

CONCLUDING COMMENTARY: FURTHER TAKES ON FALLEN WOMEN?

Danielle Hipkins and Kate Taylor-Jones

With this book we have examined how frequently nineteenth-century narratives of female prostitution, in particular those of ‘fallen women’, are still recycled in recent and contemporary visual contexts, and asked how widespread and in what contexts the ‘destigmatization of female sex work’ is underway on screen. What does this global cinematic perspective on the fallen woman, the female prostitute, the sex worker and sex-trafficked women offer us? First of all, a breakdown of these very terms, which become even more inadequate to account for the range of representations of comfort women, geishas, courtesans, Magdalenes, escorts, paid daters and geriatric prostitutes that emerge out of this juxtaposition of specific national contexts. We see how the blanket words themselves risk crushing the living bodies out of the individual experience that film narratives sometimes attempt to connect to, however unevenly, and often unsuccessfully. If film narratives are intimately attached to the drama of the sex work experience, seen in this comparative, global light, we would argue that they nonetheless often and increasingly contextualize the sex worker in all her intersectional complexity, as migrant, *Gastarbeiterin*, poet, performer, pensioner. Across the book, we identified two recurrent themes to be the affects generated by sex work’s increasing mobility and the rapidly changing nature of the urban space. The concluding section of our book in particular highlights the importance of paying attention to the specificity of the representation of the prostitute within her locality, not solely on a national level, but in

relation to her occupation of a range of spaces and places. The ‘plurilocality’ of a new feminist geography identified by Gillian Rose that Kate Taylor-Jones draws upon,¹ and which informs the spirit of this book certainly confirms that the prostitute on screen cannot easily be categorized into a series of clichés.

As we suggested in the introduction, the prostitute is often characterized by ambivalence, and indeed across the book we also recognize the recurrence of the global melodramatic tradition. If the latter in particular can sometimes present threats of a lapse into narratives of pity, the sticking points seem to appear most obviously in the postfeminist or postmodern bent of mainstream commercial Hollywood products, from *Moulin Rouge!* (Luhrmann 2001) to *Chloe* (Egoyan 2009). However, the ambivalence appears too in the generic mixing that the prostitute generates across time and space in popular forms, from the dangerous blending of realist and idealist modes in Korean Hostess films to the juxtaposition of female agency and its subjugation to the nationalist discourse in Hindi cinema. The tendency to dismiss these films because they are popular or ambivalent, however, is one that we wish strongly to counter with this book. As Aderinto observes regarding the use of popular genre in Nollywood, it can challenge the association of moral degradation and prostitution through the use of the brothel space as a space of social mobility and interaction that extends beyond sex and exploitation. What emerges from this book, then, is a strong argument for looking at the often hidden history of the prostitute genre in diverse locations, and beyond the assumption that popular genres will always generate conservative representations of the figure. At the same time, new methodological takes on the prostitute, such as Aparna Sharma’s use of Irigaray, or Teresa Ludden’s reading of her in the light of Hegelian philosophy can also offer the opportunity for the prostitute to emerge as a site of transgression in both popular and auteur-driven forms.

A useful test case for some of the ideas emerging from our book about future directions for both the representation of prostitution and our reading of it lies in a recent film that that returns us to the current centre of global media, the US, but not via Hollywood itself. UK-based director Andrea Arnold’s *American Honey* (2016) provides a picaresque girl’s eye view of a US society riven by inequality and on the brink of electing Donald Trump; the film turns back to the figure of the girl apparently at risk of the ‘fall’, in order to explore a society of brutal commoditization. Newest recruit to a travelling magazine sales team that encourages

