

Cinema and prostitution: how prostitution is interpreted in cinematographic fiction

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Abstract

Prostitutes and prostitution have been widely represented in cinematographic narrative since the early days of cinema. Speaking about prostitution is a way of reflecting on human sexuality and how this dimension of human life has evolved from the beginning of the 20th century until now. This article is a summary of research currently underway into prostitution in the cinema, analysing the figure of the prostitute in more than 200 films, with a chapter that also tackles male prostitution and their similarities and differences.

Key words

Prostitution, cinema, sexuality, male prostitution.

Resum

La qüestió de la prostitució i la figura de la prostituta han estat un recurs àmpliament utilitzat en la ficció cinematogràfica des dels inicis del cinema. Parlar de la prostitució és, d'altra banda, reflexionar sobre la representació de la sexualitat i l'evolució que ha experimentat aquesta dimensió de la vida humana des de principis del segle xx fins a l'actualitat. Aquest article és un resum d'un treball de recerca en curs sobre el sexe de pagament al cinema que analitza la figura de la prostituta en més de 200 pel·lícules, amb un capítol en què també s'aborda la prostitució masculina i les similituds i les diferències entre totes dues.

Paraules clau

Prostitució, cine, sexualitat, prostitució masculina.

1. Introduction

If there is a fundamental female role in the history of cinema it's that of the prostitute. It must be admitted that, as an element of fiction, the life of a woman who, to coin a phrase from the past, is "decent" is much less interesting than the play provided by a whore. If the most controversial and stimulating aspect of human life is sexuality, what interest is there in women for whom this aspect of life has simply been annihilated, albeit leaving out the effects of repression? That's why, if a film director had to include a female character, even in an exclusively "male" film, for the most part he would turn to a prostitute as she could also incorporate all the other roles women have played or can play: mother, wife, friend, nurse, confidante, enemy and object of desire among others.¹

The images produced by the cinema form part of our system of representation and of our collective imaginary; they feed our need to order the world, to give it meaning and explain it. In some way, we think what we think of the different aspects of existence thanks to such powerful mechanisms of reproduction and recreation as fiction in literature, cinema, television, advertising, etc., while fiction also reflects and elaborates on what is suggested by everyday reality. Experiencing fiction always affects how we look at reality and, at the same time, how we look at

reality produces copious interpretations that will indefinitely produce new changes in how we look at it. And so on ad infinitum.

That's why it's important to study the representations that have been made and proposed for the different aspects of society and different models of men and women, because these proposals feed the substrate of our aspirations, longings, desires, hopes, fantasies and urges.

Seeing how cinema has represented the role of the prostitute also reveals how society has constructed the discourse of male and female sexuality, with double standards in terms of morals and judging people's behaviour and, in short, how society preserves its model, which has been called *patriarchy*.

That's why I felt it's appropriate to analyse the different narrative treatments generated by the figure of the prostitute in film. What kinds of prostitutes have been proposed? How have they been represented? What have different directors said about this subject? Are there any differences between the men and women interested in this subject? What positions have they taken regarding prostitution? How has this issue evolved throughout the history of cinema? Has there been any change in how prostitution is represented today? Is the cinematic representation anything like the reality? And what can we say about the representation of male prostitution? Is it the same or different to female prostitution?

All these questions are the ones I have asked on starting this work² (this article is an example from the study), considering that mentalities change when there are discourses that put forward new proposals and new ways of interpreting reality and, at the same time, new proposals arise from the realisation that things change and the same old stereotypes and the same out-of-date arguments can't go on being reproduced to represent existence.

2. Men's fascination with prostitutes

Prostitutes have inspired a huge range of artistic creations, starting with literature. They appear as the main character in many works but also as a secondary or fleeting character, even if only suggested or insinuated. We can see this in *La Celestina* [Tragicomedy of Calisto and Melibea] (1499), *Moll Flanders* (1722), *Manon Lescaut* (1753), created, no less, by Abbé Prévost, indicating that the clergy was already interested in the subject many years ago; *Margarita Gautier*, la *Dama de las Camelias* [the Lady of the Camellias] (1848), *Nana* (1879) and, closer to our own time, in *Pantaleón y las Visitadoras* [Captain Pantoja and the Special Service] (1973) or the inhabitants of *La Casa Verde* [The Green House] (1965) or even *La Cándida Eréndira* [Innocent Eréndira] (1972), exploited by her own, wicked grandmother, or the *Putas Tristes* [Memories of My Melancholy Whores] (2004) that García Márquez chooses for his memoirs.

Why have prostitutes enjoyed such a prestige as a motif or object of artistic creation? I will try to list some of the reasons I believe lie behind this universal male fascination for prostitutes.

I start from a basic premise: patriarchal society has established a basic, impassable frontier between those women who are considered to be decent and dishonest or *vicious* women. That's why credibility or verisimilitude is the first reason for using the figure of the prostitute.

