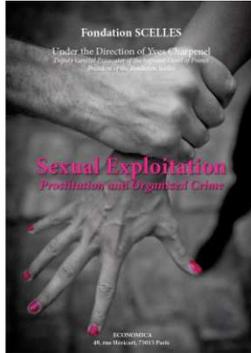




Fondation Scelles

Connaître, Comprendre, Combattre  
l'Exploitation Sexuelle

# On-screen images of prostitution



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Fiction creates imaginary and complementary representations of lived experiences. This phenomenon is especially true in the film industry where the camera lense acts as a substitute to the eyes of the spectator. Yet, for a phenomenon as fuzzy as prostitution (of which we usually only know the "shop-windows" if we spend time in the districts of Belleville, Pigalle or the highways surrounding Paris), the screen acts as the major carrier of its representation. Thus, there is an ideological stake in showing prostitution in films, TV movies and series broadcast to a large public, because these productions create the illusion of a certain familiarity with a phenomenon unknown in its full realities. What image of prostitution do recent productions show to the general public?

## Prostitution, fiction and opinion

A CSA survey carried out in 2010 concluded that 60% of the French population is in favour of reopening brothels in France. Could this public opinion be partly attributed to the glamorous image of prostitution conveyed by fiction? A fiction that is in turn fed by a vaguely perverse curiosity of observing the revival of a world fantasized as

iconic? The debate regarding the reopening of brothel and, to a larger extent, the debate over the regulation or the abolition of prostitution, found an audience with the series broadcast of *Maison Close* in September 2010. This observation attests to the impact of media (fiction and news media since the series' ambiguous poster sparked a controversy in the press) on an ethical and juridical topic. Yet, a significant number of productions that describe prostitution and, *a fortiori*, the universe of brothels romanticized by an end-of-century fantasy, tend to embellish reality. In order to emphasize the plot, the psychological development of the characters and the eye candy, fiction deviates from the hard facts on prostitution. On the other hand, the book *Carnet de bal d'une courtisane* by Grisélidis Réal (2005), with its poetical title does not allow for any anticipation of the harshness of a text characterized by a fierce and synthetic realism: the alphabetical ranking of a prostitute's customers following an unchanging and monotonous order: name, age, services, prices. But for major productions, incorporating a prostitute character in fiction is a means to display sex, violence and pathos—elements that secure the productions' profits.

### **Prostitution at the heart of the blockbusters: the case of the thriller**

The modern thriller has found an all-time favourite topic: prostitution networks. Sex, drugs, violence, money and organized crime offer an ideal background. For instance, *Taken* (2008), a Pierre Morel film starring Liam Neeson, inspired by American action movie aesthetics, takes us into an Albanian mafia network. While the movie mainly focuses on the archetypal character of the justice-seeking father whose daughter has been kidnapped, it also offers an entire panorama of human trafficking, from sexual tricks for a few bucks to the auction of prostitutes to millionaires. The film also depicts the links between sex and drugs (one is linked to the other by the simple fact that the girls are drugged before prostituting themselves), and the political authorities (corruption of the interior defense) and the financial milieu ("It's just business" are the last words of a crook caught by the hero). The documentary-style film inspired by real facts, *Sex Traffic* (2006), by David Yates, tackles the topic of the forced immigration of Eastern European girls from Moldavia to London. Yates denounces the corruption of the financial and police circles: police raids destined to "sell off the [human] stocks", a powerful company that hides its collaboration with the prostitution market... In this genre of films, we are constantly presented with an image of society in which prostitution is inescapable: merciless and corrupted, the authorities very seldom find conscientious objectors. *Eastern Promises* (2007) by David Cronenberg offers a more intimate vision of a Russian prostitution network in London thanks to the main character interpreted by Viggo Mortensen. Nevertheless, the nearly total absence of prostitute characters on-screen, substituted simply by a voice-over of a prostitute with a Russian accent whose personal diary is discovered, accompanied by melodramatic violins, clearly gives the film a more pathetic than realistic outlook. This mixture of pathos and suspense is also found,

to a lesser degree, in *X* (2011), an Australian film by Jon Hewitt. The film with its unlikely races through modern-day Sidney revives the idea of a big city seen as a den of vice: a shady, violent and harsh world, populated by marginal secondary characters and framed by corrupted authority. The symbol is somewhat heavy-handed, but it depicts efficiently the ideological background of jaded thrillers: when the young heroine arrives in town with the intention of becoming a hooker, she shortens her tee-shirt by cutting through the inscription *Dreamland*.

