but rather indulges in scopophilia, which Laura Mulvey describes as “the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object” (135). Unlike the masturbation scenes in *Baixio*, in which the protagonist’s body occupies the center of the shot and the camera adopts the same angle, in the masturbation scene in *Deserto Feliz*, the emphasis is on the unpleasant bodily functions of Mark.

Paulo Caldas further denies the viewer visual access to the female body during the scene in which Jessica’s step-father rapes her. Rather than explicitly show the physical elements of the rape, the director incorporates the sound of the bed banging against the wall and focuses the camera on Jessica’s anguished face and highlights the step-father’s grimaces and grunts. By centering on Jessica’s face, the director emphasizes her subjectivity and avoids fetishizing her body parts. Her suffering and the violence of the scene are conveyed in her crying and in the dark images, along with the constant, violent sound of the bed pounding against the wall. This technique successfully emphasizes the brutality of the act without eroticizing Jessica’s violation. Additionally, this scene is rather long and uncomfortable to watch, denying the audience the opportunity to look away or avoid its implications.

In the discussion of female bodies, it is important to note a particular similarity between *Baixio* and *Deserto*: the use of adult actors to portray underage female prostitutes. Nash Leila and Mariah Teixeira are both new to film, and were both chosen, in part, because they were adults who could pass for minors. This use of adults to portray minors allows the films to be legally exhibited while still providing for the depiction of

¹¹⁶ In this scene there seems to be a connection between the bodily function of his running nose and dripping mucous and the act of masturbation.

underage prostitution.¹¹⁷ The use of adults to stand in as minors allows the audience the freedom to enjoy the nude images, meanwhile acknowledging that they represent exploitation, but recognizing that their filming took place in a professional setting among consenting adults. It raises the question of whether it is as exploitative to show nude adults pretending to be minors as it would be to show nude minors.¹¹⁸ In both *Baixio* and *Deserto*, the protagonists are abused primarily by much older men, emphasizing their relative youth and innocence. The two films represent this abuse in far different ways, however. *Deserto* uses extreme close-up and sounds to depict Jessica's rape by her stepfather, avoiding any sexually explicit imagery and focusing on the faces of the characters. *Baixio*, by contrast, constantly displays Auxiliadora's abuse, both by her grandfather and her 'customers' at the gas station. As they molest her, her nude body and her abusers' delight are both prominently displayed for the audience. This raises the question of whether this is a means for denouncement, or simply an enactment of male fantasy on screen.

Postos

All three films incorporate gas stations, or *postos* in a kind of ironic citation or compromise. *Postos* are popular places for prostitution because, on a practical level, they provide a steady stream of customers, particularly truck drivers. On an allegorical level, *postos* highlight the effects of neoliberal economics on a region. Products and people are

¹¹⁷ The matter of choice naturally also falls into question with this use of adults to represent minors. The characters in *Baixio* and *Deserto* have little choice in the abuse they suffer, ultimately leading them to prostitution (arguably, a systematized form of abuse). However, the women that portray these characters are consenting adults that have far more choice in the matter than the girls they represent.

¹¹⁸ Both Caldas and Assis decided not to exclude nudity and sexual intercourse from the film in order to use much younger actors, as was done in *Anjos do Sol*. In contrast with *Baixio das Bestas* and *Deserto Feliz*, the protagonist of *Anjos do Sol* is a young child (perhaps 11 or 12 years old), not an adolescent. In *Anjos*, the sex scenes are obscured, so as to avoid nudity.

transferred from place to place, and some of the local economic impact is experienced by the owners of the *posto*, who earn money from selling gas, and to a certain extent by prostitutes, who service the transient population of truck drivers.

In the cast of *O Céu de Suely*, Georgina works almost exclusively at the *posto*, leading one of her customers to refer to her as “the little princess of the gas station.” Hermila/Suely attempts to find work washing cars and trucks in the same space, but it quickly becomes apparent that she can make relatively very little money. It is in part because she strays from the *posto* to sell her raffle tickets, entering into the more “legitimate” and conservative society of Iguatú that she is confronted by its citizens. While prostitution is tolerated in the transient space of the *posto*, where the population is mostly outsiders, it is clearly forbidden in the city center. This again demonstrates the separateness between the *posto* and the city itself. It is a certain non-space, or a liminal place where otherwise-forbidden activities are permitted. This is why she meets her client at a gas station before taking him to a motel.

In the case of *Baixio das Bestas*, it is the *posto* where Auxiliadora’s grandfather advertises and collects customers for her nude exhibition. It is the same *posto* where she ends up working as a prostitute, after being raped by Cícero. In her final scene, we see a truck driver tell her that he would like to see more of her, and that he passes through that area often on his route. It is also in this liminal space that the director, Cláudio Assis, enters the frame of the film as a character and slaps her on the backside. This sets up the *posto*, much like the movie theater in the same film, as a space in which the director can express his desires and incorporate his own voice into the film. Its nature as a location that people (almost exclusively men) visit briefly as a means to buy things to satisfy their

own needs and desires positions it in the same light as the theater where Assis's characters enact their sadistic fantasies.

Deserto Feliz also incorporates the *posto* into its portrayal of Jessica's entry into prostitution. After being raped by her stepfather in an earlier scene, we see her changing out of her school uniform in a gas station bathroom and then taking a long walk past the trucks and pumps to a small restaurant across the street, where she leads a man into a back room. Since this is the same man that subsequently drives her to the city in his truck, the gas station is, for her, a means of escape from her stagnant and abusive life. It is also the point of initiation for her entry into prostitution. After that point, one cannot help but notice that she is transported to the city in much the same way other resources and human beings have been. In all three films, the *posto* is the center for prostitution and the space in which men enjoy sexual freedom while women service their desires.

In a sort of ironic compromise, all three films were sponsored by Petrobrás, through its use of the Audiovisual Law. Therefore, the financial support for the films is directly tied into petroleum and gasoline. However, although these films all criticize poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth, and also feature the *postos* as the point of encounter for acts of prostitution, none of the three makes any connection between the gas stations themselves and the causes of prostitution. Rather, they ignore the neoliberal causes of this relationship.

The driving force between the three films is the need to denounce the devastating effects of neoliberalism and the abuse of women in the northeast. However, in all three cases, the films produce denouncement without indictment. Although the films expose

poverty and abuse, these are symptoms, not systems. As Dennis Altman argues, the examination of structures is essential in denouncing gender inequality:

A political-economy perspective means we have to recognize class, gender, race but also the role of the state; that is, we need to think in terms of structures rather than specific issues or identities. As long as political and economic structures maintain most women as subordinate in most areas of life, as they do in most parts of the world, we cannot escape the fact that any discussion of sexuality must recognize differences of gender which are an unknowable mix of the biological and the social. (34)

By showcasing the individual as representative of a class of people while ignoring the forces of capital working behind the scenes, all three directors in this chapter fall into a neoliberal trap. For all of Assis's assertions in interviews that his film is meant to condemn 500 years of monoculture in the *Zona da Mata*, by ignoring the structures that have made that happen and by failing to develop any historical and more contemporary perspective and to connect Auxiliadora's experience with that of the abused workers and a neoliberal project, his vision falls short. Aïnouz's telling of the story of Hermila/Suely upholds the neoliberal fallacy that entrepreneurial cleverness and hard work can (at least, temporarily) liberate individuals from their plight, as long as they are willing to sacrifice. Caldas's film may be the most realistic, in that he shows that Jessica is still submitted to the dominance of Mark whether in Germany or Brazil. However, the workings of capital that are responsible for this situation are not showcased in the film, but rather accepted as natural.

As Nguyen-Vo has demonstrated in the case of Vietnam, this type of denouncement without indictment ignores the root causes of social problems and does not move toward any probable solutions: “Unlike the earlier reportage of the 1980s, the new reportage seduces with visions of the startling new worlds within one’s city or town rather than calling on people’s sense of social justice. It deflects rather than holds the authorities, capitalists, or any social group accountable for the things that it does present as problematic” (219) In the case of *O Céu de Suely*, *Baixio das Bestas* and *Deserto Feliz*, focus on the individual story, shock value, and the occasional aestheticization of the female body all serve to distract the viewer from the workings of capital, converting major social problems into convenient allegories, rather than true revelations. While trying to denounce neoliberalism, these three directors have found themselves unable to deconstruct its workings on film. All three films lament, but they do not resist.

MEXICO-MELODRAMA RE-VISITED

The negotiation of exactly what prostitution is, and how it is represented has everything to do with the workings of capital and gender. In the last chapter it became clear how Hermila/Suely's negotiation of whether she is a prize or a product helped her distance herself from the daily prostitution practiced by Georgina. In *Baixio das Bestas*, Bela is raped when she attempts to raise her price for an orgy. In *Deserto Feliz*, the dream of marrying a rich foreigner turns out to be more of a nightmare.

These workings of capital and gender pulsate throughout the Mexican films examined in this dissertation as well. In *El Callejón de los Milagros*, an argument between Alma, the protagonist, and José Luis, her would-be pimp, highlights these negotiations. Seduced by his wealth and power, Alma comes home with José Luis, and discovers that he runs a brothel. Feeling betrayed, she turns to him and shouts: "This is not a decent house! This is a whorehouse!" José Luis corrects her: "Whores are the little butterflies that work in the street, the whores that score in motels. You know them well. They're from your neighborhood...The women in this house are called courtesans...they have a position." After thinking it over, Alma decides to join José Luis at the brothel, believing it will bring her fortune and fame. Instead, she is isolated from her mother and former boyfriend and trapped by José Luis. In one of the penultimate scenes of *El Callejón de los Milagros* José Luis slaps Alma across the face over and over again, screaming, "You have nothing, nothing!"

The second film examined in this chapter, *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?*, incorporates some of these scenes from *El Callejón* and asks the protagonist, Yuliet, what she thinks. Standing on a street corner in Havana, she tells the camera that, "If [Alma]

hadn't been so stupid, the film wouldn't have been so stupid." This intersection of these two films is made possible by Carlos Marcovich's participation in both, and serves to examine the workings of melodrama in both while creating two very different representations of prostitution.

These Mexican films are markedly different, in terms of time and space, from the Brazilian examples in the previous chapter. First, they are from the mid-1990s, while the Brazilian films are far more recent. Second, as I will elaborate later, the violence implied in these films is far less explicit, and relies much less on sensual displays of the female body. At the same time, as mentioned above, we can see some of the same messages communicated in these films that became evident in the Brazilian films examined in this dissertation.

El Callejón de los Milagros is a contemporary adaptation of the melodramatic model. Despite its updating in some areas, the classic "fallen woman" *scenario* is played out.¹¹⁹ Russell Campbell contends that fallen woman films are, at their heart, instructive:

Ideologically, the fallen woman film deals with the disturbance to the patriarchal order that occurs when a female is cast adrift from the family and is forced, bereft of protection from father or husband, to fend for herself. In its address to female spectators, the story will thus serve as a cautionary tale, illustrating what is in store for the woman who permits herself from the path of virtue; or for male audiences, the film may warn of the consequences of parental or marital failure.

(13)

¹¹⁹ I am using *scenario* in the terms described by Diana Taylor in *The Archive and the Repertoire*. The meanings of this term will be further elaborated in this chapter.

Given the context of rapidly-changing economic conditions, including neoliberal reforms leading up to the implementation of NAFTA, this type of film helps to express societal anxieties about class and gender as well as the increasing penetration of global capital. In this case, Alma, the protagonist, stands in for the sanctity of the nation, falling victim to temptation and deceit and ultimately prostituting herself in an effort to gain fame. The following sections will detail the ways in which prostitute characters are often used to allegorize Mexico and to negotiate new meanings of gender and economy.

¿Quién diablos es Juliette? seems, on its surface, to be a more playful film, pushing the boundaries of documentary and fiction and questioning the “realities” produced in filming. It both uses and questions the same melodramatic models employed by *Callejón*, constantly pushing the perceived boundaries between fiction and documentary film. The use of self-referential techniques and constant commentary from the characters as well as the editing techniques employed have led some to view the film as a meditation on representation. Upon closer examination, however, we better understand how *¿Quién diablos...?* is as much a political statement as an aesthetic one.

Intersections between the Films

Unlike the directors of the three Brazilian films examined in the previous chapter, the Mexican directors mentioned here do not come from the same generation of filmmakers. However, their connections are still significant. Jorge Fons, the director of *Callejón de los Milagros*, was born in 1938. He studied in the Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos and graduated from UNAM, the National Autonomous University of Mexico.¹²⁰ He has an extensive history as a filmmaker, beginning in the

¹²⁰ Fons was among some of the early graduates from the film school (founded in 1963) and participated in the New Latin American Cinema movement of the 1970s, which included *Cinema Novo* in Brazil. For

1960s, and received awards for several of his films, including the short film *Caridad*.¹²¹ He gained even more notoriety from his 1989 film *Rojo amanecer*, which deals with the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre, and *Callejón de los Milagros*, which the Alameda Films website calls the most awarded film in Mexican history (1995).¹²² Along with awards in Germany, France, Cuba, Paraguay and Spain, the film was widely awarded in Mexico, including an Ariel, the Guadalajara Film Festival audience award and the Top Box Office Movie of 1995 prize.