A woman who is considered *honest* cannot embark upon certain adventures nor can she even be in certain places. Her good name and decency would prevent her from doing so, whereas most scenes come under this type. The only women who could undertake any kind of adventure without damaging their virtue were those who had already lost it. Those who had nothing to lose socially, neither a good name to maintain nor appearances to keep up nor modesty to preserve, and who were at the mercy of any scoundrel. It's true that cinema has provided us with some good, decent women who have had adventures (how can we forget the more than puritanical Rose from *African Queen* (1951)) but, in general, if directors had to place a woman in any scene or circumstance, it had to be a woman who was distanced from the concept of decency: a *streetwalker*, a *woman with a doubtful or dark past*, an *easy-living woman*, a *loose woman*, a *woman of ill repute*, a *bad-living woman*, a *woman of easy virtue*, a *prostitute*, a *hooker*, a *slag*, a *cocksucker*...

Names (increasingly more gross as we near the present) that are all applied to these women who were not even called prostitutes. Gloria, played by Elizabeth Taylor in *Una Mujer Marcada* [*Butterfield 8*] (1960) says how impossible it is for a woman to experience passion without being considered a prostitute for doing so. And I don't include here the so-called *femmes fatales*,³ as not all have been prostitutes.

Another of the reasons why men feel attracted by the figure of the prostitute is that, although prostitutes undoubtedly belong to the subordinate sex (women) and, among these, to those who are not respectable (and we should always remember this), I believe that, in a way, they see them as an equal once they can disassociate their sexuality from their feelings, in a similar way, for example, to how the police can admire the cleverness and intelligence of a criminal, although they are on opposite sides of the law.

If, on the one hand, so-called *decent* women must be respected, on the other men have perceived them as inferiors, limited, almost simpletons, always subjects, dependent on the work, on the affection, the consideration of a man and therefore subordinate to the hegemony imposed by them (or, on the other hand, authoritarian, castrating or bad women). Men do not conceive of sex and love as necessarily going hand in hand, and only a prostitute has made this separation explicit. The patriarchal discourse regarding honest women tells us that women cannot separate their feelings from sexuality, that both must be indivisibly united and that it's deviant or perverse to be otherwise. Meanwhile, prostitutes openly challenge this principle and show that it's not true, that sex is one thing and affection another. And men, in this respect and only in this respect, feel they are witnessing a person who feels like them. But, moreover, they are witnessing an equal because they do a deal that is fair, apart from those cases of deceit: how much do I have to pay you to do what I want. So much. OK. In many films, the exchange of money for sex is done naturally. In *Mujer Flambeada* [A Woman in Flames] (1983), the prostitute Yvonne instructs the beginner Eve on prices and attitudes and there's a moment when she says to her "Nada de sexo anal y no pidas más de 500 marcos, se sienten estafados [No anal sex and don't ask for more than 500 marks, they feel swindled]" (500 marks in 1983!). Sera, in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), tells the alcoholic Ben, "Por 500 dólares puedes hacer conmigo lo que quieras. Dame por el culo, correrte en mi cara, lo que quieras [For 500 bucks you can do pretty much whatever you want. You can fuck my ass. You can come on my face. Whatever you want to do]". Ben religiously pays her the 500 dollars, even though he doesn't use any of the prerogatives included in the price.

In some films, the client doesn't want to pay the prostitute or robs her but, in general, the financial agreement is represented impeccably. The cinema has provided an infinity of images of this exchange but, merely by taking out the wallet and paying a woman, viewers know that they are witnessing bought sex; if the money is thrown down or screwed up (as in *Canciones de Amor de Lolita's Club*), there's also an added dose of contempt.

If men didn't also need other affective components, such as love, affection, understanding or tenderness, then a relationship with a prostitute would be the ideal one. Woody Allen, in *Desmontando a Harry* [Deconstructing Harry] (1997), says exactly this. "Me encantan las putas. Es lo ideal: pagas y te vienen a casa. Sin tener que hablar de Proust, ni de cine ni de nada [I still love whores. It's ideal. You pay them and they come to the house... and you don't have to discuss Proust or films or anything]". Talking about Proust is obviously an example of Allen's delicacy, because you don't have to even know who Proust is to go with a prostitute, let alone talk about him.

If it were not because they have to share her with other men, contradiction permitted, a prostitute would be the perfect companion. This being able to see woman as prostitute as an equal is possible because a prostitute, in a certain way, does not form part of this female mystery or eternalness that adorned the women of 18th century romanticism. In *Desmontando a Harry*, we can see a revealing scene: an old man is instructing a young man about the use of prostitution and resolves his doubts. "¿Pero no es engañar a tu mujer? [Isn't that cheating on your wife?]", asks the young man, confused. "No, no es engañar. Es una puta. No es lo mismo que tener un lío. Una profesional llega, te unta sus ungüentos y al catre. Le sueltas 50 pavos y adiós muy buenas [No, it's not cheating. She's a hooker. It's not like a love affair... She comes over, rubs on her oils... and into the sack.... Lay half a C-note on her and she's history]". In other words, there is no involvement beyond coitus or screwing, in contemporary language.