### **Prostitution at the heart of the drama: an erroneous use of the fascination aroused by the image of the prostitute**

If the thriller enhances the violence and injustice of a society that allows the sexual exploitation of women, the drama, in turn, focuses on the prostitute as a person. Fascinating and emotional, the prostitute is usually a gorgeous young woman - archetype of an ideal movie character - joining vulnerability and strength of soul. This constitutes a delightful contrast which feeds the eternal fantasy of a women's femininity. The juxtaposition of the two antagonistic poles, the whore and the Madonna, alongside the inherent degradation related to this kind of financial exchange are also found in *L'Apollonide*, which depicts the image of the aptly-named Madeleine as a distressed Madonna. The cinematographic production does not stop feeding the fascination between empathy and admiration. These insidious forms of sharing put the audience in a comfortable position because they combine complacency with compassion.

A genre of aesthetically-oriented films with nostalgic airs was thus born in the tradition of *La Petite* (1978) by Louis Malle or *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) by Hou Hsiao-Hsien, using a bittersweet style can also be found in *L'Apollonide (souvenirs de la maison close)* (2011) by Bertrand Bonello. Taking

place at the end of the XIXth century and during the last years preceding the closure of the whorehouses in France, the film exploits the topic of the decadence, symbolized by the image of the rose losing its petals at dawn on the last day of the Apollonide. It is an adulterated world on the path towards obsolescence, and in which luxury is in contrast with the trivialities of the prostitutes' daily lives. This world is no less intriguing exactly because of this contrast, a familiar aesthetic since the days of Baudelaire. Instead of displaying the prostitutes' harsh lives under a sordid light, the aesthetically-appealing photography preserves the charm of these women as victims and valorous. The ambiguity of the prostitute's status, both oppressed and attractive, lies in the fact that her seduction comes from oppression: emancipating her would mean breaking the charm: for the purpose of showing the misfortunes of the "girls" (Clotilde gradually kills herself with opium), and the injustices of which they are victims (Madeleine's disfigurement, playing on the horrific legend of Jack the ripper, maintains the fantastical style), we once again find that authorized complacency in the frame of a speech superficially critical of the institution, and we allow ourselves to be seduced by the heady perfume of this ambiguous atmosphere. This double-dealing in "atmosphere films" on prostitution, to quote the expression used by Max Chaleil in *Prostitution: the mystified desire*, is also present in a more obvious but less effective way in the TV series *Maison Close* directed by Mabrouk El Mechri, through the topic of the ideal escape of the *Paradis* girls. This series does not succeed in masking the satisfaction of the spectator's dream of intruding on a universe where he can, at his pleasure, give free reins to his voyeuristic desire.

However, some films show the ambiguity of this fascination and this hypocritical complacency. We think of course of *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) by Stanley Kubrick, a film which plays with a dumbfound curiosity for the