Carlos Marcovich was born in Argentina in 1976, and moved to Mexico at the age of thirteen. While Jorge Fons has an extensive history directing, Marcovich has worked primarily as a cinematographer. *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* is his debut film as director. Geoffrey Kantaris calls *¿Quién diablos...?* “the most locally and internationally successful Mexican documentary to date- in terms of ticket sales and distribution” (221). The film won prizes at the Muestra de Cine Mexicano en Guadalajara, Sundance, and at festivals in Cuba, Switzerland and Colombia, as well as an Ariel for debut film and for editing. Marcovich has since directed the film *Cuatro Labios* (2006), about the breakup of the band OV7.

After working as a cinematographer on *Callejón*, Marcovich traveled to Cuba to film a music video and began filming *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* on the side. In that film,

more on this era of filmmaking in Latin America, see: *The New Latin American Cinema: Volume Two*. Michael Martin, Ed. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997.

¹²¹ Much of this biographical information is cited by Hammam Al-Rifai in “La imagen de la prostituta.” *Estudios sobre las Culturas Contemporáneas*. 2:9 (2003) 57-85.

¹²² A complete list of the awards can be seen at: <http://www.alamedafilms.com/inicio/eng/index.html>. Unlike Brazil, Mexico does not keep official box office numbers on its nationally-produced films; however, the comments made in this section indicate that both *Callejón* and *¿Quién diablos...?* were rather successful in drawing audiences. IMCINE does keep statistics on other matters; they can be found at: <http://www.imcine.gob.mx/informes-y-estadsticas.html>

he incorporates several scenes directly from *Callejón*, along with commentary and footage from interviews and appearances by Salma Hayek. His choice to ironically cite the feature film on which he had worked as cinematographer highlights the performative aspect of *¿Quién diablos...?* and allows him to question and challenge the melodramatic model. In his documentary, Marcovich juxtaposes interviews with Salma Hayek, whose film career was launched in part from the success of *Callejón*, with responses from Yuliet, who aspires to be an actress, interweaving the meanings of the two films.¹²³ The effect is that once one has seen both films, they are inextricably connected to each other. Although *Callejón* was filmed first, Marcovich's inclusion of the film in *¿Quién diablos...?* makes it impossible to forget its role in the latter. For this reason, the films must be analyzed separately, but also together. Their close relationship, despite the vast differences in their production, is one of the reasons for their inclusion in this chapter.

Prostitution and Melodrama

In *Cinemachismo*, Sergio de la Mora declares that “The ‘mother’ of modern Mexican industrial film production was a whore” (46). Jorge Ayala Blanco's writings support this view: “National sound cinematography begins by relating the biography of a prostitute and since then it has not been able to liberate itself from the tutelage of this character. All of its productions include it or imply it” (108).¹²⁴ Both authors are referring to the first production of sound film in Mexico, *Santa* (1931), which was only the first of many prostitution films to follow, particularly during the Golden Age of

¹²³ A much more detailed analysis of the staged dialogue Marcovich creates between Hayek and Yuliet can be found in the section on *¿Quién diablos...?* It is important to note that Hayek was already a well-known *telenovela* star in Mexico before her film career began.

¹²⁴ “La cinematografía sonora nacional comienza relatando la biografía de una prostituta y desde entonces no ha podido liberarse de la tutela de ese personaje. Todas sus producciones lo incluyen o lo implican.”

Mexican cinema, but also extending to the present. An important element in the portrayal of prostitutes and prostitution is and has been melodrama.

Because melodrama has been produced in so many heterogeneous settings- from radio to theater to cinema to other genres- it is difficult to define. Jesús Martín Barbero identifies the family as the epicenter of melodrama: “In Latin America, whether it be in the form of tango or bolero, Mexican cinema, or soap opera, the melodrama speaks of a primordial sociality, whose metaphor continues to be the thick, censored plot of the tightly woven fabric of family relationships” (277). Andrea Noble adds the presence of “an emphasis on human relationships and emotions, dramatic *mise-en-scène* and excess” as essential elements in melodrama (95). Since it focuses on moralities, social structures, and human relations, melodrama has been employed, particularly in Mexico, as a means for dealing with anxieties that can come with social and political changes. Susan Dever explains: “As a mode, or as a *modus operandi*, [melodrama] functions to right worlds irrupted by personal, civil, and foreign conflicts. That an outpouring of national sentiment so often characterizes the genre is a consequence of one of its functions as mediator and redresser of social injustices” (8). In the case of both films examined in this chapter, the previous statement could not be more appropriate. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, years of neoliberal reforms in Mexico culminated with the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and resulting uprisings in 1994. These events destabilized many ideas of national identity and increased class tensions. Although *El Callejón* does not explicitly incorporate these tensions into the plot, the film relies on melodrama as a means to negotiate changing meanings of identity and community. In the case of *¿Quién diablos...?* the collapse of the Soviet Union and the

subsequent declaration of the Special Period in Cuba resulted in rapidly changing lifestyles, as reflected in Marcovich's film.

The ubiquitous production of prostitute films throughout the history of Mexican filmmaking speaks to the appeal of what Diana Taylor would call the *scenarios* played out in them. Taylor develops the term *scenario* in *The Archive and the Repertoire* to better understand the repetition and re-representation of certain themes. Familiar aspects of the *scenario*- such as scenery, costume, narrative, character roles, and other elements- signal the audience as to the outcomes they can expect, and these expectations are strengthened over time through the multiple representations of these *scenarios*. Taylor offers the *scenario* of 'discovery' of the Americas as an example, showing how the performance is framed by certain recognizable scenery and acted out in a predictable manner to audiences familiar with its meanings: "*Scenarios* conjure up past situations, at times so profoundly internalized by a society that no one remembers the precedence" (32). In this case, the familiar arrival of the Conquistadors on the beach, the greeting of the indigenous peoples, the Christian themes of crosses and priests, and the Spanish ships poised in the background are all familiar elements that set up the *scenario* for the audience. At the same time, Taylor stresses that since *scenarios* rely on the presence of the human body, they are not necessarily mimetic. They offer the potential for parody, resistance and adjustment: "*Scenarios*, like narrative, grab the body and insert it into a frame. The body in the *scenario*, however, has space to maneuver because it is not scripted" (Taylor 55). One often-used example is the performance of *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* as performed by Guillermo Gómez Peña and Coco Fusco. They enact the *scenario* of human beings captured and put on display for the colonizer, but inject parody

and ridicule into the performance, thereby questioning the relationships of power and dominance that make such a scene possible.¹²⁵

As the citation from Russell Campbell at the beginning of this chapter suggested, the *scenario* of the fallen woman film plays out predictably by illustrating the punishments awaiting women that stray from the dominant moral code.¹²⁶ Prostitute films as *scenarios* help to negotiate anxieties about the strength and structure of families, patriarchy, and also the changing roles of women. In addition to this, they may serve to denounce poverty, or to allegorize an entire population. At the same time, the personal and intimate focus of melodrama often ignores structural causes for the problems being critiqued.

Melodrama complements representations of prostitution so well because it examines issues of gender, as Andrea Noble observes: “[I]f melodrama is concerned with both contemporary and historical identities, both are bound up with issues of gender which resonate in particular at the level of the family as the basic unit of the social structure” (101). The ‘original’ prostitute character, stemming back to the conquest of Mexico, is La Malinche. As Sergio de la Mora highlights, the melodrama surrounding this controversial figure continues to play a role in representations of prostitution:

Beginning with the foundational narrative of La Malinche, consort and translator to Hernán Cortés and mother of the nation, stigmatized as a traitor and a whore for assisting the Spanish in the conquest and defeat of the Aztec empire, the

¹²⁵ For a better understanding of this example, please see the film produced by Coco Fusco while touring and performing, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* (1992).

¹²⁶ This performance of prostitution is repeated throughout Mexican film history. The popularity of the theme speaks to its continuing importance in the negotiations of gender in society. Consider that films such as *Santa* (1918, 1931), *La mujer del puerto* (1934, 1949, 1991), *Salón México* (1948, 1996) have been made and re-made over the years, although Ripstein’s 1991 remake of *La mujer del puerto* changes the original story extensively.

transgressive woman figured as a prostitute holds a privileged status in the Mexican-cultural imaginary. (22)

La Malinche gives birth to a son, who serves as the representative of a new race and the emergence of mestizaje. This mixing of virgin and whore in one character gives La Malinche her enduring appeal and controversy. The foundational myths of Mexico are melodramatic, and those myths continue to be circulated and adapted in varying forms as allegories and metaphors for national suffering, as Andrea Noble describes:

[M]elodrama invariably functions according to the logic of metonymy. That is to say, it focuses on the individual and/or the family unit which stand in for collective, national identity ... More specifically, this female identity is associated with the 'defiled and abused' Malintzin/Malinche, the interpreter and lover of Hernán Cortés. (100)

The prostitute body, as mentioned before in this dissertation, is invested with meanings that go far beyond the representation of individuals, or perhaps better said, the nation is embodied in the prostitute character. Prostitution in Mexican film is also used as a method for denouncing injustice. Speaking specifically about *Callejón*, Al_Rifai argues that "the prostitute is a metaphor: of the lost and oppressed nation, or even of life itself" (59). Al_Rifai is among a host of researchers that view the issue similarly. Sergio de la Mora, for example, states:

Prostitution is an allegory for the nation, and discourse about prostitution reveals the social relations that have historically shaped the private and public regulation of women's sexual agency. Prostitutes are emblematic social agents embodying Mexican modernity's anxieties, desires or contradictions. (66-67)

So while prostitutes in films draw attention to the roles of literal women, they also stand in for other problems, much larger than themselves. The melodramatic *scenarios* re-cast and re-envisioned in prostitution films attempt to narrativize and negotiate shifting meanings of gender. The question that remains, as with the Brazilian films examined in this dissertation, is whether the use of the prostitute figure to embody the problems of the nation results in a loss of subjectivity.

“You have nothing, nothing!:)” El Callejón de los Milagros

El Callejón de los Milagros (1995), directed by Jorge Fons, adapts the 1947 novel *Midaq Alley* by Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988.¹²⁷ While the purpose of the present analysis of *Callejón* is not to compare the film to the novel, some mention of its adaptation to the Mexican context is relevant. The novel *Midaq Alley* takes place in Egypt during World War II, and is adapted to the Mexican context of 1994. Rather than a coffee and hashish café, the film includes a bar that serves alcohol. While young men in Mahfouz’s novel are tempted by the money they can earn by working for the British military, in *Callejón*, they are drawn to the U.S.-Mexico border.¹²⁸ The focus on a small community and the workings of family within remain a constant, however, as do criticisms of colonial power. Hammam Al_Rifai hypothesizes that the adaptation of *Midaq Alley* also reflects a common affinity for representations of prostitution in Mexico and Arab countries, due to their shared “complicated history of machismo that classifies women in two categories: mother or

¹²⁷This was the second adaptation of a Mahfouz novel by a Mexican director. In *Mexican Cinema: Reflections of a Society*, Carl J Mora explains that Alfredo Ripstein (the producer) purchased the film rights to both *Midaq Alley* and *The Beginning of the End*. His son, Arturo Ripstein, filmed *The Beginning of the End* as *Principio y fin* in 1993 (227).

¹²⁸ In both cases, there is a love-hate relationship with the imperial presence. While the British and the border represent opportunities for a better life, the characters that take that path could be seen as working for the enemy.

prostitute” (60).¹²⁹ In both the novel and the film adaptation, the question of gender roles is central.

In *Callejón*, the storyline centers on a small alleyway near the Zócalo, in the city center of the Mexican capital, and the relationships among its residents. The plot is broken into three perspectives, which overlap each other in time and space, focusing on three different characters and ultimately concluding in the fourth segment, called “el regreso” (the return). The first focus is Don Ru (Rutilio), a middle-aged man and the owner of the local bar. His extramarital affair with a young man incites his only son, Chava, to violence. After assaulting his father’s lover in a bathhouse, Chava flees to the United States with his friend Abel. Chava returns later with a wife and young son, who he has named Rutilio. Although Don Ru initially rejects his son and grandson, they eventually make peace.

The second perspective is that of Alma, the daughter of a single mother, who has aspirations of leaving the poverty-stricken neighborhood in order to become famous as an actress or model. Much of the dialogue between Alma and her friend Maru highlights her inexperience and sexual curiosity. She briefly dates Abel, and promises to wait for him while he is in the United States, but then very quickly agrees to marry a much older, wealthy shop owner. When the shop owner dies suddenly, she begins dating José Luis, an outsider, who attracts her with his flashy car and good looks. José Luis courts Alma by taking her to expensive restaurants and flattering her by saying that she could be a great actress or a model. When he takes her back to his apartment, Alma is shocked to discover that he is the owner of a brothel, and she leaves him. However, she decides to return to

¹²⁹ “en la compleja psicología del machismo que clasifica a las mujeres in dos categorías: madre o prostituta.”

the brothel and have sex, presumably losing her virginity. In the end, this decision separates her from her friends and family as she becomes a prostitute.