For men, a prostitute is a woman dispossessed of a soul. I said before that, to a certain extent, a prostitute was an equal, but we must point out that she's an equal insofar as she can separate her sexuality from her feelings and, precisely because of this, she's half the woman, reduced only to her carnality, as it's taken for granted that women cannot disassociate these two things. In fact, prostitutes (and sometimes even women who aren't prostitutes) are often compared with an animal. For example, in *La Diligencia* [Stagecoach], the innkeeper where they are staying laments the loss of his horse more than the loss of his wife. In *Los Vividores* [McCabe and Mrs Miller], John McCabe complains "¿80 dólares por una furcia si por 50 puedo tener un caballo? [80 dollars for a chippy? I can get a goddam horse for 50]". In *Carne Viva* [Prime Cut], they say "carne de vaca, carne de chica, es todo lo mismo" ["cow flesh, girl flesh, it's all the same"]. In *Sin Perdón* [Unforgiven], Alice laments "igual no somos más que putas, pero, por el amor de dios, no somos caballos [maybe we ain't nothing but whores but by God we ain't horses]".

Because of this absence of a soul (especially in the first third of the history we're analysing, from 1930 to 1960, more or less), men feel so desperate and torn up inside when they fall in love with one of them. Then their desperation knows no bounds because they feel the prostitute's able to give herself in body but not in soul, because she doesn't have one.

At other times, love breaks down the barriers and the man falls in love, *forgetting* what she is and, from that moment on, she's his, exclusively. What doesn't normally happen is that the man who's fallen in love doesn't mind if his partner continues with her previous life. In fact, no film of those seen shows this possibility: the prostitute either continues with her previous life (without the man) or gives up that life. She's either a whore or she becomes decent: you can't be a whore and decent at the same time, not in the past and not now.

But men also see prostitutes as their equal in another sense, namely that they keep herself. They're self-sufficient and sufficiently so for them to pay a high price for it: the disdain of society. In their heart of hearts, men feel that *honest* women somehow represent a burden they had to bear, as they weren't able to support themselves. Naturally, all these obligations entailed some benefits: the woman, in exchange, looked after the man, was always at his side, "gave" him children that ensured his heritage would live on, if he had any, or satisfied his vanity and, at times, even really loved him.

He had sex when he wanted it, although always limited because of the *consideration* due to the woman's honesty. With a prostitute, all this disappears. And, moreover, his desires can be given free reign because he actually *pays* for it. He doesn't have to behave according to proper custom or keep up appearances and, once the deal is over, he doesn't have to put up with her presence. The prostitute accepts disdain as part of her way of life. The coarse settler Carson, in *Tierra de Pasión* [Red Dust] (1932) says to the sarcastic Vantine "¿Quieres que te eche a bofetadas de aquí? [Want me to throw you out on your ass?]" and, later on, referring to Barbara, the wife of the new surveyor: "Escucha, Vantine, ella es decente, así que mantén la boca cerrada y no te dejes ver [Listen, Vantine, she's decent, so keep your mouth shut and yourself out of the way]". That's why prostitutes also treat men as equals, with cheek, audacity and brazenness, without the air of modesty, decency or submission women usually had to have in front of men and with which they somehow ensured men's gentlemanly behaviour. Sadie Thompson in *Bajo la lluvia* [Rain] (1932), or the 1953 version (*La Bella del Pacífico*) [Miss Sadie Thompson], is lively, natural, daring and treats the soldiers as equals, while the decent woman keep their distance, scandalised: "No le hables, es una descarada [Don't talk to her, she's shameless]".

Prostitutes challenge the need for male exclusivity. When a man falls in love with one of them, he wants to take her away from everything, make her his, have her for himself, enjoy (even humiliate her, if necessary) exclusively. Often, the hero redeems and saves the prostitute and takes her away from a life that's almost always considered undesirable. "Cuando te conocí, eras una mujer de la vida, y ahora vas a convertirte en una esposa y una madre [When I met you, you were a streetwalker, and now you've become a wife and mother]", says Nestor (Jack Lemmon) to *Irma la Dulce* [Irma la Douce], contrasting two antithetic and seemingly irreconcilable themes.

But there are also other reasons for why men feel fascinated by prostitutes: men can express their best and worst feelings with a prostitute. They know they can show their best side even though they don't have to and in spite of the fact that no-one expects them to. A man who treats a hooker well always becomes a hero for her and, in turn, wins over the people watching the film. In *Sin Perdón* [Unforgiven] (1992), this can be seen in the defence of Delilah, the prostitute whose face is cut up.

But, on the other hand, men can also express their most perverse inclinations with prostitutes, insulting or harassing them, subjecting them to practices they wouldn't carry out with their wives or trafficking and making a profit from them, and all this *without feeling guilty or being called to account*. A man can be good or bad with her and will be equally accepted by society and by prostitutes themselves as part of the price they must pay for being on the margins of morality or conventionality of each era. In no film of the 200 analysed is the possibility shown of a beaten up prostitute filing a complaint with the police.

Given all these attributes, it's more than understandable that prostitutes have inspired so many artistic creators, especially men, although it also remains to be seen how this has been approached by the few women that have tackled it. So, let's see how fiction has attempted to reflect the figure of the prostitute.