its young employees to use their sex appeal to sell, the film's protagonist, the mouthy but soft-hearted late teen, Star (Sasha Lane), recently escaped from an abusive relationship, appears increasingly vulnerable to violence or exploitation. She eventually finds that her sales pitch in the male-only environment of the oil field quickly tips over into a negotiation over sex work. Arnold is unflinching in her typically phenomenological approach to the girl's encounter with her supposed client,² as she conveys the discomfort of Star's proximity to his moment of sexual release through close-ups on her constantly averted gaze, all the more convincing thanks to their juxtaposition with sun-lit scenes of joyful sex in contrasting close-ups with her new lover Jake (Shia LaBeouf). The key message here is what R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes explain as the much needed removal of innocence 'as the criteria against which a girl's relationship to sexuality gets measured'.³ Star's discomfort is not grounded in unwanted sexual knowledge, therefore, but in sheer alienation from the exchange. Her nameless client is as desperate as she is, as he struggles to get aroused in the face of Star's indifferent small talk, a sign of her reluctance to engage in the emotional labour implicit in the transaction. The whole scene is lit by the flickering flame of the oil field he has driven to as a supposedly romantic gesture: in fact, a stark reminder of both parties' reduction to commodity. The flame lights up the bunch of notes, \$1000, on the dashboard, Star's only concrete step so far towards her modest dream of having her own trailer with lots of children, which does nothing to soften the claustrophobic darkness of this reluctant encounter, but does remind us why Star is choosing 'survival sex'. What is at work here is precisely the empathy that Jane Arthurs calls for in the first chapter of this book when she distinguishes between: '*identification* with the suffering victim that positions viewer and victim in a relation of equivalence, and *empathy* with the victim's suffering that is an imaginative projection that allows us to understand how *she* might feel' (p. 24). Indeed, unlike *Lilya 4-ever*, although its protagonist is equally marginalized, and in keeping with a recent post-financial crisis turn in cinema and television towards an emphasis on female resilience, identified by Jorie Lagerwey et al.,⁴ the film resists a narrative of victimhood. After expressing his anger over her act of supposed sexual 'betrayal', Star's lover later pays tribute to her potential for survival with his mysterious gift of a turtle in the film's enigmatic ending. The 'fall' no longer marks women and the notion evaporates, as Star dips below the surface of the water to emerge renewed and to continue her fight for

survival. Sex work is something she has done, but it does not define her. What the scene of sex work does, however, is to remind us powerfully of how that fight is always a battle against commoditization on mental, emotional and physical levels, felt most acutely by society's most vulnerable. Star's resilience is not a postfeminist female resilience narrated in service of male success, as identified by Alice Bardan in Chap. 3, but one focused on self-preservation.

The film's significance increases in a post-Trump world (made a year later it might have seemed more difficult to maintain its final promise) because it reminds us of cinema's increasing potential to keep female agency at the centre of the narrative about sex work while still exploiting its drama to denounce political inequity. The intervention of women in the film-making process, from Abi Morgan as script-writer of *Sex Traffic* (Yates 2004) to film-makers like Arnold and Francesca Comencini who emphasize the 'suffering actor', complicate insidious and self-effacing postfeminist narratives of the 'happy hooker' analysed by Bardan in *Schimb Valutar* (Margineanu 2008) or the postmodern tidying away of Chloe described by Fiona Handyside. We can and should look too to film's intermediality, as it enters increasingly into dialogue with other visual forms, as Katie Johnson's discussion of the 'Lady Marmalade' (2002) music video suggests. The self-constructed 'diva performances' incarnated by the producer and performers of that video, from Missy Elliot to Lil' Kim contain a power to challenge the racialization of commercial sex in intertextual dialogue with *Moulin Rouge!*

The casting of first-time actress Sasha Lane in the role of Star in *American Honey* also raises the under-examined question of how actors experience acting sex work.⁵ Close readings of facial expression and affect during sex scenes recur across the chapters of this book, but what does it feel like to act those parts? Despite the much vaunted parallels between prostitute and actress, where are the ethnographic or ethical studies exploring what it feels like and means to 'perform' sex work, of which Kirsten Pullen's work is perhaps one of the few examples to date?⁶ A further and final reflection offered by *American Honey* that chimes with this collection is its use of space and place. We have already mentioned above the persistently urban focus of representations of prostitution, as if the figure is symbolically at one with the city and modernity, but the prostitute is often also a travelling figure. Star's peripatetic trajectory in Arnold's film, and siting of sex work at the raw energy source of urban civilization—the oil field—far away from the skyscrapers and

escalators of the postmodern city, offers a new attention to the lived experience of the prostitute, existing beyond the parameters of the city symbol. Are there other representations of prostitution that privilege the apparently increasingly invisible in-between spaces of the 'rurban' or the 'rural'?

Another area of shadow exists in studies of the screen prostitute, which we have touched upon here, but on which we should aim to shed more light. The prostitute's magnetic narrative appeal is reflected in numerous academic studies dedicated to her appearance in single films and contexts. Across these chapters, however, from the chastising madam of *La Bandida* (Rodríguez 1963), for example, to the blank slate of the maid, Oharu, in *Flowing* (Mikio 1956), other questions of age and gendered destiny emerge in the hitherto shadowy figures that surround the sex worker's story. What of the men in her life? The prostitute exists as the apparent hub of a whole web of complex social relations, and critics have repeatedly pointed out how the continued spotlight on the prostitute casts into shadow the men who use her—the punters, the pimps—reinforcing a supply over a demand model,⁷ but are we as scholars still complicit in that pattern in our critical focus?