The third perspective is that of Susanita, the landlady of the building in which all of the characters originally live. Her desire for a husband leads her to seek advice from Alma's mother, Doña Cata, a fortune teller. Susanita eventually runs into Güicho, who is a small-time thief, and marries him. When she discovers he has been stealing from her, they fight and she tells him to leave.

The three stories ultimately intersect at the end, but the final scenes focus far more on the conclusion of Alma's story than of the other characters. She has become imprisoned in the brothel when Abel returns from the United States. He visits the brothel to rescue her, cuts José Luis on the face with his barber's razor and is subsequently stabbed to death, dying in the street in Alma's arms. Like the Brazilian films analyzed in the previous chapter, the trajectory of the story adapts to Alma's individual story as she is introduced into prostitution. Although the films are very different for a number of reasons, there are certain parallels that overlap and intersect. Much like the case of Auxiliadora in *Baixio das Bestas*, the central concern of *Callejón*'s narrative centers on Alma's virginity- to whom she will lose it- and then her subsequently becoming a prostitute.

Callejón may be a new version of the classic melodrama, but closely examined, it is clear that it re-iterates the performance of prostitution made popular by its predecessors. Alma may be a willful character, shot through with all of the desires and trappings of a modern girl stifled by a traditional setting, but this does not mean that the overall argument of the film advocates in her favor. Ultimately, Alma's experiences have

a moralizing undertone, which is reminiscent of so many prostitution films of the Golden Age. The performance of prostitution here may be slightly different, but the *scenario* of prostitution in the form of the fallen woman film is not significantly challenged.

Alma's curiosity and desire lead her to date the attractive, modern and wealthy suitor, José Luis, who will eventually become her pimp. Because of this, Hammam Al-Rifai argues that Alma is actually condemned from the beginning, in the manner Mahfouz's characters often are. Her own rebellious nature predestines her to prostitution. Al-Rifai explains that Alma is both a victim and an accomplice, tricked by José Luis, but also led into temptation by her own ambitious character (72). This view of human nature, particularly of women, again reflects the legend of La Malinche, and to a certain extent that of Eve.

The structure of the film encourages us to equate Alma's betrayal of her promise to Abel with prostitution, leaving little room for moral flexibility. Before returning to José Luis, she gazes at Abel's photograph, weeping and kissing it, then setting it down and leaving it in her room. Her defiance of the socially accepted patriarchal order exposes her to this world prostitution, which is the other side of patriarchy. She has only two options: virgin or whore. As Mas'ud Zavarzadeh explains, films serve to uphold certain discourses about societal norms. In this case, by giving up love in favor of adventure, Alma seals her fate: "The underside of the middle-class valorization of love is that prostitution awaits all women who transgress the bourgeois codes" (194). Alma's misbehavior must be punished, so she is relegated to the space of the prostitute, which is seen as among the lowest of the lows. This disruption further exposes her boyfriend Abel, who seeks to recover her honor and is stabbed by José Luis. When José Luis stabs Abel

in the abdomen, his resulting bodily movements are not unlike those of Alma when José Luis had sex with her from behind in a previous scene. He gasps and chokes and grimaces with surprise. Her penetrability, in this way, becomes his. Again, the meaning of these interactions goes far beyond the individuals, as Andrea Noble points out: “Alma’s betrayal of Abel in the denouement- that is to say, a betrayal by a prostitute- is heavily imbued with national symbolic significance” (118). Alma has rejected her local and very dedicated boyfriend for a shot at fame and fortune. Going back to the story of La Malinche and the meanings invested in her perceived betrayal of the native people, this significance becomes clearer.

The Prostitute Melodrama as Allegory for the Nation

Although it takes place in the Mexican capital, which is one of the largest cities in the world, the plot of *El Callejón* takes place on a very specific, local scale, in which all of the characters know each other in some way, and each occupies her or his small role in the community. This microcosm, in which residents interact as if they were in a small town, but then walk out of the alleyway into the Zócalo, serves as a staging ground for allegory. Like in a small community, minor and major characters all address each other by name. David William Foster argues that the camera work of the film further emphasizes the communal nature of the *Callejón* by featuring open windows and doorways. He adds that:

It is not so much that the lives these individuals live create these porous spaces, although that is in part what does in effect take place: the enormous sociality of Hispanic life, particularly on the social level of the inhabitants of the *Callejón*, is unquestionably a communitarian one of diverse historical origins, such that the

personal is collective, everyone has a stake in everyone else's life, and, most importantly, there is a tendency for everyone to share significant details of his or her life with those with whom almost daily, and often hourly, contact is maintained. (48)

As characters see each other through doorways and windows, so does the audience, connecting everyone into a community where everyone is watching everyone else. It seems in the film that every character is involved in some way in everyone else's lives.

¹³⁰ Although some of the women in the film are portrayed as gossips, it is also clear that the men in the film are also interested in all of the goings-on in the vicinity. For example, each section of the film begins with the patriarchs of the community playing dominoes and discussing the neighborhood in Don Ru's bar. Don Ru and Don Fidel sit comment on Alma's beauty in Don Fidel's shop, and when Chava returns from the United States, the women of the community, including Susanita and Doña Cata, take it upon themselves to fill him in on the recent developments in the *Callejón*. Occasionally, it almost seems as if the members of the community are updating each other on the latest episode of a soap opera they have all been watching.

Andrea Noble argues that *El Callejón de los Milagros* is too self-referential to be a mere reinscription of the standard melodramatic formula. She cites that Alma mentions the word 'cine' several times as part of this, drawing enough attention to the genre itself to destabilize its meanings. This is evident, to a certain extent, in Maru's reference to the cinema and sex, in José Luis's false promises of making Alma a film star, and in Alma's conversation with her suitor, Don Fidel, in which he asks if she prefers opera or theater,

¹³⁰ In another example of a repeatable *scenarío*, *El Callejón* is reminiscent of the urban melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s. For example, the opening sequence has striking similarities to the 1948 film *Nosotros los pobres*, which takes place in a bustling alleyway full of residents and vendors.

and she replies that she loves the cinema (118-9). However, I contend that the mention of cinema could also be taken merely as part of the context of Mexico in 1990s, in which Alma is far more likely (as a character) to be interested in cinema than opera or theater and to learn about sex from films than from other sources. Her interest in cinema shapes her identity as a young person and inspires her ambitions to be a film star.

Framing further serves to emphasize the cinematic self-referentiality, but does not necessarily break with the melodramatic model. Characters that transgress the norms of society are punished accordingly, but women particularly so. For example, the first appearance of Alma is framed by her bedroom window, where she sits, drying her hair. Abel and Chava stand below, gazing up and commenting on her attractiveness. Later, however, this scene is repeated from another angle, and from inside Alma's apartment, it becomes clear that she has climbed up and inserted herself into the window frame in order to gain their attention. From this perspective it is evident that she is fully aware that they are watching, and is stylizing her appearance.¹³¹ She is curiously looking down at them as much as they are looking up at her. From the new angle it becomes clear that she is putting herself intentionally on display. To a certain extent, this does draw attention to the filmic technique and demonstrate how the angle of filming shapes our perceptions of the person being filmed. On the flip side, this change in angle argues that rather than a sexual object victimized by the male gaze, Alma is self-styling, self-promoting, and self-victimizing if she is, in fact, a victim. In this way, the film seeks to partially blame Alma for her own downfall. Her aspirations, her tendency to expose herself, her sexual desires and her overwhelming need for praise lead her to become a prostitute. We see this

¹³¹ Chava's father Don Ru chooses his future lover by gazing at him through the display window in a local shop much in the same way. The difference is, however, that Jimmy is not aware that he is being watched, making this an act of voyeurism.

repeated in her sexual advances toward Abel, who rebuffs her, preferring to maintain his vision of her as a virgin.

In many other aspects, the standard melodramatic format, and its moralizing tendencies, are maintained. José Luis is a stereotypical lock-up-your-daughters pimp, complete with an expensive suit, red sports car and a silver tongue. Moralizing Christian symbolism pulsates throughout his interactions with Alma. When he is seducing her at a restaurant, telling her what she could have –such as an acting or a modeling career- there is a chef pouring flaming alcohol in a steady stream in the background. These flames are positioned directly behind his head, and some even seem to be streaming from his mouth as he talks. During his enticing speech, he is also smoking a cigarette and blowing the smoke in her direction, heightening his demonic image. This delimits very clearly for the audience the dichotomy of good and bad and foreshadows Alma’s introduction into prostitution.

As a confirmation of the moral and religious undertones, Alma is explicitly given the opportunity to choose her fate when she bumps into Eusebia (Don Ru’s wife) coming out of mass. Eusebia asks her if she is coming to church, lamenting that “the young people don’t come around here anymore.”¹³² Alma looks up at the church tower, but chooses to walk on, seemingly sealing her fate. Andrea Noble comments on this pivotal scene in *Mexican National Cinema*, but perhaps overlooks one key detail. The director uses Alma’s wardrobe to signal the passage of time, and so what seems like very little time in terms of actual film encompasses one or more days. When Alma visits José Luis and discovers that he is a pimp, she is wearing a blue suit and has her hair in small braids.

¹³² “Los jóvenes ya no vienen por aquí,”

When she encounters Eusebia she is wearing a lilac dress and has her hair loose. When she returns to José Luis, she is in a black dress, which is the same one she wore to her fiancée's funeral in another scene. In the meantime, she has effectively said goodbye to Abel by crying over his photo. These changes can lead us to conclude that at least 24 hours have passed since her argument with José Luis, meaning that she has given careful thought to her decision to return to him. Her decision is anguished, but methodical and calculated as well as selfish. Through these signals, we understand that she has submitted herself to José Luis, fully knowing what he is, and the filmic structure argues that this should lead to her condemnation as a betrayer. Additionally, by being given the chance for redemption through church as opposed to submission to José Luis, Alma is asked to choose between being the virgin or whore, which further serves to uphold this cultural dichotomy. She must choose from two extremes, both of which are patriarchally-constructed types. Here she has no flexibility for a life that falls outside of the bounds of these stereotypes. She must submit to God, as represented by the church, or to the Devil, embodied in José Luis. This element of submission is evident in that in their sexual encounter, José Luis bends her over the bed and takes her from behind, emphasizing her submission much in the way that Everardo and Cícero rape their victims in *Baixio das Bestas*. Alma tries to turn around and face José Luis, but he holds her down on the bed, maintaining her position as passive, and as an object for his pleasure. Alma's sexual encounter is not a rape, however, and the sequence of events carefully reminds the viewer of her choice in the matter. Thus, Alma upholds the idea of "free" choice promoted by neoliberalism and by contractarians in reference to prostitution. She is not forced, but rather seduced into prostitution by the possibility of entrepreneurial advancement.

The religious symbolism does not stop with demonic references. Three of the story lines conclude- or pause, since they are resumed in the final section of the film- with a man and woman in some kind of embrace, all of which very closely resemble a Pietà.¹³³ This art form depicts the crucified body of Christ being held by his mother, the Virgin Mary. It is steeped in symbolism of the suffering mother and her sacrifice, particularly in Mexico with its extensive Catholic heritage.

In the first two examples, the men do not die, but rather seek comfort or forgiveness from their wives. When Don Ru discovers that Chava has left his family to go to the United States and possibly never return, he transitions from anger to sorrow and buries his head in his wife's lap, crying out: "My only male child!"¹³⁴ In this case, the anguished mother is left to console her guilt-ridden husband. She plays the role well as she holds and comforts him, despite the lasting impression of the bruised eye he gave her in an earlier scene. This imagery reinforces her role as the abnegated woman. In the second example, Susanita discovers that her husband Güicho has been stealing from her and tells him to get out of her house. He grovels at her feet, kissing them as she cries on the sofa.

The third example is the final scene in the film, in which Abel dies of the stab wounds inflicted by Alma's pimp, José Luis. Alma cradles Abel in her arms as the two fanaticize about their future wedding and how she will wear a white dress. His sacrifice and the blood on her hands have seemingly absolved her of her sins against him in Christ-

¹³³ In *Mexico City in Contemporary Mexican Cinema* David William Foster makes reference to the final shot of the film in which Alma holds Abel's body as a Pietà, but this is not the only example of this type of framing.

¹³⁴ "Mi único varoncito!" Of course, he has no such sadness over his female children. His sense of loss is partially connected to his desire to pass on the family name and family business to his son, Chava.

like fashion. He then dies and she weeps over his body. In this case, it is not Mary who holds the body, but perhaps Mary Magdalene, the repentant so-called prostitute.