3. From *La Galfa* to *Pretty Woman*

60 years passed between *La Galfa* [La Chienne] (1931) by Jean Renoir and *Pretty Woman* (1990), and both were women of ill repute, although the first took her man to hell and the second to heaven, to use two fossilised metaphors. The first was born in the first third of the 20th century and *Pretty Woman* almost at the end and between one model and the other the most important change occurred for women in society. In the century since cinema was invented, women are no longer what they once were, not even prostitutes. The greatest silent revolution has occurred in the history of humanity, relations have changed between the sexes, the family, our perception of sexuality and especially the concepts of decency and honesty, which I mentioned at the beginning.

Between *La Chienne* and *Pretty Woman* there's been a complete turnabout in how the same theme is approached: the prostitute against the pretty woman; *prostitute*, an insulting word, a pejorative way of referring to a woman who does not deserve our respect; *pretty woman*, a nice way of restoring dignity to someone who, yesterday, was a *loose woman* and today is a respectable *sex worker*, although most still carry out their work under conditions of semi-slavery and without a knight in shining armour to look out for them. It's clear in the titles of these films: we can see in the names given to the prostitutes that there's been a big change in how prostitutes are represented in cinema, and I'm not comparing the quality of the films but the

image proposed by the directors and how the prostitutes are represented in them.

In this period of almost 100 years of fictional prostitutes, I have catalogued more than 200 films that, in one way or another, tackle the theme or at least include a character working as a prostitute. Not all the films are included that deal with the theme, of course, especially those filmographies that are less closely related to our cultural environment or perhaps those that have not enjoyed a wide distribution or I have not been able to see. In writing this article, I have included only the 200 most representative films.

I have included a chapter on male prostitution, which I believe provides an important counterpoint and evidence of the changes I have just mentioned. 90% of the films that tackle prostitution refer to female prostitution. In watching these films, the different spaces have also emerged in which the different prostitutes can be placed, especially when prostitution is the main theme. These spaces, easily recognisable, were as follows: *a)* street prostitution, *b)* prostitution in a brothel or whorehouse, *c)* prostitution in clubs or cabarets, *d)* prostitution in luxury salons or related to high society, *i)* prostitution in mafia contexts or related to sexual trafficking, *f)* prostitution in homes, private flats or various erotic places (peep-shows, cabins, erotic phone lines, etc.), this last case to a far lesser extent. We should also differentiate another aspect, namely that of "courtesans or concubines" who, although they have relations with several men, do not exercise prostitution per se, as it's traditionally understood: here we could include the fiction created around Mata Hari, Nana, Margarita Gautier, Lola Montes or films about *geishas*.

Another interesting point has been whether the director is male or female, trying to establish some differences in treatment. In this respect, we can extract an initial quantitative piece of information: of the 200 films seen, only 14 were directed by women, accounting for about 7%, from the oldest *Trotacalles* (1951), by Matilde Landela, to Chantal Akerman, with her *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce* (1975); *Chicas de Nueva York* [Working Girls] (1986), by Lizzie Borden, and *Salaam Bombay* (1988), by Mira Nair, up to the most recent: *En la Puta Vida* [In this Tricky Life] (2001), by Beatriz Flores Silva; *Caos* [Chaos] (2001), by Coline Serreau; *Nathalie X* (2003), by Anne Fontaine; *Los Niños del Barrio Rojo* [Born into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids] (2004), by Zana Briski and Ross Kaufmann; *El Corazón es Mentiroso* [The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things] (2004), by Asia Argento; *Monster* (2004), by Patty Jenkins; *Yo, Puta* (2004), by Luna; *Alta Sociedad* [Chromophobia] (2005), by Martha Fiennes; *El Día de la Boda* [The Wedding Date] (2005), by Clare Kilner, and finally *La Cliente* [Client] (2009), by Josiane Balasko. I am aware of others, such as *The Red Kimono* (1925), by Dorothy D. Raid; *La Fiancée du Pirate* (1969), by Nelly Kaplan; *Dirty Daughters* (1981), by Dagmar Beiersdorf; *Broken Mirrors* (1984), by Marleen Gorris; *El Chico de la Noche* [Nettoyage à Sec] (1997), by Anne Fontaine, and *À Vendre* (1998), by

Laetitia Mansson, which I have not been able to see. In any case, even if we include these six films, we would have a total of 20 films directed by women out of 200, which would give us 10% of the films that tackle prostitution being directed by women.

By nationality, we can see that the majority (41.5%) are from North America, followed by Spain (14.5%), France (9.5%), Italy (9%), England (5.5%) and, to a lesser degree, Japan (3%), Germany (2.5%) and other countries, many of whose films I have only been able to see one or two. There are more than likely more films that tackle this theme but I have not been able to find more due to the limitations of my research.