strongly ritualized erotic mysteries of wealthy, initiated characters, but in which the artificial game of erotic profanation turns into real anguish for the intruder who has tried to immerse himself in it. In the same vein, *Sleeping Beauty* (2011) by Julia Leigh, places the practice of prostitution of a young woman in a milieu of initiated characters whose cleanliness and elegance, alongside the purity of the features and the charismatic indifference of the heroine, spare us for a moment from the horror, until the final scream of anguish. The voyeurism of the viewer is distanced by the deceptive final scene; a film capture of the forbidden room where elderly people indulge the fantasy of the captive sleeping beauty. Far from showing the spectacle of perverse atrocities, it only displays the motionlessness of death. *Chloé* (2009) by Atom Egoyan also plays with the angelic face of a young escort, contrasting it with her psychological opacity. Hired as a temptress by a woman suspecting her husband of adultery, the girl enters into the couple's perverse game, but, emotionally implicated, affection overtakes her initial role of investigate instrument, giving her a disturbing depth and fragility. The middle-class wife who hired her services (subtly played by Julianne Moore) progressively discovers her own moral implication in the future of the young woman. The movie *Chaos* (2001) by Coline Serreau is praiseworthy as well in that it points out with great strength, through the encounter of a middle-class milieu with prostitution, a revolting wait-and-see policy. That strength is all the more significant by the fact that here the prostitution is not a high level one, and not one symptomatic of a psychological instability, but one that is surrounded by the violence of an organized exploitation. As a matter of fact, there is a huge gap that separates movies taking profit from the charismatic potential of a prostitute character by immersing the character in a refined aesthetic, from movies giving up this aesthetic and erotic dimension (that leads to a certain form of consent from the spectator), and reporting not only the concern inspired by

prostitution but also its sordid characteristics. Therefore, the ultimate goal would not be to play with a primary fascination, but to describe a human reality. Movies like *Or (Mon Trésor)* or *Mes Chères Études (Student Services)* respond to that goal.

### **From the realistic point of view: the social drama**

*Or (My Treasure)* (2004), an Israeli film by Keren Yedaya inspired by a true story, is set around a mother working as a prostitute and her daughter. The latter, after having tried to steer her mother away from prostitution, ends up entering into the sex market herself. The realism of this movie allows for empathy without any complacency, and reexamines the representation of the prostitute as the eternal victim by showing the addiction of the mother to the streets. Facing distress and isolation, mother and daughter take refuge in giving their bodies, with a remuneration or not. *Mes chères études* (2010), a TV film by Emmanuelle Bercot, in the same vein as *Mauvaises fréquentations* (1999) by Jean-Pierre Améris, investigates the most sordid aspects of student prostitution. Here however, there is no sexual exploitation by a third party with an emotional control over a young and malleable psyche, but instead there is a choice made by the young woman, which becomes more and more painful and degrading however, in front of a society where the poor student, in order to be able to consume, must be consumed. Her first customer tells her: "It is society that wants this to happen. Everything can be bought nowadays". Even her boyfriend tells her at a restaurant that: "It is as if each part of the meal had the same value as one part of your body". This TV film, based on a real testimony, provides an illustration of the student prostitution scandal revealed by the SUD-Étudiant union in 2006. The similarity between this film and its realistic portrayal and analysis of events effectively brings awareness to such a phenomenon. Although certainly minor considering the proportion of global

prostitution, the denunciation of this phenomenon is quite meaningful because it is more likely to be understood by a large public than fictional interpretations analyzing unknown or distant realities.

### **When prostitution is seen from the bright side, or the equivalent of a questionable feminism**

It sounds daring; however, a certain number of productions tend to make prostitution look like a fulfilling job. These productions turn the woman making money by using her charms into the archetype of a modern and uninhibited woman. The most remarkable among this kind of production is the series *Secret diary of a call-girl*, in which the heroine disassociates herself from the stereotypes linked to prostitutes from the very first episode. Neither drugged nor raped during her childhood, she shows herself as a strong and independent woman: "I like to be my own boss". She has a taste for luxury and enjoys sex. This last element leads to a recurrent confusion in the series between uninhibited sexuality and prostitution practices, as if there were only a small gap between selling one's own body and assuming the fact one likes sex and money... This insidious mixture claims to adhere to a doubtful feminism that hijacks feminine stereotypes (taking care of one's looks, having an influence on men through the existence of a sexual demand) by claiming them as fulfilling. Hence, it is this dimension of glamour (by the way it was largely stigmatized by media and by feminist associations when the broadcasting began in 2008 in England) that is enhanced by the series. In adopting such a strategy, the series gives the illusion of joining the *Sex and the City* philosophy, taking a feminine heroine, spiritual and in control of her sexuality, who breaks taboos by showing them under a funny or attractive side. That blurring of the lines between personal sexuality and sexuality for sale is symptomatic of a very current sex industry reorientation. An illustration of this

phenomenon can be seen in the transformation of the *Sexodrome*, located Place Pigalle in Paris, into a gigantic sex shop with bright colours and doors wide open to young people looking for an easy slum in and some fun.