The moral condemnation of Alma is further emphasized in the use of color in her wardrobe. When Alma returns to the brothel to have sex with José Luis after discovering that he is a pimp, she wears the same black dress she previously wore to her former fiancée's funeral. It seems almost as if she is already in mourning of her former life, or perhaps, her virginity. Alma appears in white in several scenes in the film, but once José Luis removes her white underwear to have sex with her, we never see her in white again. The meaning of this color is again emphasized in her final conversation with Abel, as he lies dying in her arms. He says: "We'll get married, with your white dress. They'll see that you really love me."¹³⁵ Russel Campbell explains in *Marked Women* that the figure of the defiant, female prostitute has few options at the end of the film: "Prostitute characters in film, if they are fiercely independent, do not remain so for long and are seldom permitted to remain in their profession at the end: like other independent women in the movies, they are typically either married off or killed off" (30). *Callejón* adapts this concept slightly in that Abel sacrifices himself for her, but as David William Foster writes, Alma is condemned to remain a prostitute:

[Abel and Alma] are the youngest couple, and it is difficult for the spectator to overlook the resonance of a story told about the so-called next generation and a renewed promise for a better life for them ... Abel dies as a consequence of evisceration at the hands of a cynical ponce, and there is no doubt that Alma has little choice but to return to pursue her career in the brothel. (56)

¹³⁵ "Nos casamos, con tu vestido blanco. Van a ver que tú me quieres de veras."

In terms of allegory, it seems that the future is doomed. Although this may appear to be the preoccupation of a modern generation, the conflict between feminine roles within a changing society dates back much further. Darryl Catherine explains that as a central aspect of Mexican allegorical melodrama, *La Malinche* reveals the ambiguous roles assigned to women: “A recurring motif in melodrama is women caught between two allegiances. They have their familial and maternal duties, modeled by the Virgin of Guadalupe, and also their sexual desires associated in Mexican culture with *La Malinche* ...” (293). Alma is revered as a kind of ideal virgin by Abel, but she also has her own sexual longings and curiosities that he is unwilling to acknowledge. When she propositions him on the roof of their building, he rebuffs her and then quickly runs off to the border with Chava. Alma promises to be faithful to him, but easily moves into an engagement with one man and then a sexual relationship with another. Although her personal struggle is highlighted, the film’s conclusion leaves no doubt that her decision to have sex with José Luis resulted in her conversion into prostitute and her punishment in the form of Abel’s death. Furthermore, Abel embodies the unsuccessful entrepreneur, returned from the United States with very little money. He returns to the same shabby room he occupied before, having failed at achieving his dreams to open his own barber shop. José Luis, on the other hand, has money, a flashy car and a brothel full of prostitutes at his disposal. His brutality and unscrupulous behavior win out over Abel’s traditional values.

Abel dies for her ‘sins,’ but the film’s conclusion seems to indicate that she has few options outside of prostitution. It is obvious that José Luis’s abusive claims- that Alma has nothing: “no friends, no family, nothing”- are meant to demean and control her.

However, his statements ring true to a certain extent. Sherry Ortner underscores the importance of virginity in her essay “The Virgin and the State,” demonstrating the value it holds and the consequences of losing it: “Virginity is a symbol of exclusiveness and inaccessibility, nonavailability to the general masses, something, in short, that is elite...For if she is a good girl, she has the potential for personal status mobility which in fact exceeds that of most of the men of her group” (56-57). This is the potential we see for Alma in her courtship with Don Fidel. Once she is associated with the brothel, however, her potential for improving her social status is zero. This is why although Alma’s friend Maru is aware that she is working in a brothel, she does not tell Alma’s mother, who thinks she is missing or dead- which socially, she is. Chava tries to conceal her profession from his friend Abel, and begs him not to go to the brothel to see her. In becoming a prostitute she is automatically excluded from her former family and community. Again, we see the Virgin/Whore dichotomy exemplified.

The biblical references extend also to the names of the characters, particularly Alma and Abel. Abel is essentially martyred, like his namesake, killed because of his righteousness.¹³⁶ He sacrifices himself for Alma’s honor, and also demonstrates that his way of life is no longer tenable. There is a political and economic undertone, as Abel sees Alma as stolen from her community, while José Luis is the impenetrable upper-middle-class villain that threatens the moral order in el *Callejón*. The encounter, then, could be seen as a metaphor for the abuses perpetrated by the more accommodated classes on the less fortunate and the danger of outsiders to the alleyway. If we view the alleyway as a microcosm standing in for Mexico, the threat of foreign capital is also clear.

¹³⁶ In the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4: 1-16), Abel is murdered by his brother, Cain, out of jealousy. This is the first murder in the Bible, and can be seen as an example of martyrdom.

The introduction of outsiders disrupts the community order already in play, like the snake in the Garden of Eden. Jimmy, Rutilio's lover, draws the attention of the regular bar patrons, and particularly Chava, who eventually attacks him and flees to the United States. In several scenes in which Jimmy enters the bar, the patrons and Chava openly stare at him, and in one example, Chava sits at his table and intimidates him until he leaves. José Luis appears at Alma's fiancée's funeral and draws the attention of several residents, who ask her if she is alright and invite her to dinner in an effort to separate them. Abel and Chava's departure to the United States leaves the field open for José Luis to seduce Alma. They seem to foresee that he will ultimately influence her to abandon her mother and neighborhood and become a prostitute. We can read these anxieties allegorically, especially given the economic and social tension brought on by Mexico's opening to neoliberal reforms.

"She dies of whoring, but not of hunger!:" ¿Quién diablos es Juliette?

As was mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* cites scenes from *El Callejón de los Milagros*, and also incorporates interviews with Salma Hayek, who plays Alma, as well as Yuliet's commentary on the film and how it relates to her experience. Because of this, it is difficult to consider each in a vacuum, ignoring their overlapping meanings.

¿Quién diablos es Juliette? is the only documentary film included in this investigation. That being said, the film overtly incorporates fiction-filming techniques and cleverly escapes standard definitions of filmic genres, leading it to be described by some as performative documentary and others as docu-fiction. At times, the *¿Quién diablos...?* seems more like a home movie, or a compilation of clips than a coherent

narrative. Through interviews and creative editing, director Carlos Marcovich incorporates elements of melodrama, documentary, fiction, ethnography and mystery. The tone of the film is occasionally extremely serious, but also frequently irreverent, and constantly defies and elides the audience's expectations.

Through the incorporation of these often-conflicting and overlapping elements, the film intentionally resists categorization. Although *¿Quién diablos...?* follows 'real' people and 'documents' their lives, it also self-consciously constructs and then exposes techniques of filming in order to undermine the narrative being told. The sound equipment often enters the frame, the characters accuse the director of trying to sleep with them, scenes repeat themselves until the interviewees can 'get their lines right,' and the film appears to rewind and correct itself. Even the subtitles are subject to modification by the film's characters. Ultimately, the Marcovich is simultaneously constructing and deconstructing the filmic apparatus, both utilizing and questioning filmic discourse, and bringing structures of power into focus as well.

Although some excellent analyses of *¿Quién diablos...?* have been written, many tend to either focus on the political context of the Período Especial in Cuba, or the aesthetic peculiarities, while failing to sufficiently connect the two.¹³⁷ As we have seen in the other films examined in this analysis, the manner of filming and the content of the film are inextricable. Perhaps better said, message and form are intertwined and co-dependent; it is impossible to understand one without the other. In this section, I examine the context of the film and its unique portrayal of prostitution as well as Marcovich's

¹³⁷ Deborah Martin makes a dense and well-organized analysis of *¿Quién diablos...?* in *The Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, and her article is quoted in this chapter. However, Martin's analysis does not take the same perspective as mine, which focuses on the examination of prostitution in film.

provocative use of editing and filmic techniques in order to dismantle the narrative power of film in general, and this film in particular.

¿Quién diablos...? is Carlos Marcovich's first feature-length film as director, although he worked as director on smaller projects, as well as cinematographer on feature-length films such as *Desiertos mares*, *Salón México*, and *El Callejón de los Milagros*.¹³⁸ Scenes from *Callejón* are included in *¿Quién diablos...?*, again bringing fiction together with documentary, and the implications of its uses are discussed later in this section. Since the film does not follow a traditional narrative structure, it is difficult to summarize. The filming for *¿Quién diablos...?* was done in Cuba (Havana), the United States (Los Angeles, New York and New Jersey) and several locations in Mexico from 1995-1998. As the film opens, Cuban citizen Yuliet Ortega and Mexican model Fabiola Quiroz introduce themselves. They then explain to the camera that they began making the film when they were working on the music video "Tonto Corazón" ("Foolish Heart") by Mexican singer Benny Ibarra. Fabiola plays Benny's love interest in the music video. According to Yuliet and Fabiola, the crew members were so enthused by how much the two looked alike that they decided to incorporate Yuliet into the filming as Fabiola's younger sister.

Two years after filming the music video, the director returns to Cuba and sought out Yuliet again. With the help of Fabiola, Marcovich manages to obtain a visa so that Yuliet can fly to Mexico to interview with a modeling agency and, unbeknownst to her, reunite with her estranged father, who had been living in the United States since Yuliet was a small child. Much of the film focuses on highlighting connections between Fabiola

¹³⁸ *Salón México* serves as another example of a prostitute film from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema re-made. The original is from 1948 and the re-make was released in 1996.

and Yuliet, such as their physical features, their shared dreams of being famous, and their search for identity in their absent fathers, drawing in strong elements of melodrama, as seen in *Callejón*, but also questioning and ridiculing these techniques along the way.

¿Quién diablos...? is emblematic of the unique economic circumstances in which it was filmed, both in Mexico and Cuba. The subsequent peso crisis exacerbated these problems. Carlos Marcovich acknowledges the Mexican economic crisis, originating in neoliberal reforms that culminated in the application of NAFTA, the Chiapas Revolution and the subsequent peso crisis. He makes this connection in the production credits of *¿Quién diablos...?* when the words “El error de diciembre” (The error of December) appear on screen. This is the name out-going president Salinas de Gortari gave to the economic crisis resulting from the devaluation of the peso.

The Cuban context acknowledges the Special Period (*Período Especial en Tiempo de Paz*). The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in abrupt increased economic hardship for Cuba, which had heavily depended on its foreign aid. In the face of widespread suffering, Fidel Castro declared the Special Period in 1990, saying that Cubans “must cast away their illusions and prepare for struggle during these hard times” (Henry Taylor 62). In 1992, the US escalated its trade embargo against the island, leading to worsening conditions for its residents. As a result, Vincenzo Perna describes that Cuba quickly “saw the living conditions of her citizens reach fourth world levels” (54). In an effort to alleviate the suffering, in 1993 the Cuban government turned to tourism as a means for propping up the economy. Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb explains that in order to create the economic conditions and infrastructure necessary to support the tourist industry, the socialist government made some major changes to its agenda: “These

[market reforms] included de-penalizing the dollar, opening free markets for agricultural products, allowing certain forms of self-employment, increasing foreign investment, and emphasizing tourism as the most important means of rebuilding the Cuban economy” (22). It would be naïve to suggest that no unofficial economy existed before this period; however, these opening of restrictions dramatically increased the opportunities for entrepreneurial schemes and re-shaped the way Cubans viewed money and status. The workforce also changed, in that tourism-oriented businesses saw significant growth, and the demand for positions such as taxi drivers, waiters, maids, and entertainers increased. Since these jobs tend to deal in cash, primarily dollars, workers in the tourist industry often found themselves earning more than physicians and teachers (Perna 68-69).

The success of the tourist industry has come to rely heavily on visitors’ easy access to beaches, hotels, restaurants and sex. Catherine Moses implicates the Cuban government in the promotion of Cuba as a sexual playground for foreigners during the Special Period: “To promote tourism, the government has been selling Cuba as a sexual paradise, using photos of scantily clad beautiful women to entice tourists” (48). Charles Trumbull concurs, highlighting that:

Travel agents flaunt pictures of scantily clad women on white sand beaches. In 1990, *Playboy* did a photo shoot of Cuban women on the famous beach resort, Varadero. In 1995, the Italian magazine *Viaggiare* claimed that Cuba was the “paradise of sex tourism,” beating Thailand, Brazil, and the Philippines for this top honor. The next year Cuba saw a 68% increase in arrivals from Italy. (Trumbull 358-359)

This phenomenon is certainly reflected in *¿Quién diablos...?* on more than one occasion.¹³⁹ Sunburned Italian men gawk at the camera and gesture to women on the beach while commenting on their bodies several times in the film. Perhaps the strongest example, however, is a scene in which Yuliet is preparing to leave Cuba to visit Mexico. As she and her family gather in the airport, and she hugs them goodbye, a few rowdy, red-faced, Italian men approach her and insist that she hug and kiss them, too. They intrude on her family's space and play to the camera, laughing and joking. Their invasion into this intimate moment is highly symbolic of the "Italian invasion" of Cuba, where foreigners may often feel that they have free access to female bodies. This scene serves to sharply contrast the Italian men's vision of Cuba as a liminal space, free from rules and obligations, with Yuliet and her family's experienced reality of Cuba as home.¹⁴⁰

At the same time, however, the filmmakers themselves are participating directly in this tourist industry. The crew has come to Cuba to film Benny's music video precisely because of its increasing appeal, and they use the beach and the urban landscapes to highlight Fabiola's beauty and sensuality. They choose Yuliet to participate, supposedly because she looks so much like Fabiola, and although she is not dressed in the tight-fitting clothes or a bathing suit like Fabiola, she is part of the package being sold.