4. A job like any other?

Many of the characters realise their job is indecent; all assume and accept that they are despicable, that they're not decent and therefore deserve contempt. This is most evident up to 1960, more or less. Female prostitutes have accepted that they're not like other women ("Si a las chicas decentes no les proponen en matrimonio, imagínate a nosotras [If decent girls don't get marriage proposals, then imagine us]", shouts Gracita Morales in *Maribel y La Extraña Familia* [Maribel and the Strange Family] (1960), but, at heart, they long to be "retired" by someone that loves them. Maribel says to her astonished companions "No sabéis lo maravilloso que es sentirse nueva, diferente, con un novio que te besa la mano con respeto [You don't know how wonderful it is to feel new, different, with a boyfriend who kisses your hand with respect]". They know that their occupation isn't a job like any other, that they can never aspire to be respected as women; it's part of the price they must pay for not being like the others. This situation starts to change around 1960. Ilia in *Nunca en Domingo* [Never on Sunday] (1959) resembles more a sacred vestal virgin than a prostitute and Marie in *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) is a 22-year-old girl who naturally goes from selling records to being a professional prostitute without being morally sanctioned for it. However, at the end Marie is shot dead, when she's being exchanged for money by some pimps, something which definitely shows that this job is not an occupation like any other, as Marie can't leave prostitution whenever she wants.

Bree Daniels, from *Klute* (1970); Jeanne Dielman (1975), Eva, from *La Mujer Flambeada* (1983); Lauren, de *La Calle de la Media Luna* [Half Moon Street] (1986), and Molly, Diane and Liz, from *Chicas de Nueva York* (1986) see prostitution as a job or activity that doesn't cause them any moral problems or sense of guilt; however, for various reasons they all leave the occupation. This new perception of prostitution enters films of the 1970s and 1980s, when the women's liberation movement started to spread and the idea of decency or indecency started to disappear. *China Blue* (1985) is a strict fashion designer by day and a frenetic prostitute by night. These are women that apparently use their bodies without any hang-ups,

that don't hide their activity and don't feel guilty or inferior because of it. However, there's always the idea that, in actual fact, it's not a job like any other.

As from the 1990s, there's another change in how prostitution is handled. The strict division disappears between *honest* and *loose* women. Honesty or dishonesty is no longer measured socially according to how a woman uses her body and this taxonomic division therefore disappears between good and bad women defined by their sexuality. Men can now have relations with "decent" women without these women being judged negatively because of it. But prostitutes continue to exist in reality and in the cinema. Liz, the cheeky and tender prostitute in *Whore* (1991), explains her turbulent and agitated life as a streetwalker and uses a revealing coin of phrase when reflecting on what men are looking for when they go with prostitutes: "No buscan sexo, buscan venganza [They're not looking for sex, they're looking for revenge]". This phrase, skilfully put considering the outrages to which this likeable woman is subjected, summarises the change in men's attitude when they decide to go with prostitutes. It's no longer a way to release tension, a sexual urge or venting that cannot wait but the objective of a new kind of *fun* enters the scene. The excuse no longer exists that going with a prostitute is the only way for a man to satisfy his sexuality. Fortunately, women are no longer judged if they have sexual relations whenever they want and at least not to the point of being stigmatised for it. Now a prostitute is someone with whom they satisfy other desires or fantasies, for entertainment or fun. It's often decided in a group, as part of a game among friends. With prostitutes they can go further. This is what happens with Liz, picked up by a young man with an angelic face in a van but she then discovers that it's a trick used by a group of young men to rape her, abuse her, ridicule her and throw her from the moving van, more dead than alive.

Judy, the *Girl 6* (1996) who works for an erotic phone line, also uses prostitution, in this case oral and at a distance, as a job like any other, while the doors are closed to her in her chosen profession as an actress. This erotic game, which starts as something that's fun and innocent, will also become a source of suffering when a client forces her to say "Dilo, di: soy una zorra. Sólo soy una puta. No eres nadie, eres menos que nadie [Say it, say 'I'm a bitch. I'm just a whore'. You're no-one. You're less than no-one]". She leaves her job, frightened at just how much she can be emotionally affected by seeing herself as a prostitute. In this phase, the treatment of prostitution often involves harassing and humiliating the woman, because the innocuous sexual act of the past, which could only be carried out by paying, has now become a way of exercising power over another person (be it a woman or, as we will see, sometimes also a man).

Charo and Vanesa from *Días Contados* [Running Out of Time] (1993) are so innocent they don't even realise what they are: "No digas eso. Nosotras no somos prostitutas [Don't say that. We're not prostitutes]", Vanesa answers when Charo says that her mother, when there wasn't any money at home, said that

she would become a whore. "A lo mejor sí que somos putas [Maybe we are whores]", Charo asks herself. However, they're the only ones with any doubts about their profession, because everyone around them does see them as whores. In *Mediterráneo* (1991), we find an extremely beautiful Vassilissa who introduces herself to some soldiers lost on the island to offer her services in a very natural way. "yo trabajo de puta, ¿puede interesar? [I work as a whore. Might interested?]" she says to the soldiers who, after some slight hesitation, do seem to be interested. Of course *Mediterráneo*, although set in the Second World War, was made in 1991 and prostitutes were seen very differently at that time. They were no longer loose or morally sanctioned; rather it was recognised that they performed a social function that was not called into question.

Some more recent films even introduce a certain amount of humour in tackling this theme. Maggie, the unforgettable *Irina Palm* (2007), works as an effective masturbator just like someone who sells bread. She needs money and, overcoming all her initial objections and fears, becomes the best in the club. She never sees herself as a prostitute, nor does she let her son say so when he discovers how his mother has been able to earn so much money to pay for her grandson's medical treatment.