There is no escaping the popularity of the prostitute narrative. In fact, at a recent event talking to members of the public in the UK about the representation of women on screen, one of our authors found that it was *Pretty Woman* (Marshall 1990) the older generation were most keen to discuss. One glaring gap our study has not been able to address is the question of how audiences consume and remember representations of prostitution. We still know very little about how questions of race, language, age and gender might inform everyday engagements with these films? Until we research this area, we can know that they are popular, but we cannot really understand why. What might it mean for an audience to watch a film about a prostitute in Los Angeles, if they are living in Devon, or in rural Thailand? The question of the viewing experience also returns us to questions of intermediality—do viewers remember films because they have been screened so often on television? How do televisual representations of prostitution differ from cinematic representations? What role is there for the prostitute in 'quality' television? What might the popularity of prostitution-based narratives on VOD (Video On Demand) platforms like *Netflix* have to tell us about the evolution (or not) of the figure?⁸ How might new modes of viewing change audience engagement with narratives from across the globe? If representations of

fallen women can appear surprisingly resistant in their core narratives, the forms in which they reach us are constantly shifting, and we must work to keep up if we wish to understand and sometimes to challenge them.

NOTES

1. Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The limits of geographical knowledge* (Indianapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
2. Lucy Bolton, 'A Modern Girl for a Modern Britain? Mia in *Fish Tank*', in Fiona Handyside and Kate Taylor-Jones, eds, *International Cinema and the Girl* (London: Palgrave, 2016).
3. R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes, 'Endangered Girls and Incendiary Objects: Unpacking the Discourse on Sexualisation', *Sexuality and Culture*, 12:4 (2008), 291–311 ().
4. Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda and Diane Negra, 'Female-Centered TV in an Age of Precarity', *Genders*, 1:1 (2016), <http://www.colorado.edu/genders/2016/05/19/female-centered-tv-age-precarity>. Accessed 14April 2017.
5. I would like to thank my colleague Catherine O'Rawe for drawing this to my attention.
6. Kirsten Pullen, *Actresses and Whores: On stage and in society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
7. Kaitlynn Mendes, Kumarini Silva, Ambar Basu, Mohan J. Dutta, Jennifer Dunn, Feona Attwood and Karen Boyle, 'Commentary and Criticism', *Feminist Media Studies*, 10/1 (2010), 99–116, 114.
8. One could, for example, consider the response to Lifetime TV's 2-season show *Client List* (2012–2013), taken up by *Netflix*.

INDEX

B

- Bedroom, 153, 155, 156, 158, 259, 260
Benjamin, Walter, 12, 147, 155, 168n, 278, 285n
Blackness, 229, 238
Bourgeois, 30, 150, 154, 159, 167, 200, 247, 279
Brothel, brothels, 69, 72, 74, 75, 77, 78, 85, 86, 94, 107–128, 139, 141–144, 150, 152–156, 158, 179–182, 184, 189, 196, 202, 220, 270, 288

C

- Call-girl, 107, 219
Campbell, Russell, 4, 53, 67, 70, 71, 78, 169n, 169, 243, 246, 280
Campus prostitution, 108, 121
Capitalism, 4, 7, 9, 49, 74, 147, 151, 154, 166, 205
Client, clients, cliental, 14, 42n, 47, 76–79, 81, 96, 119, 143, 152, 169n, 180, 181–183,

- 265, 269–271, 273, 276, 277, 280–282, 289
Commercialization, 89, 204
Commercial(ized) sex, 36, 204, 230, 238, 240, 290
Commodification, 4, 159
Commoditization, 108, 110, 113, 288
Corpse, 150, 162, 228, 236, 277
Corruption, 1, 8, 28, 31, 118, 124, 149, 152, 155, 208
Costume, 9, 113, 132, 133, 144, 156, 157, 160, 181, 188, 229

D

- Domestic, 3, 45, 47, 54, 124, 131, 137, 138, 156, 163, 165, 198

E

- Emasculation, 46, 61
Emigration, 160
Emotional labor, 289
Entrepreneur, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial, 49, 50, 60, 62,