¹³⁹ *¿Quién diablos...?* is not the first film to criticize prostitution in Cuba. The 1964 post-revolutionary film *I am Cuba*, a co-production between Cuba and the Soviet Union, portrays life during the Batista dictatorship, showing the rampant prostitution of Cuban women by wealthy foreign men and juxtaposing this with overwhelming poverty. The melodramatic analogy of Cuba as a prostitute, consumed and discarded by Americans is apparent, and serves as powerful propaganda to justify the socialist reforms taking place. It is certainly ironic, then, that the socialist regime should later promote Cuba as a sexual paradise.

¹⁴⁰ This scene also draws attention to the difference in status between Italians and Cubans. From the film, we know that obtaining a visa for Yuliet to visit Mexico was not an easy task. Catherine Moses explains that tourists have the most privileged position in Cuba because they have dollars, and freedom to leave (55). This is made evident time and time again, both in Yuliet's complaints about her father's emigration-when he left his wife and children behind and went to the United States- and in Yuliet's departure.

Yuliet's role in the music video is that of the younger, innocent looking counterpart, or younger sister, to Fabiola, connecting her directly with Fabiola's role as the love interest in the music video and consequently sexualizing her –and the countries both women represent– as well.

What makes these connections all the more meaningful is that the audience already knows by this point in the film that Yuliet occasionally practices *jineterismo*, an informal type of prostitution, with foreign tourists. Within the Cuban Special Period's context of widespread poverty, the promotion of tourism and the loosening of socialist restrictions, along with radical shifts in social structures, *jineterismo* emerged as a means for survival or even for economic mobility. Deborah Martin emphasizes that *jineterismo* is unlike formal prostitution, in which there is an explicit exchange of sex for money, but rather “a term that may perhaps roughly be translated as ‘escort’” (349-350). At the same time, it appears that more direct forms of prostitution also take place. The name *jinetera* comes from the Spanish verb *jinetear*, which means to ride (as in to ride a horse). Catherine Moses describes the situation: “These are attractive, educated Cuban women and girls, in all the colors of the rainbow, who are servicing the needs of paunchy, licentious tourists from around the world. Some of the tourists marry the girls and take them away, others buy a few gifts and leave some dollars” (49). As Moses explains, *jineterismo* tends to be characterized by a casual sexual relationship in which money or gifts are given, or in which the foreigner may buy his escort dinners and afford her entry into social spaces from which she would otherwise be excluded, such as tourist clubs and hotels. Yuliet never applies the term *jinetera* to herself, but this is what she seems to be describing when she addresses the camera and confesses that she has had sex with

countless Italian men, and shows a photo of herself on the beach with one. She explains that they pay her one dollar for spending one day with them, two dollars for two days, and so on. Although some researchers have claimed that *jineteras* can earn hundreds of dollars in one night, it seems that within the practice, the potential for earnings can vary widely, and the amount of money received by Yuliet emphasizes that she is excluded from the realm of the much higher-earning prostitutes.¹⁴¹

While Yuliet is very frank and shows little emotion during her descriptions, the narrative makes it clear that she engages in *jineterismo* due to a combination of economic circumstances, sexual curiosity and previous abuse. Likewise, Catherine Moses downplays the role of sexual attraction in *jineterismo*, viewing it as the practice of women desperate to survive (48). Yuliet also explicitly states that she is not attracted to the men she has slept with, adding that one wanted her to write letters to him, but she is not much for writing, and that she could never be attracted to men with such small penises, removing any illusion of foreign men as lovers rather than paying customers. She repeats the Italian she has learned for the camera: “You’re a beautiful girl. I enjoyed sleeping with you. I’ll call you in the morning. Let’s smoke a cigarette.” Shortly after she makes this statement, two older Italian men appear in the film, and explain that they come to Cuba for the “beautiful girls.” Shots of enthusiastic Italian men and young Cuban women dressed in bikinis on the beach together serve to confirm this.

The strongest of example of Yuliet’s economic motivations in practicing *jineterismo* is when she is asked to determine how the film itself will end. She repeats

¹⁴¹ Amelia Rosenberg Weinreb claims that *jineteras* can make far more than doctors, for example, earning “more in one night (approximately US \$370) than a medical doctor in one year (US \$210)” (26). This estimate assumes, however, a certain access to richer tourists and the exclusive spaces they inhabit, as well as business sense and exclusivity. In Yuliet’s case, she does not seem to be earning anywhere near this amount, and the low price she receives highlights the degradation in the process.

over and over, escalating to a shout, “That she dies of whoring, but not of hunger. That she dies of whoring, but not of hunger. That she dies of whoring, but not of hunger!”¹⁴² At the same time, however, it seems that Yuliet is not sleeping with foreigners because she needs food, but rather because she wants access to dollars and the freedoms they provide. It is important to note that she narrates in the 3rd person, saying that “she” slept with Italians for money because there were things she wanted, but could not afford, and because she was angry with her grandmother. Like Hermila/Suely from *O Céu de Suely*, who takes on a *nome de guerra*- a kind of stage name for prostitutes- Yuliet separates her two personas by narrating her story in the 3rd person. Furthermore, she emphasizes that sleeping with men is her own choice, and seeks to distance herself from any implied romance, attraction or coercion. She portrays her motivations primarily as economical.

This attitude is reflective of a new generation of young Cubans that has limited access to dollars and new perceptions of wealth and status. Amelia Weinreb highlights that the changing economy shifted the way in which Cubans related to the State, and how they felt about daily living: “[Cubans] explain that while access to dollars has afforded them new consumer freedoms, it has also created citizen-consumer dissatisfaction and, more than anything else, has permanently altered Cuban society by ushering in the twilight of the socialist revolution” (23). Yuliet seems to be speaking on this point when she tells the camera: “I don’t believe in anything, anything!”¹⁴³ She is emblematic of the generation of Cubans that feels detached from the revolution and its values, while it is constantly confronted with the disparity in wealth between the island’s visitors and its residents.

¹⁴² “Que se muere de puta, pero no de hambre. Que se muere de puta, pero no de hambre Que se muere de puta, pero no de hambre.”

¹⁴³ “No creo en nada, nada!”

Timba

Evidence of this new generation in Cuba is present throughout the film, but particularly in the musical performances, which contain lyrics that extol the values of consumerism, and musical personalities that resist the socialist rhetoric of the State. Several times in the film, Yuliet appears in clubs where Manolín (el Médico) is performing with his band. Manolín's image and the lyrics of his music echo the contrasts between emerging consumerism and the State's official line. Often called El Médico because he trained as a doctor before becoming a professional musician, Manolín flaunted his fortune and promoted consumption and self-enjoyment: "With his smart designer clothes, his optimistic message, his songs celebrating hedonism and flamboyant life, Manolín expressed the dreams of young Cubans who lived in scarcity and did not believe in the promises of the revolution" (Perna 69).¹⁴⁴ The constant arrival of affluent tourists created a kind of second world, separate from the poverty and day-to-day dealings of average Cubans. In nightclubs, these worlds often came together, giving Cubans a glimpse of what Western money could buy.¹⁴⁵ Yuliet gains access to these spaces, if only briefly, during the filming of *¿Quién diablos...?* and Manolín's participation is acknowledged in the closing credits.

Vicenzo Perna uses the Cuban musical sensation of Timba to illuminate the social, economic and political changes of the 1990s. In the case of this film, Timba (or what Perna also calls MB- Música Bailable) ties together increasing tourism, *jineterismo*,

¹⁴⁴ Manolín rejected his state-sponsored medical training, considered to be a noble profession, to entertain people. Also of note is that he had no formal musical training, but was able to gain success by rejecting socialist values and promoting consumerism. In this way, he represents an entire generation of emerging consumer-citizens.

¹⁴⁵ Catherine Moses recounts her visit to one of Havana's most popular nightclubs, the Palacio de la Salsa at the Hotel Riviera, and hypothesizes that almost all of the women present in the club are *jineteras*. She observes similar circumstances at the Copacabana Hotel and other clubs (50-52). The average Cuban worker could not possibly afford the admission price.

and the tensions between the official discourse of the socialist government and the reality of changing economy and values:

The new style [timba] acquired an outstanding symbolic importance because it celebrated, connecting them, the culture and pride of the black barrio and the hedonistic mood of the youth of the *período especial*, unimpressed by political rhetoric and desperate to escape scarcity. For many young *habaneros*, thus, timba became both a subcultural manifesto and a practical means to gain access, via tourist dance clubs, to a world of sophistication and plenty. (55)

In order to access this new world, however, it was necessary to earn enough money to purchase entrance. According to Perna, the average Cuban did not have the means for self-enjoyment and entertainment in Timba clubs. For this reason, clubs came to represent Cuba as it was performed for tourists: as spaces of entertainment for an elite few. Charles Trumbull claims that among other motivations- such as survival, adventure, the hope of meeting a handsome foreigner, supplementing meager State incomes- this access to clubs, restaurants and nice hotels is one contributing motivator for women and girls to engage in *jineterismo* (360).

As part of its appeal, Timba attracted tourists, and also contributed to the creation of spaces for selling sex:

Looking at the connections between timba and *jineterismo*, it appears clear that [músicaailable] played a pivotal, albeit indirect role in the boom of sex tourism in Cuba. By the middle of the decade, Havana dance clubs had become sites for the staging of the sensuality of the *mulata* for male tourist audiences, with timba

bands launching waist-shaking contests and inciting *jineteras* to strip off. (Perna 193)

¿Quién diablos...? makes these connections even more explicit in that Yuliet appears in two scenes in clubs listening to the music, dancing and singing along, and her appearances are strategically located within the film. The lyrics of one of Manolín's songs help to reveal these connections further. Pena argues that "'Somos lo que hay' ('We are what there is'), probably provided the best manifesto for the new market-driven Cuba and the urban subculture that identified with Cuba" (68). The refrain is: "We're what there is/ What sells like hotcakes/ What the people prefer and ask for/ What the market runs out of/ What you hear everywhere/ We're the best."¹⁴⁶ These lyrics are highly appropriate given the success of both the song and the band. Marcovich uses this music to set a much more sexual tone, however. In one scene the song is performed in a nightclub, where Yuliet dances at the side of the stage. Everyone seems to know the lyrics by heart, and Yuliet sings along. In the next shot, a group of pre-adolescent girls, presumably between 8 and 10-years-old, sing and dance to the song in a school courtyard. They swing their hips and stroke their thighs, some lifting their skirts at the end. When sung by at a live performance by El Manolín, the song seems to be about the success of the band, but when sung by a group of young girls, the meaning shifts, and the implication is that it is their bodies that are up for sale, or will be soon. This connection is made more obvious when the song is played over a montage of school children running and playing and then immediately followed by Yuliet's performance of the Italian she knows and the Italian men on the beach, explaining that they have come to Cuba for the

¹⁴⁶ *somos lo que hay / lo que se vende como pan caliente/ lo que prefiere y pide la gente/ lo que se agota en el mercado/ lo que se escucha en todos lados/ somos lo máximo*

‘chicas calientes’ (hot girls).¹⁴⁷ The overall effect implies that there is an entire generation of *jineteras* in the making. One of Yuliet’s friends then tells the camera that he has no problem with men coming to the island for sex, but that they should stay away from young girls.¹⁴⁸

In order to support an emerging tourist industry, Cuba invested heavily in constructing and renovating hotels. Marcovich again emphasizes sexual tourism in the repetition of shots of the Hotel Plaza in La Habana. A *New York Times* article from 1994 declares that “New Hotels Attest to Cuba’s Reawakening,” and mentions the Hotel Plaza as one example. According to the Hotel Plaza’s website, it was renovated in the 1990s, thanks to support from the Cuban government. This is one of many hotels renovated in order to attract the quality of tourism that would help recover the Cuban economy. Henry Louis Taylor claims that “between 1990 and 2000, the number of hotel rooms in Cuba, keeping pace with arrivals, doubled from 18,565 to 37,178” (65). A recurring scene in *¿Quién diablos...?* shows Yuliet leaning against a pillar in front of the hotel, with its name clearly etched on a window in the background of the frame. Of course, there is an obvious connection, and a convenient relationship between the hotel industry and *jineterismo*. This is clear in that Yuliet leans against the pillars, seemingly waiting to pick up a foreigner. In the final scene of the film this process is repeated and again, the song “Tonto corazón” plays as the camera wanders in this same space between the

¹⁴⁷ Also note the double meaning of the word ‘caliente,’ which can mean hot in temperature, but can also imply sexual attractiveness and talent.