Almost all of them, however, dream or hope to be able to leave the profession at some point. They know it's a temporary job and many are very relieved when they give it up. Eva, from *La Mujer Flambeada*, however, seems to want to continue in the profession, in spite of her boyfriend's opposition. The teacher Lauren Slaughter seems to be going to devote herself to her studies, as she does have professional alternatives. Molly, from *Chicas de Nueva York*, throws down her work dress at the end of the day, as if distancing herself from that claustrophobic flat where she spends so many hours pleasing her clients. Judy, the *Girl 6*, goes to Los Angeles to try to relaunch her acting career. Elisa, from *En la Puta Vida*, dreams of setting up her own hairdresser's in the centre of Montevideo, and when Plácido says to her "Sos una buena puta [You're a good whore]", she replies "Yo no soy puta, trabajo de puta [I'm not a whore, I work as a whore]".

5. The most dangerous profession in the world

The world of prostitution seems to be represented most of the time as hell. A large number of prostitutes are murdered: Lulú from *La Chienne*; María, from *Trotacalles*; Lulu, from *La Caja de Pandora* [Pandora's Box], is murdered by Jack the Ripper; Debby from *Los Sobornados* [The Big Heat] is beaten up from time to time, burned with boiling coffee and finally murdered. The vivacious Gloria, from *Una Mujer Marcada*, dies in a car accident because of speeding. Nadia, from *Rocco y Sus Hermanos* [Rocco and His Brothers] (1960), is first raped and then murdered. Marie, from *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962), is shot dead, without seeking redemption but, in spite of the absence of moral condemnation, cannot escape her tragic end.

In *Peeping Tom* (1960), *La Commare Seca* [The Grim Reaper] (1962), *De la Vida de las Marionetas* [From the Life of the Marionettes] (1980) or even the sugary *Pretty Woman* (1990), even there we have a murdered prostitute at the beginning, just like in *Angel* (1984), where there's a serial killer, or in *El Beso del Dragón* [Kiss of the Dragon] (2001).

In the Spanish film *Bilbao* (1978), a prostitute is kidnapped, drugged, her pubic hair shaved off and, unconscious, she dies and is chopped up in a sausage factory without a second thought. Ana from *Batalla en el Cielo* [Battle in Heaven] (2005) is murdered by her chauffeur, Marcos, without us knowing why. It would be impossible to list all the examples because murdering a prostitute has, in many cases, been the catalyst for a film that, in principle, has nothing to do with this theme, such as *Scoop* (2006), by Woody Allen.

There are others that commit suicide or die from illness, such as Myra in *El Puente de Waterloo* [Waterloo Bridge], Berta in Bubu de Montparnasse and Satine in *Moulin Rouge*; Italia in *No Te Muevas* [Don't Move] is raped, sodomised and almost strangled in each sexual relation and, finally, dies from a back-street abortion. The poor Penélope Cruz, who plays Italia and also the marginalised Gloria in *Alta Sociedad*, dies this time from liver cancer. If they're not killed or they don't die from illness or accident, almost all cinematographic prostitutes are, at some time, beaten up, raped, abused or punched, such as Mary, whose face is carved up with a razor (*Mujer Marcada* [Marked Woman], 1937). They tried to drown Cabiria twice. Sadie Thompson is raped; Stella and Maddalena from *Accattone*; Séverine in *Belle de Jour*; Suzie, in *El Mundo de Suzie Wong* [The World of Suzie Wong]; Anna, in *El Bosque de los Placeres* [Tombolo]; Marie, in *París Bajos Fondos* [Golden Helmet], Bianca, in *La Viaccia* [The Lovemakers]; Hallie, in *La Gata Negra* [Walk on the Wild Side]... They are abused and hit by clients on some occasion. Even sweet Irma is treated horribly by the pimp she had when Nestor (Jack Lemmon) meets her, "Y el que tenía antes era aún peor... [And the one I had before was even worse]" she says. Even the despotic *Eva* (1964) by Joseph Losey, and the bourgeois Séverine, in *Belle de Jour* (1967) are hit at some point in the film. Some farmers cut up Delilah's face in *Sin Perdón* and in *Última Salida, Brooklyn* [Last Exit to Brooklyn], *Whore* and *Leaving Las Vegas* the three starring prostitutes, Tralala, Liz and Sera are respectively beaten up, sodomised and brutally gang banged. Eve's boyfriend (*La Mujer Flambeada*) tries to burn her alive, who is also a gigolo, working both sides. And Bree Daniels in *Klute* is beaten up and doesn't even report it. Even the sweet *Pretty Woman* is hit by Edward Lewis' partner, and she complains: "¿Por qué todos los hombres saben abofetear a una mujer? ¿Les enseñan en el instituto? [How come all men know how to hit a woman? Do they teach them at high school?]" But for malignity, there's that shown by Liz's pimp in *Whore*, who relentlessly looks for her to kill her, if she doesn't give in to his conditions. We also see an atrocious portrait of the world of drugs and the treatment given out to prostitutes in *Mona Lisa*.