- 111, 112, 151, 152, 205, 236, 256, 257
 Escort, 197, 213, 226, 287
 European Union (EU), 46, 62
- F**
 Fallen woman, 8, 23, 26, 78, 87, 90, 144, 212, 220, 261, 287
 Female solidarity, 133, 160, 161
 Feminism, feminist, 9, 12, 20, 22, 28, 29, 31, 34, 45, 46, 49, 50, 97, 113, 118, 143, 154, 160, 161, 164, 168, 177, 178, 185, 189, 199, 200, 203, 205, 212, 222, 230, 234, 236, 237, 283, 288
- G**
 Gill, Rosalind, 12, 49, 50, 60, 206, 207, 222
- H**
 Happy Hooker, 53, 290
 Hegel, G.W.F., 9, 148, 149, 155, 288
 Hooker, 12, 219–222, 225, 236, 238
- I**
 Innocence, 25, 27, 30, 38, 71, 162, 179, 196, 289
 Immigration, 1, 5, 19, 25, 32, 36
 Irigaray, Luce, 10, 149, 151, 177, 178, 184–186
- M**
 Madam, 118, 122, 141–143, 291
 Make-up, 113, 162, 205
 Marriage, 3, 9, 10, 70, 74, 79, 90, 94, 95, 100, 150, 154, 159–163, 165, 167, 176, 178, 188, 189, 192, 200
- Materialism, 74, 79
 Melodrama, melodramatic, 5, 9–11, 23, 26, 27, 29, 30, 33, 47, 94, 131–135, 143, 144, 151, 178, 179, 185, 187, 189, 192, 195–197, 206, 207, 209, 213, 220, 222, 232, 255, 266, 288
 Migration, 5, 25, 28, 46, 58, 60, 89, 101, 110, 151, 256
- N**
 Nationalist, 76, 77, 176, 191, 288
 Neoliberal, Neoliberalism, 3, 4, 13, 48, 50–52, 60, 112, 210, 256, 269
- O**
 Objectification, 50, 176, 178, 181, 207
- P**
 Pathos, 27, 175, 179, 184, 192
 Patriarchal, 2, 36, 53, 67, 68, 70–72, 78, 102, 113, 163, 176, 178, 179, 192, 199, 212, 222, 230, 234, 265
 Patriarchy, 9, 70, 141, 149, 150, 167, 184, 207, 234, 286
 Pimp, 35, 107, 144, 150, 152, 161, 162, 169, 268, 276, 291
 Pity, 5, 26, 46, 193, 200, 281, 288
 Porn, pornographer, pornography, 1, 4, 34, 49, 269, 275, 277
 Postfeminism, postfeminist, 3, 6, 11–13, 24, 36, 46, 49–52, 59, 60, 91, 197, 203, 204, 206, 207,

- 211, 222, 223, 226, 234–238, 288, 290
- R**
- Race, racial, racialization, 12, 45, 46, 57, 112, 187, 221, 222, 228, 236, 238, 268, 281–282, 284, 290, 291
- Rape, raped, 3, 24, 27, 34, 85, 94, 95, 97, 116, 117, 133, 150, 161, 162, 165, 202, 232, 271, 276
- Realism, realist, realistic, 10, 23, 61, 86, 87, 94, 96–98, 101, 159, 288
- Recession, 48, 62, 111, 204
- Rural, 85, 86, 89, 90, 94, 95, 116, 133, 153, 190, 265, 266, 291
- S**
- Sex industry, 1, 5, 8, 20, 34, 35, 69, 95, 268
- Sex traffic, sex-trafficked, sex-trafficking, 2, 5, 6, 20, 23, 26–34, 36, 60, 290
- Sexualisation, 2, 36, 49, 204
- Sex work, sex workers, 1–6, 19, 33, 35, 36, 38, 47, 48, 51, 72, 75, 88, 89, 91, 94, 95, 108–110, 114, 116, 118, 121, 124, 135, 140, 142, 152, 155, 162, 166, 175, 197, 203, 204, 208, 230, 258, 259, 270, 287, 290, 291
- Singer, 88, 169, 199, 200, 234–238
- Socialism, socialist, 59, 60, 193
- Subjectification, 50, 207
- V**
- Victim, victimhood, victimized, 5–7, 11, 20–25, 30, 32–35, 46, 48, 60, 97, 102, 109, 110, 123, 147, 149–151, 154, 162, 166–168, 179, 189, 190, 192, 195–197, 203, 205, 209, 212, 267, 273, 281, 289
- Virgin, virginal, virginity, 13, 25, 50, 134, 162, 200, 269
- Voice, 97, 102, 115, 141, 149, 150, 155, 157, 161–168, 198, 199, 202, 204, 207, 211, 213, 224, 226, 237, 246, 278
- W**
- Whiteness, 25, 46, 57, 222, 228, 229, 238
- White slavery, 23, 25, 202
- Whore, 2, 35, 71, 72, 77, 78, 86, 113, 152, 154, 222, 224, 233, 234, 236–238, 267, 284