¹⁴⁸ The authors cited in this section all agree that the Cuban government has made minimal efforts to protect minors from sexual exploitation. This being said, Catherine Moses mentions: “Although Raul Castro’s wife, Wilma Espin, the head of the Federation of Cuban Women and the closest thing Cuba has to a First Lady, has come out strongly against prostitution, the trade is thriving, The State has its crackdowns, but the *jineteras* just change location or disappear from the streets for a while, opting for the nightclubs” (51). Since the government promotes sexual tourism and provides few alternatives, it effectively endorses prostitution as long as it is practiced in certain spaces.

pillars. This time, however, it closes in on another girl, who is also *mulata*, light eyed, and, like Yuliet, looks like Fabiola. The camera zooms in on her and scans the various parts of her body, much as a potential sex tourist would. However, this is a highly self-conscious fetishizing of her form. Although the camera adapts to the gaze of a sex tourist, the audience's experience from previous scenes allows criticism to prevail. By replacing Yuliet with another younger girl, Marcovich shows how interchangeable they become in this sexual economy. Hence, this collection of pillars in front of the Hotel Plaza appears to be something of a revolving door through which young, Cuban girls are introduced to prostitution.

At the same time, Yuliet's strong character simultaneously embodies the defiant and the abused. She recounts how she was raped at a young age by a friend of a friend after a party and says that the man is now in jail for murder. While she tells this violent story, however, she stands in the shower, mostly obscured by the shower curtain and dripping wet. While her vulnerability and violation are showcased, so, too, is her sexuality. When she addresses the camera on her encounters with foreigners she is lying in bed, partially covered, but presumably naked underneath. This stylization provokes the audience to consider Yuliet as both sexualized and sexual.

Part of this provocation comes from Yuliet's behavior. She is boldly sexual and provocative when interacting with the camera and when talking to children. Almost at the very beginning of the film she accuses Fabiola of being "really slutty" (*muy puta*) to several random passers-by, who seemingly have no idea what she is talking about. She goes on to explain that Fabiola sunbathed topless ("like a whore") while staying at a hotel. Two photos are then shown, one of Fabiola's music video co-star Benny staring at

her bare chest and one of Yuliet doing the same. Yuliet also asks young children in the film if they know what sex is, and even accuses her toddler cousin of having an erection for her. Deborah Martin sees the framing of Yuliet's sexuality and her position as both subject and object as resistant to the dominant discourse:

The film openly sexualizes female (and male) bodies, but does so in such an overt way – and with such in-built critique –as to expose the normally naturalized voyeurism of cinema. To do so in this way is tantamount to resistance to the hegemonic sexual politics of the gaze. (346)

So while the Italian men in the film can be seen as taking advantage of young Cuban girls, Yuliet defies the label of victim, and reveals the problem to be much more complicated. Her consumer-driven desires, her sexuality, her disappointment from never knowing her father and losing her mother, along with her history of abuse and her desire to be free from the control of her extended family all factor in to her defiance.¹⁴⁹

The question of gaze is central to understanding Yuliet's character and the film's content. Much of the focus on Yuliet and Fabiola's similarities is on their light colored eyes. In Yuliet's case, she knows that her European-looking eyes came from her father, while Fabiola's eyes remain a mystery. Her mother claims that her father was a foreign archeologist that had come to study the pyramids, while some interviewees claim that this could not be true. Nonetheless, the attention both Yuliet and Fabiola get is attributable to their difference from the general population, their incorporation of features from the colonizer and the colonized, their embodiment of the ideal traits of the mulatta. Deborah

¹⁴⁹ It is this attitude that led one film review of *¿Quién diablos...?* to describe Yuliet as “Young, sassy, and ashamed of nothing.” At the same time, this categorization over-simplifies Yuliet, and ignores the techniques of filming that are essential to understanding the construction of meaning in the film.

Martin connects the film's obsession with their eyes to the history of colonization through the politics of gazing and looking. For example, Fabiola's eyes are shown in extreme close-up while she cries. She shows the camera a painting by a New York artist, in which he has exaggerated the proportions of her face, giving her enormous eyes and lips, drawing attention to her sensuality. She shows the camera a photo of herself covered partially by a photo of Yuliet, demonstrating that their features are almost the same.

At the same time, Fabiola and Yuliet use their eyes to re-appropriate the gaze and the power of looking. Yuliet shades her eyes and looks into the camera, saying she cannot see the audience because the theater is too dark. Both Fabiola and Yuliet look directly at the camera, often accusing the director of manipulating them in some way or anticipating what the audience may be thinking. Close-ups of Fabiola crying emphasize her subjectivity. This focus on eyes, therefore, highlights the aspect of gaze and complicates the film's messages further in that Fabiola and Yuliet both look as they are looked at.

Technique

¿Quién diablos es Juliette? defies easy categorization in that it is part documentary, part fiction, and it self-consciously criticizes both documentary and fiction filming at the same time. Some have called the film docu-fiction- what we can understand as the creation of a fictional narrative using documentary filming techniques- while others have categorized it as performative documentary. Bill Nichols provides some insight into what differentiates performative documentary from other types of filming:

Performative documentary suspends realist representation. Performative documentary puts the referential aspect of the message in brackets, under suspension. Realism finds itself deferred, dispersed, interrupted, and postponed. These films make the proposition that it is possible to know difference differently. (97)

Performative documentary questions the method as it represents. It is, therefore, necessarily self-reflective. Stella Bruzzi reasons that performative documentary “emphasizes – and indeed constructs a film around- the often hidden aspect of performance, whether on the part of the documentary subjects or the filmmakers (185). From this we can understand that films like *¿Quién diablos...?* do not seek to hide the means in order to reach the end. The power invested in filmic discourse is a central issue. Bill Nichols emphasizes that this type of filming is still politically charged, and a means of resistance to increasing globalization:

As this economic lion [of global capitalism] or perhaps paper tiger, grows larger and larger, more globally interconnected and less locally responsible, the contrast between its power and scope and the apparent power of identity politics, makeshift alliances, and cyborg affinities may seem dwarfed out of all proportion. This is the perception that performative documentary sets out to revise. By restoring a sense of the local, specific, and embodied as a vital locus for social subjectivity, performative documentary gives figuration to and evokes dimensions of the political unconscious that remain suspended between an immediate here and now and a utopian alternative. (106)

From these remarks, it is clear that performative documentaries are not mere post-modern meditations on the art of filmmaking, but rather strategic adaptations of the documentary form that serve to undermine overriding concepts of Truth.

¿Quién diablos es Juliette? is difficult to categorize precisely because it questions the methods of filming at every turn. From the beginning, the very title of the film is brought into question. While being interviewed by the director, the lead character, “Juliette,” explains that her name is actually spelled with a Y, making it Yuliet. As she re-spells her name, the titles return and are scratched out and corrected. Yuliet seemingly has the power of self-representation, in that her correction stops and ‘rewinds’ the film to revise its title. We see it reverse on the screen and then she instructs the director to re-type her name correctly. As Geoffrey Kantaris reasons, this is a challenging of traditional documentary style:

The film thus [through the opening sequence] simultaneously installs and frustrates a documentary discourse predicated on the knowability of the other: that power-knowledge system inherited from colonial anthropology and ethnography that investigates the lives of some remote other (s) for the edification of a civilized spectatorship. (223)

Yuliet refuses passive representation and insists on participating in the making of the film. From the very beginning, when she corrects the spelling of her name, the relationships between reality and film, and between colonizer and colonized are disrupted, as Deborah Martin clarifies: “In privileging the Cuban spelling, she claims the name and language for herself and shows irreverence in the face of European culture, a subversive hybridity ...” (Martin 348). Yuliet’s father claims that the spelling of her

name is Italian, however, further complicating the question of identity. This conflict of meaning and the examination of who is entitled to create it are central to the film, again raising the question of whether the subaltern can speak. This being said, it is still ultimately the director guiding the final result, making the cuts, and creatively editing to make characters dialogue with each other across oceans and time, and to perhaps make Yuliet seem far more empowered than she actually is.

¿Quién diablos...? stretches the boundaries between documentary and fiction even further in its ironic citations of Marcovich's previous film, *Callejón de los Milagros*, on which he worked as the cinematographer. Marcovich combines interviews with Salma Hayek about her role in *Midaq Alley* with Yuliet's criticism of the film and clips from the film in order to reveal the tensions between actual and represented prostitution. First, Yuliet gives her opinion of *Midaq Alley*: "It's trash." Then, with the iconic Hollywood sign in the background, Hayek explains her role in the film as Alma. Yuliet interjects that Alma "acts like a fool." A clip from the film shows José Luis persuading Alma that she deserves better than her life in the alleyway, that she could be an actress. Yuliet interjects again: "She became a whore." Both Salma and Yuliet explain how Alma was fooled into believing she could become a famous, and we see a shot of Salma wearing a ball gown, riding in a limousine, much like Cinderella. It becomes clear that although Alma made a presumably bad choice in becoming a prostitute- as Yuliet says: "If she had not been so stupid, the film would not have been so stupid"- Salma Hayek has launched an acting career by playing the prostitute.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Brazilian actresses Hermila Guedes, Nash Leila and Mariah Teixeira all launched their film acting careers by playing prostitutes. In

Mexico, we can recall Andrea Palma as Rosario in *La mujer del puerto* (1934). In the United States, the examples are also abundant, such as Jodie Foster in *Taxi Driver*, Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* and Brooke Shields in *Pretty Baby*. In the context of *¿Quién diablos...?* it is made clear that Salma Hayek owes much of her success as a film star to her role as Alma in *Midaq Alley*. These associations reinforce the enduring associations between acting, or modeling, and prostitution. Deborah Martin remarks that:

Female acting and modeling are consistently aligned with prostitution in *¿Quién diablos?*, as the female stars make (tongue in cheek?) references to sex with the director, and the label of prostitute is applied to both Fabiola and Yuliet in the course of the film by other characters, and by each other. (345-46)

Marcovich's citation of *Callejón* serves to reinforce this connection. As Yuliet interviews with Fabiola's modeling agency, the agency's director tells Yuliet she will need to change her hair, learn what to wear, in essence, completely change in order to become a model. As this is told in voice-over, the narrative is interrupted; José Luis slaps Alma in a scene from *Callejón*, shouting, "You have nothing, nothing!" Yuliet then decides not to join the agency, since she would have to leave Cuba. The juxtaposition of the scenes leads the viewer to the conclusion that she has chosen not to prostitute herself, at least in the form of modeling and acting. In fact, Yuliet is constantly distanced from Fabiola in this sense, in accusing her of being a "puta" for sunbathing topless. It is also Fabiola who asks the director to choose between her and Yuliet, flashing her breasts at the camera. Unlike the models and actresses mentioned previously, Yuliet is the only individual that actually works as a prostitute (in this case as a *jinetera*). These interactions play into the stereotypes applied to women in public roles in that "within the logic of Mexican cinema,

‘actriz de cine’ and ‘prostitute’ are virtually coterminous” (Noble 118). While Yuliet has some agency in choosing not to become a model, the scenes serve as a stark reminder of the difference between represented prostitution and her lived reality.

This is reflected in that there is a constant preoccupation with the pronunciation of the word “actuar,” leading Yuliet, Don Pepe and other characters to pronounce it over and over. Deborah Martin explains that the Cuban dialect changes the word-final ‘r’ to an ‘l,’ making the word sound like “actual”:

In fact the ‘mistaken’ pronunciation, actual (current, present), can be seen as privileging the here and now, authenticity over performance. Yuliet’s line ‘aunque no sepa decir actuar, actué’ (‘even if I can’t say “to act”, I acted’) demonstrates the irrelevance of mere words when confronted with the vitality of action, and privileges practice over theory. (347-8) ¹⁵⁰

Moreover, it validates Yuliet’s performance as something more than accidental, and implies that her participation is valid, important and conscious, as well as timely. She is, therefore, not an actress in a fiction film, but rather, the actress of her own narrative. Furthermore, the emphasis on the word “actual” highlights the political and economic context of the film, which should not be mistaken for merely a meditation on form. Rather, the unique circumstances of Special Period in Cuba are what make this meditation possible. As Martin mentions, this repetition of the word constantly calls attention to the interviewees, questioning whether they are somehow ethnographic subjects, or actors, or something in between.