Cathy, who Simone is in love with, is trapped by the trafficking networks, who drug her to handle her better, just like a lot of other girls, whom they beat up and abuse, although the clients still say they come out happy and satisfied.

More recently, the theme of the white slave trade and reducing prostitutes to sexual slaves has been included [a theme covered precociously by *Carne Viva* (1972)]. The most atrocious portrait of how a young woman can be sold as a slave is presented by *Lilja 4-Ever* (2002), about a 15-year-old Russian whose only way out, after being raped to a state of extreme weakness, is to jump off a bridge. Here we're not in 1940 but in the year 2000 and you don't have to be a martyr to get forgiveness. However, Lilja commits suicide out of desperation, because she can't go on being a sexual slave subjected to the brutality of pitiless men. Malika-Noemí in *Caos* and Jessica in *El Beso del Dragón* (both from 2001) are almost like slaves, forced to prostitute themselves and to inject heroin, something that makes them more dependent. The beatings and humiliations they are subjected to by their captors have not been seen since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Elisa, in *En la Puta Vida* (2001), is brutally beaten up by Plácido, the man she thinks loves her, and her friend Lulú has even unluckier, as she's shot dead in the streets of Barcelona, and she isn't the only prostitute to die in this film.

More recent is the case of Tatiana, the 14-year-old who dies during childbirth at the start of the film *Promesas del Este* [Eastern Promises] (2007) after having been deceived and raped by the affable boss Semyon, a film that presents a horrifying picture of the Russian mafia in London, for whom prostituting girls from the different Soviet republics is just part of their business.

All these narrative liberties are much easier to justify if they occur to prostitutes. It's as if anything goes with them. On many occasions, the profession of prostitute is a necessary condition to keep the story coherent, but on many other occasions it's not strictly necessary and I would suggest that, if the film resorts to making the girl a prostitute, it's because this narrative liberty is better accepted by the director him or herself or even by the audience. We are ultimately more willing to accept, or even justify, prostitutes being killed or abused or beaten up or humiliated, prostitutes killing themselves or becoming desperate, prostitutes being deceived, swindled or harassed merely because these are the consequences that might result from them being prostitutes, from going where they shouldn't go, from having left the right path and crossed over to the other side, the side of freedom, which wasn't meant for them as they are women. In *Henry, Retrato de un Asesino* [Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer] (1986), the psychopath murderer of women even states that "cuando se mata a una prostituta, no pasa nada [when a prostitute is killed, it doesn't matter]". Perhaps it's this feeling of impunity that makes it so easy to kill prostitutes at the slightest excuse (cinematographically speaking, of course).

In spite of the beatings, abuse, fights, rapes, punches and sporadic or continued maltreatment, prostitutes never report it.

They put up and shut up. In many films, the guilty party ends up paying for the crimes or barbarities that have been the film's overall motif but they almost never end up paying for murdering, abusing, beating up or raping prostitutes.

As I claim in this work, cinema's treatment of prostitutes has got worse as from 1990: from considering them as *fallen* creatures that are nonetheless necessary and innocuous, who should be treated with sympathy and compassion (in the cinema of the 1940s and 1950s), they have gone to being represented as victims of all kinds of abuse, both physical and verbal.

6. About gigolos, transvestites and escorts

Cinema's treatment of male prostitutes has no point of comparison with how it has treated female prostitution. Not only is the number of films very small in quantitative terms (20 out of 200, 10% of the sample we have analysed) but how male or female directors have tackled this aspect is also qualitatively incomparable. To start with, male prostitution has never been a widespread phenomenon in all eras and all places. The history of male sexuality cannot be compared with the history of female sexuality. I refer back to what I said at the beginning of this article concerning the different consideration of sex for men and women.

Naturally, cinema could not help but cover some of these stories of women who *resort* to buying sex or, more accurately, love and companionship. From the start the word *gigolo* was used to refer to those men who lived off wealthy, lonely women and lately the term *prostituto* or *puto* [male forms of 'prostitute' and 'whore'] has started to be used, but they don't have, and don't even come near to the disdainful meaning of the term when used for women.

The first three films that deal with this hidden facet of sexuality and female sentimentality are *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *La Primavera Romana de la Señora Stone* [The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone] (1961) and *Dulce Pájaro de Juventud* [Sweet Bird of Youth] (1962) and, curiously, all three have in common, as their protagonist, a film actress in decline. We have to wait until 1969 to see a new kind of male prostitute appear; the kind that, in *Cowboy de Medianoche* [Midnight Cowboy] believes all women are dying to go to bed with him.

American Gigolo (1980) is a film that transcends the limited circuits and establishes Richard Gere as a seducer. As from 2000, the theme of men who devote themselves to being escorts for women multiplies and we find *Servicio de Compañía* [The Man from Elysian Fields] (2001), where a selfless and loving father of a family, Byron Tyler, sacrifices himself consoling wealthy women because of his failure as a writer. In *Sonny* (2002), we're presented with a 26-year-old man who wants a change of scene, as since he was 12 "su madre ha vendido su rabo [his mother had sold his prick]", but always with women. In *El Día de la Boda* [The Wedding Date] (2005), we find the good-looking Nick, New York's most distinguished,

popular, cultivated and sought-after escort, madly in love with Kat, the woman that has hired him for 6,000 dollars to play the part of her boyfriend at her sister's wedding. All the women we've seen in the cinema who dare to hire one of these escorts come from the idle rich and we're left wondering whether poor women don't have the desire or money to afford a male prostitute. In *La Clienta* (2009), we see a new, contemporary perspective of how this issue is treated, presenting a female character, Judith, an attractive, independent and single 51-year-old, who presents a TV shopping programme, that has resorted, since she was 49, to an escort in a similar way to how men usually do when they want sex. However, the relationship established goes much further than a sexual encounter.