Part of the film’s performative nature leads it to adapt and create melodramatic situations, simultaneously manipulating the story of its participants while questioning its

¹⁵⁰ In Spanish *actual* means contemporary, or as Martin elaborates, current or present.

own right to do so. This challenging of the typical melodramatic model exemplifies the power of *scenario*, as described by Diana Taylor. Taylor emphasizes that while the *scenario* is repeated, the bodies within that frame have the ability to maneuver. This manipulation of the *scenario* becomes evident in some highly-staged scenes that play on the melodramatic representation of family relationships. Early in the film someone knocks on Yuliet's door with a potato. When she opens it she laughs, getting the play on words between *papa* (potato) and *papá* (dad). This mock reunion ridicules the melodramatic model, which often focuses on a search for identity, but the film's trajectory quickly shifts to just that.¹⁵¹ The filmmakers stage a dramatic and theatrical reunion between the Yuliet and her father in the tourist destination of Xochimilco, in central Mexico. Tanya Weimar explains that the location of the reunion is meaningful in the context of Cubans living in exile:

For the tourist, Xochimilco consists of a series of canals through which adorned boats circulate, generally full of families and groups that listen to the live mariachis or other music that emanates from the stereos. In [the film] Xochimilco is an empty space that is recognized by boats that arrive at an island. Yuliet and her father encounter each other in this emptiness, markedly Mexican. This emptiness emphasizes the Mexican space as neutral for the two Cubans (83).¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ In one scene Yuliet's father meets Fabiola in New Jersey. She somehow stands in as a proxy for Yuliet. Their similar appearance implies that they could be somehow related, or at least that they have parallel stories in their search for identity through their missing fathers.

¹⁵² "Para el turista, Xochimilco consiste en una serie de canales por los cuales circulan lanchas adornadas, generalmente llenas de familias y grupos que escuchan a los mariachis vivos u otra música que emana de las grabadoras. En [la película] Xochimilco es un lugar vacío que se reconoce por las lanchas que llegan a una isla. Yuliet y su padre se encuentran en este vacío, marcadamente mexicano. Este vacío enfatiza el espacio mexicano como neutro para los dos cubanos."

The symbolism is overt. Yuliet stands on a tiny island, a stand-in for her home country. Her father, who left on a boat in 1980, returns to her, again on a boat. The drama is enhanced by a helicopter shot from above. Since the audience has seen interviews with her father before, and recognizes that a reunion is imminent, the anticipation heightens. When her father first approaches, she does not realize who he is, and even flirts with him a little. When she realizes that she has been tricked into a reunion, she becomes irate and embarrassed, demanding to know why he did not return to Cuba. The orchestrated encounter turns out to be far less ideal than those in soap operas, and the question of whether Yuliet and her father will remain in contact is left unresolved. The finality, certainty and closure that the viewer may expect are denied, and break with the traditional melodramatic narrative structure. In these ways, scenes played out in Yuliet's contacts with her estranged father both ridicule and appropriate melodramatic *scenarios*.

The Female Nude

The question of the female nude was central to understanding the Brazilian films examined in the previous chapter. There, insights from scholars such as John Berger and Lynda Nead served to explain how the difference between nakedness and nudity is the conversion of the female body into an object of desire. I argued that *O Céu de Suely* and *Baixio das Bestas* display nude women in the way Berger and Nead describe, but that *Deserto Feliz* successfully avoids these trappings by taking camera angles that highlight the character's subjectivity rather than display her body. In contrast to the Brazilian films examined, however, the two Mexican films discussed in this chapter contain very little nudity.

Unlike the characters of *Baixio* and *O Céu de Suely*, neither Alma nor Yuliet appears nude in *Callejón* or *¿Quién diablos...?* In fact, both films seem to go to great lengths to avoid explicit nudity, choosing instead to imply rather than display. This is not to say, however, that the styling of their characters does not constitute *to-be-looked-at-ness*, or that the images are not carefully constructed for the male gaze.

As mentioned earlier, Alma positions herself in her bedroom window in order to create an enticing display for Abel and Chava, who are smoking marijuana below. Her wet hair serves to remind them that she has just gotten out of the shower, and looking into her window has a voyeuristic appeal. Abel comments that she looks like an angel, but Chava sees her in a more sexual light. In following scenes, we see from inside Alma's apartment, and it becomes clear that she has put herself on display intentionally. This is part of what leads Al-Rifai to call Alma "victim accomplice" due to her ambition and her use of her sexuality to achieve her dreams (72). It is this ambition, and her use of her sexuality that predestine her to prostitution. When she does, her appearance conforms to the stereotypical high-class prostitute, complete with low-cut dresses and bright red lipstick.

Yuliet, as mentioned before, is sexualized by consequence, as she plays the role of Fabiola's younger sister in Benny Ibarra's music video. Although Yuliet is fully clothed, the sensualized images of Fabiola in a bathing suit on the beach spill over onto Yuliet. Her sexuality is much more complicated than the cases in *Baixio* or *O Céu de Suely*, however. In the first place, unlike Auxiliadora in *Baixio*, who is a young character played by a legal adult, Yuliet is actually a minor. Perhaps because of that, Yuliet appears several times in *¿Quién diablos...?* to be nude but covered, meaning she seems to be

naked under a blanket or behind a shower curtain. In these scenes she is often confessing something or telling a story. As we can recall, *Deserto Feliz* used similar imagery in portraying Jessica's story. The shower scene of *Deserto Feliz* featured Jessica's face, which occupied the majority of the screen and the close-up served to emphasize her subjectivity and vulnerability while avoiding sexualizing the image. In Yuliet's case, she appears in various different showers while telling the story of her rape by an acquaintance of her sister. The shower setting serves to highlight her vulnerability, but at the same time, adds an element of sensuality because she is drawing the shower curtain across her body, reminding the viewer of what is behind it. There is a certain amount of self-reflexivity in this set-up, however. For example, while Yuliet is beginning to tell the story, water starts to fall on her from the showerhead and she stops talking to get out of the way. Additionally, the story is broken up between settings so that she tells the story in two different showers- one with a blue curtain and one with a red one- as well as in a café. In one shower she is washing her hair and spitting out water as she talks, making the setting seem more like part of a routine than an element of seduction.

Yuliet also appears to be naked under the bed sheets in several intermittent shots where she is asked to explain why she slept with foreigners or how her story should end. Here she insists that she did it for money, and not for pleasure or love. She wanted to "buy things she couldn't afford" and says that the story ends with the protagonist dying of "whoring, but not of hunger." By emphasizing that her motivations are consumer-driven and not merely survival, the commentary shows her place within the rapidly-changing Cuban society. Her position in the bed, which could be in any hotel room, makes it appear that she has just finished having sex. This arrangement, paired with her

claims that she hated having sex with Italians because of their various shortcomings, denies the sensuality of the image of her lying in bed and asks the audience to associate her semi-nakedness with an unpleasant experience, just as her appearances in the shower did.

The only instances of actual nudity in *¿Quién diablos...?* are of Fabiola. In one instance, Fabiola jokes that the filming is taking a long time because the director is choosing which of his stars he will sleep with. She is wearing a denim jacket and quickly exposes her breasts to the camera saying, “Choose!” This moment is both playful and telling, in that it implies that Fabiola must give a little in order to be part of the film, but it is also irreverent because the scene is staged by the director and filmed by the director in order to expose a double-standard in filming. Another, far more complicated example occurs early in the film, when Fabiola’s topless sunbathing becomes the focus of Yuliet’s teasing and criticism. She insists that Fabiola is a ‘puta’ for lying around her hotel pool without her swimsuit top on: “She sunbathed without a shirt, without a bikini, without anything, with her boobs out in the air, like a whore, like a slut, oh, sorry Fabiola, I didn’t know you were there.”¹⁵³ The scene is obviously staged so that Fabiola will enter the frame and hear Yuliet’s rant. Fabiola explains that she noticed Yuliet staring at her breasts, implying that she was enjoying the view. Later on, photographs show that both Yuliet and Benny have been staring at Fabiola’s bare breasts. Both have been caught taking pleasure in gazing, and someone taking a photograph of the whole scene – presumably also taking pleasure in gazing- has captured this triangle of gazes on film,

¹⁵³ “Tomaba el sol sin blusa, sin bikini, sin nada, con las tetas al aire libre. Como una puta, como una cualquiera, ay, disculpa Fabiola, no sabía que estabas allí.”

and then developed the photograph to create another layer of gazes when the audience views it.

Male Nudity

Two of the films examined in this dissertation contain male nudity, and its framing is often completely different from the filming of female nudity. The issue of male nudity is significant, particularly when examining aspects of the gaze and also of phallic power. The differences between the representations of male nudity in *Callejón* and *Baixio* attest to their distinct messages about male sexuality and violence.

Two men appear naked together in *Baixio das Bestas*; Cícero and Everardo masturbate together on a waterfall and then, with some clothes on, shoot guns for sport. In *Baixio*, these images of naked men were shot from above, and never at eye-level, as the images of Auxiliadora, Bela and Dora, whose abuses and rapes are represented with the help of high-key lighting and angles that allow for maximum visibility. Although the relationship between Cícero and Everardo seems to be intimate, and at the least homosocial and somewhat sexual, they are primarily portrayed as co-abusers, rather than lovers. Although they masturbate together, their bodies are not put on display for the pleasure of the gazing audience in the same way the female characters are. I have argued that this intentional obscuring of male nudity is a means for preserving the power of the phallus, which is inseparable from the penis, as Richard Dyer and Mary Ann Doane remind us.

Callejón takes a much different approach to male nudity in the scene in which Don Ru and his young lover, Jimmy, are bathing each other in a public shower. This shot does not make any effort to hide the men's bodies, and their intimacy is directly

expressed through caresses and kisses. Don Ru's son, Chava, rushes in and beats Jimmy's head against the wall. What was a playful moment between two men suddenly turns violent, and male nudity quickly becomes a sign of vulnerability. It is important to note, perhaps, that Jimmy is the one who is beaten, rather than Don Ru. He is portrayed as the submissive figure in the relationship; Don Ru buys him gifts, pursues him, leads him to the back room, stands behind him while massaging him in the shower. This vulnerability associated with penetrability is confirmed when Jimmy is attacked by Chava.

Some Conclusions

El Callejón de los Milagros may accomplish some re-working of the melodramatic model, as Andrea Noble suggests, but a closer look at its story arch reveals that it is still a strong example of incomplete resistance. Alma has only two paths, heterosexual love, or condemnation to prostitution. David William Foster asserts that: "Alma's restlessness would appear to be less a matter of poor object choice or even the betrayal of Abel ... than it is a matter of dead-end lives for women of her social class in Mexico" (54). In this observation, Foster has given the film far too much credit for transparency and seems to have forgotten that films are aesthetic spaces that construct their own realities. The dichotomy of the virgin vs. the whore is not a material fact, but rather a patriarchal construct, generated and repeated through gendered norms. The structure of *Callejón* very much argues in favor of condemning Alma and blaming her for Abel's death because she values material gain, fame and sexual satisfaction over virginity.

¿Quién diablos es Juliette? incorporates this dichotomy to question and complicate it. By juxtaposing the conditions Yuliet experiences with the filmic

representations in *Callejón*, Marcovich signals that he is resisting the way the prostitution *scenario* has typically played out. Furthermore, his resistance to and use of the melodramatic model resist repetition of the same narratives of the past. It is, to a certain extent, implied that Yuliet perhaps would not have practiced *jineterismo* if it were not for the absence of her father, but this is never confirmed. Her search for identity through her father, furthermore, is awkward and angry, and avoids any cliché of harmonious melodramatic reunions. Although the film is constantly self-questioning, as Deborah Martin has reasoned, Yuliet is both subject and object. She desires as she is desired and is caught in the act of looking, both at the audience and at her co-stars. This re-appropriation of the gaze suggests that it is possible to portray prostitution with a minimal amount of objectification, but that this relies on self-conscious filmic techniques. The conclusions chapter of this analysis will closely examine the filmic techniques taken up by *Deserto Feliz* and *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* and the ways in which they resist dominant discourses about prostitution and subjectivity.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROJECTS

Nguyen-Vo Thu Huong has illustrated effectively in the case of Vietnam that prostitution films can reveal ways in which society negotiates changing meanings of citizenship, gender and economy in a shift toward neoliberal policies: “Commercial sex and similar vices can easily be used to depict the seductive dangers of freedom in the market and emphasize the need to contain such freedom” (216). These representations are not created in a vacuum, but rather within a framework of circulating discourses and practices that include prostitution itself, human trafficking, pornography and other elements of what Sheila Jeffreys calls the “sex industry” (199). The five films examined in this dissertation seek to deal with the ‘problem’ of prostitution, or to deal with other problems through the representation of prostitution, all within the context of rapidly-changing economic and social policies. What ties them together is their attempt to denounce prostitution; however, in many cases, their resistance is incomplete.

Several key factors can contribute to incomplete resistance as I have described it. Several of the filmmakers discussed here fail to critically acknowledge filmic techniques that serve to subjugate and objectify women. In *Baixio das Bestas*, gratuitous violence ultimately glorifies, rather than denounce abuses. Once characters have served their purpose, they are eliminated from the film. In *O Céu de Suely*, the camera repeatedly adopts a male gaze in order to take pleasure in the nude form of the protagonist, attempting to criticize one aspect of prostitution while simultaneously playing to the audience’s desires. *El Callejón* indulges in stereotypes and clichés to show how Alma’s intense sexuality leads to her own downfall.

A central concern of this analysis has been subjectivity, and whether the characters in these films and the real people they are meant to represent are just stand-ins

for something else. In reference to performances of conquest, Diana Taylor explains that “the native body serves, not as proof of alterity, but merely as a space on which the battles for truth, value, and power are fought by competing dominant groups” (63). The use of the prostitute body, this Other onto which groups can inscribe meanings about society, is comparable. That is, the prostitute body is used to ‘embody’ anxieties about gender and class as well as sexuality. It serves to represent the raped, violated or vulnerable environment or population. It reminds the audience of the dangers of modernization, of foreign invasion, of the changing roles of women, shifting meanings of public and private space, as well as literal and figurative forms of penetration, but rarely without a corresponding loss of subjectivity. However, as Janet Wolff reminds us: “There is every reason, too, to propose the body as a privileged site of political intervention, precisely because it is the site of repression and possession” (415). Both *¿Quién diablos...?* and *Deserto Feliz* opt to re-envision the prostitute body in an effort to recuperate some amount of subjectivity. They manage this through positioning of the body itself, by rejecting sensualized and clichéd images of female nudity and through filmic techniques that defy easy readings.

All of the films examined in this investigation, except *¿Quién diablos...?*, track their protagonists from non-prostitute to prostitute. These journeys are important, as they attempt to explain the conditions that compel women and girls to become prostitutes, and also to negotiate much of the debate over the nature and causes of prostitution. In the case of *Baixio das Bestas* and *Deserto Feliz*, Auxiliadora and Jessica are victims of brutal sexual assaults. In a way, prostitution seems to be both a means for survival and a reaction to the violence they experience. Suely, Yuliet and Alma’s motivations are far

more entrepreneurial, however. *O Céu de Suely*, *¿Quién diablos...?* and *El Callejón de los Milagros* make it clear that their protagonists are driven by ambition. Their lives before and after this decision are details, whereas the bulk of the story focuses on the transition to prostitution, the process and its causes.¹⁵⁴ In many cases, it is not so much the individual or character that is important, but prostitution itself. In order to become a stage, the prostitute body is necessarily stripped of its subjectivity.

In terms of technique, a closer examination of *¿Quién diablos...?* and *Deserto Feliz* deserves our attention. Of the five films examined in this dissertation, these two stand out both for their unusual aesthetic style and their methods of representing a harsh reality. They deal specifically with underage prostitution, that is, girls about 15-years-old. Additionally, they both avoid sensual displays of the female nude. The end of the Brazil chapter in this dissertation analyzed extensively the films' uses- or avoidances- of the female nude. As that chapter made clear, the female nude is created by privileging the male gaze and making the female image an object of desire. This is accomplished through framing, context, camera angles and other techniques. As I explained earlier, Yuliet is often in a state of semi-nudity, but completely covered by a sheet or a shower curtain. This reminds the audience of nudity without showing it explicitly. Likewise, Jessica's naked body is obstructed when she showers and later her clothed form is juxtaposed with the grotesque belly of her much older male customer, giving the audience a rare view of the unpleasantness involved in the sexual act itself.

Both *Deserto Feliz* and *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* seek to 'document' the problem of prostitution in their own ways, but at the same time, both are mediations on

¹⁵⁴ Since Contractarians often insist that women enter prostitution of their own free will, Sheila Jeffreys proposes the use of the word "decision," rather than "choice" in order to better explain the amount of duress often involved (*The Idea of Prostitution* 155).

form and the relationships between ‘reality’ and fiction. *Deserto Feliz* is a fiction film, but it is based on interviews of local residents, and its use of neorealist techniques- such as handheld camera, filming on-site, and mostly ambient music- gives it a documentary feel. This is logical, since much of Paulo Caldas’s experience is in documentary filmmaking.¹⁵⁵ The purpose of the film seems to be to record and denounce a serious problem in the Northeast, that is, the abuse and trafficking of women. *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* also seeks to reveal and document the very real issue of sex tourism and its effects on women in Cuba, but its constant questioning of form, and its overt incorporation of performative techniques heighten the sense of subjectivity and deny the audience easy answers.

Both films resist easy categorization. *Deserto Feliz* is a fiction film that relies on documentary techniques while *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* is a documentary that relies heavily on fiction techniques. As a consequence, both (perhaps intentionally) blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction films and question the ability of film to capture any ‘reality.’ As recent film scholarship asserts, there is no definitive opposition between documentary and fiction film, “The rise of the docudrama, the self-reflexive documentary, and the mockumentary ... all signaled the breakdown of the stable critical dichotomy which had for so long kept fictional narrative and documentary film in separate analytical boxes” (Rhodes and Springer 3). Likewise, it is not possible to simply divide films into fiction and non-fiction, as upon close analysis, any film can be seen to contain some of both. The neorealist techniques employed by *Deserto Feliz* could perhaps be best labeled as docudrama, which Rhodes and Springer define as

¹⁵⁵ Caldas won several film awards for the feature-length documentary *O rap do pequeno príncipe contra as almas sebosas* (2000).

documentary form plus fictional content (4). *Deserto Feliz*'s use of "real" spaces, such as the Edificio Holiday, filming in Germany, low-light, handheld cameras, 'real' people, few takes, keeping it basic and un-laquered all contribute to its documentary style. It does not masquerade as a documentary per se, but Caldas does utilize the same aesthetics in order to document.

As I discussed in the chapter on Mexican films, *¿Quién diablos...?* falls within the category of performative documentary. The constant interruptions by the means of filming, such as sound equipment entering the frame, stops and starts and conspicuous editing, remind the viewer that documentary is a performance, a construct. In *New Documentary*, Stella Bruzzi explains that while the stylistic play may be similar, the effects of the two types of filming – docudrama and performative documentary- are different:

With such a realist aesthetic [in docudrama], the role of performance is, paradoxically, to draw the audience into the reality of the situations being dramatized, to authenticate the fictionalization. In contrast to this, the performative documentary uses performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation. (185)

Then again, *Deserto Feliz* is far more slippery than that. The use of the backpack type camera, emphasizing instability, disrupts any easy and passive viewing. Mary Devereaux comments that: "The seamless narrative which presents its story as 'absolute truth' thus ironically encourages the passivity of both male and female spectators" (342). By disrupting this passivity, filmmakers acknowledge the importance of active spectatorship. For example, the dream sequence in which Jessica goes to Berlin with Matheus, but then

returns to her hotel room, leads the viewer to question whether she was really ever there or not, provoking thoughts on which life is better and which she should choose, if given the chance. This aspect again challenges the dichotomy between documentary and fiction and makes *Deserto Feliz* even harder to categorize. In a similar manner, constant interruptions to the flow of the narrative in *¿Quién diablos...?* engage and challenge the spectator, rather than encourage passivity.

Another central issue in incomplete resistance is the manner in which films represent prostitution as a problem. As the theory chapter of this dissertation argues, prostitution is not the result of individual ‘free’ choices, but rather the result of economic, social and gender discourses that compel women to sell sex. As a quote from Dennis Altman illustrated earlier in this dissertation, a political-economic analysis is necessary: “[W]e need to think in terms of structures rather than specific issues or identities” (34). It is with little or no irony that *Baixio* and *Suely* film prostitution in gas stations while their major sponsor, Petrobrás, is the very owner of those businesses. In contrast, *Deserto Feliz* constantly brings attention to the space by having Jessica change her clothes in the gas station bathroom and then take her long walk through the gas station to the restaurant across the street, and by filming in the Edificio Holiday and with the positioning of the Fernsehturm in Berlin (emphasized by Jessica’s sustained focus on it while staring out the window.) In this film, the economic imbalances make prostitution possible. Although Jessica lives the ‘dream’ of being taken to Europe by a German, it becomes evident that the power structures remain the same and she is still subordinate. In similar manner, *¿Quién diablos...?* calls attention to the differences between Yuliet and her Italian ‘customers.’ The imbalance of power between Cuba, the United States and Mexico, play

out in phone conversations and the juxtaposition of images. The emphasis on the Hotel Plaza highlights economic inequalities and the ways in which young women and girls are introduced to *jineterismo*.

In the case of most of the films examined here, the State is almost entirely absent. There are no politicians, no police and no military members in any of the films. This can be viewed two ways. Nguyen-Vo points out a similar tendency in her analysis of Vietnamese films: “Unlike the earlier reportage of the 1980s, the new reportage seduces with visions of the startling new worlds within one’s city or town rather than calling on people’s sense of social justice. It deflects rather than hold the authorities, capitalists, or any social group accountable for the things that it does present as problematic” (219). In the case of the five films investigated in this dissertation, this lack of indictment could merely reflect that a shift to neoliberal market freedoms has led to an increasing absence of the State. At the same time, however, as we have seen in the cases of *ANCINE* in Brazil and *IMCINE* in Mexico, it is the State that pays the bills when it comes to film production. The portrayal of prostitution as more of a social problem than the result of institutionalized inequalities and abuses certainly supports a neoliberal strategy of governmentality. Again, there are some minor exceptions in *¿Quién diablos...?* in the discussion of Yuliet’s passport and exit visa. In *Deserto Feliz*, the German tourists have a brief discussion about how to buy a fake passport for Jessica (a minor) in order to smuggle her out of Brazil. By including these seemingly minor details, the filmmakers point out (though only briefly) the complicity of the State in the exploitation of women and girls.

Although these two films focus primarily on the individuals' personal stories, these serve to denounce systematic inequalities. Rather than use prostitute characters as mere stand-ins or allegories, these films allow them to retain a certain level of subjectivity and still connect them to the bigger picture. Jessica's dream sequence and Yuliet's trip to Mexico allow Caldas and Marcovich to bring these systems into sharp focus. Despite the 'dream' of marrying a wealthy foreigner in *Deserto Feliz* and the Yuliet's ambition to become a model in *¿Quién diablos...?*, both dreams turn out to be nightmarish. Jessica is dissatisfied with her life in Berlin because she is still dominated and controlled by Matheus. In Mexico, Yuliet (by careful editing) seems to perceive that becoming a model means losing her entire identity, and in particular, not returning to Cuba.

While in *¿Quien diablos...?* much of the experimentation seems playful, the implications are very serious. This filmic discourse, this industrial producer of meanings that relies on the fabrication of believable scenarios and gendered performances, is destabilized and questioned in this way. In the previous chapter, Deborah Martin argued that Yuliet's re-spelling of her name for the sake of the camera is a privileging of the Cuban over the European and a resistance to colonial discourse. At the same time, this is a re-claiming of subjectivity. The Yuliet that exists in reality has her own name with its own spelling that may set her apart from others. She differentiates herself from the beginning as an individual, as opposed to a trope, a cliché, or an allegory. This is apparent in the film's title, which asks: "Who the Hell is Juliette?" The purpose of the film is to explain who she is, and to justify her relevance and importance by highlighting her subjectivity.

Considering that so much has been said about funding and its importance, it is crucial to note another relevant connection between *¿Quién diablos es Juliette?* and *Deserto Feliz*: both were supported by the Hubert Bals Fund, which is a Dutch film support fund connected to the Rotterdam Film Festival.¹⁵⁶ The fund's website states: "The Hubert Bals Fund is designed to bring remarkable or urgent feature films by innovative and talented filmmakers from developing countries closer to completion. The HBF provides grants that often turn out to play a crucial role in enabling these filmmakers to realize their projects" (Online). The description goes on to explain that "content and artistic value" play the heaviest role in the awarding of funds. Collaboration with Europe is certainly not a new trend in Latin American filmmaking. One striking example would be the 1976 film *Iracema: Uma Transa-Amazônica*, a co-production between Germany and Brazil. Its criticism of the Brazilian government led to its being banned and originally released only in Europe. Perhaps funding from HBF gives filmmakers more leeway to criticize the State. At the same time, the importing of these representations of prostitution plays into discourses of exotic Latin America, its exotic women, and its thriving sex industry. It also could potentially serve distract (whether intentionally or not) Europeans from accusations of sexual slavery in their own regions.¹⁵⁷

Future Projects

¹⁵⁶ *Baixio das Bestas* and *O Céu de Suely* also participated in the Rotterdam Film Festival. See their website for more information: http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/about/hubert_bals_fund/

¹⁵⁷ Recent news stories in the United States have focused on the trafficking of Eastern European women into Dutch Brothels. For one example see: "Sex Trade Charges Cause Dutch Furor." *The Washington Post*. 12 Feb 2006. A24.

It is impossible to conclude a process that is on-going. The five films analyzed in this dissertation are a few of the recent Mexican and Brazilian filmic representations of heterosexual prostitution, but by no means all of them. Russell Campbell points out that the majority of filmic representations of prostitution are written and directed by men, and is the case with the films analyzed here. An examination of emerging women directors and their perspectives on prostitution would be a logical next step. Furthermore, the films examined here take heterosexual (female to male) prostitution as their theme, but there is as much analysis to be done of other types of prostitution, such as homosexual, transgendered, transvestite, and others. As I have emphasized throughout this investigation, prostitution always already evokes multiple meanings. Those meanings participate in the wider circulation of discourses about gender and economy and help to shape perceptions and policies. The proliferation of representations of prostitution in times of turmoil speaks to its symbolic power and importance in the understanding of governmentality.

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