Another important aspect in how prostitution is represented is that of prostitution between men. As from the 1970s, approximately, with customs becoming much freer, male homosexuality also becomes more visible, as well as sex for money between men, with proposals such as the one by Paul Morrissey, *Flesh* (1968), which for the first time offers a perspective of male prostitution. We had to wait until 1990 for the phenomenon of male prostitution (between men) to be dealt with again and with more frequency. In *Mi Idaho Privado* [My Private Idaho] (1991), we find wealthy Scott (Keanu Reeves) and the drug addict Mike (River Phoenix), next to a gang of young men working as prostitutes in the streets of Portland (Oregon, USA).

En Casa con Claude [Being at home with Claude] and *Beznes*, both from 1992, show, in the first, a male prostitute who has killed his client and, in the second, the life of another that traffics with what he can in the traditional society of Tunisia. *Johns* (1996) portrays a male prostitution that's as unadorned as the female prostitution so frequently represented, including violence towards the young male prostitutes and the murder of one of them by a client who doesn't want to accept his homosexuality. Just like in *Ronda Nocturna* [Night Watch] (2005), where we find Víctor, a 19-year-old who walks around the streets of Buenos Aires looking for clients to satisfy for a few pesos.

And as regards Spain, there's the very early case of *El Diputado* [Confessions of a Congressman] (1977), where a homosexual politician from the Communist party secretly frequents male prostitutes, and *Hotel y Domicilio* [Hotel & Home] (1995), which shows a male prostitute or call boy and criticises class differences and the privileges of those with a certain power.

Paid sex between men follows the same patterns as paid sex between men and women: with fast penetration (active or passive), it's functional, instrumental, totally unrelated to the world of affection and often carried out with a large dose of violence whereas, for the women who ask for it, paid sex is full of apparent romanticism (on the screen, naturally).

7. Conclusions: prostitution, after two hundred films

I believe we can differentiate between stages in the development of prostitution in the cinema: **Firstly**, throughout the first

third of the history of cinema, from its birth to approximately the 1960s, the dividing line that underlies all the films is the existence of decent women, women for whom sexuality is only permitted (and with restrictions) within marriage, and "public" women used to satisfy the desires that marriage's sexual austerity disparages and prohibits.

Secondly, as from the 1960s and with the women's liberation movement, prostitutes begin to appear who have been released, who prostitute themselves by choice, without considering whether or not they need to economically. As from this time we can also see films that don't contain any moral or ethical sanction for prostitutes.

Thirdly, as from 1990, in addition to including what we've mentioned for the phase after 1960, the issue starts to appear of prostitution being related to the mafia and sexual trafficking and, on many occasions, related to drug-taking. More films also appear that deal with male prostitution between men, following a very similar pattern, with much more visually explicit sex and also more aggressive. Disgust and lack of consideration continue to dominate anything to do with female prostitutes, who are still called hookers, whores, slags and all kinds of *affectionate* names and adjectives.

In spite of this, women who charge for sex are mostly represented positively and idealised and embody women of great dignity, courage, bravery, generosity and devotion. The directors, who take so many narrative liberties with female prostitutes, thereby offset the scorn and ridicule suffered by them in film scripts by exalting these human values that, ultimately, end up redeeming them.

We should ask ourselves up to what point these fictitious representations have shaped the real behaviour of real people and have affected our conception of what desire, sexuality, love life and its satisfaction really mean. Fiction and reality combine, intertwine, interrelate in a dialectic symbiosis where it's difficult to know if social change came before or after its representation on film, or to what extent cinematographic stories have shaped and are shaping reality.

Notes

- 1 Russell Campbell, in his book *Marked Women*, typifies up to 15 models of prostitutes in cinema, namely: gigolette, siren, comrade, avenger, martyr, gold digger, nursemaid, captive, business woman, happy hooker, adventuress, junkie, baby doll, working girl and love story. I believe that almost all these roles are played, in a way, by each of them, so that it's difficult to separate one aspect from another.
- 2 Translator's note: Given the nature of the research, where the films have been seen and worked on mostly in their Spanish version, original or dubbed, the Spanish titles have been kept, and the English title added, when relevant.

- 3 Isabelle Cottenceau, "L'avant scene cinéma", April 2004; Jack Boozer, "The lethal femme fatale in the Noir Tradition". In: *Journal of Film and Video*, volume 51, no. 3-4, Autumn 1999, p. 20-33 (quoted in the programme of the Filmoteca de Catalunya, *Les Vamps*, in 2010, supplement number 5).

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