Another aspect which is especially significant in productions depicting a prostitute as a modern and fulfilled woman is the notion of professionalism. The heroine of *Secret diary* uses her talent, becomes an independent escort girl and then creates her own firm. It is a success story that grows season after season. The dimension of job and professional requirements can also be found in *The Girlfriend Experience* (2009) by Steven Soderbergh. In the context of an economic downturn, a high level call girl looks forward to developing her business. She seeks advice from her customers, most of them New York financiers. The movie then unfolds through a sequence of dialogues, approaching prostitution through the principles of marketing development. In this highly unlikely scenario, prostitution is represented as a profession and it seems to have some advantages: the customers are regular, clean, respectful, and most of them handsome and young, while the heroine enjoys a stable relationship with a man who respects her job. Nonetheless, an interview with a journalist brings to light her incapacity to define herself as a person: "armored", she refuses to give away her "inner self". The heroine of *Sans queue ni tête* (2010) by Jeanne Labrune, portrayed by Isabelle Huppert, begins by displaying an appearance of strength and independence (she declines in particular to prostitute herself in clubs) before admitting to herself the feeling of being reduced to an "empty armor", an "anaesthetized body". Through a parallel between prostitution and psychoanalysis (paid service, in a lying down position, a place where fantasies and complexes are expressed), what began as a good-tempered satire of the psychoanalysis of the Parisian milieu turns into an acknowledgement of common distress.

### Harmless prostitution

But the most common representation of prostitution, and possibly the most dangerous, is still the one that sweetens it, reducing the prostitute to a mere element of decoration. We just need to think about the *topos* of the striptease club, a prerequisite of the American teen movies, acclimatizing the audience to a practice which is often combined with that of prostitution. Even more worrisome is the observation that seemingly the use of prostitutes may constitute a sign of power and of attractive nonchalance for many male characters. We think of Chuck Bass from *Gossip Girl* (an American series broadcast since 2008), a provocative character who gets his charismatic aura from a string of anonymous sexy girls wearing refined lingerie. In *Two and a Half Men* (an American series starring Charlie Sheen and broadcast since 2003) this phenomenon is highlighted even more because it is less related to a deliberately inflammatory cynicism than to an opposition between the cool guy, who alternates between casual hook ups and the company of prostitutes, and the uptight man, restrained by his moral values. This demonstrates an increasing preference for a male character whose attractive power lies in morally reprehensible qualities, positively (and artificially) acquired by anti-conformism. This kind of leading male character, surrounded by prostitutes reduced to mere elements of decoration, represents a contrast to the anonymous clientèle portrayed in movies in which the prostitute herself is the heroine. This is the sign of an intolerable identification by the audience of either the character of the prostitute or the customer. In this perspective, two possibilities arise: the customer has to be either depraved or a loser, or the prostitutes have to be anonymous characters without any psychological depth, thus with no chance that we could detect a hint of moral grief in them.

Nonetheless, of all the productions that perniciously sweeten prostitution, the most

conspicuous may actually be the most well known: the one about which Julia Leigh (director of *Sleeping Beauty*), who fiercely protested against the ban of her film to audiences under the age of 16, used to say: "The movie that truly deserved to be banned was *Pretty Woman*, because seeing that girl prostituting herself and at the end getting the guy and the money, was much more of an incentive to the prostitution!".

If we have not mentioned male prostitute figures, it is because they are rarely on-screen. As a matter of fact, if *American Gigolo* (1980) by Paul Schrader has made history, the screens definitely prefer to focus on feminine figures for the role of the prostitute. Such dichotomy between the oppressed female and the male oppressor takes us back to a gender power relations, both sexual and financial, supported by centuries of cultural representations and that

the media continues to feed. This power relation is particularly crystallized in the figure of the prostitute facing the client or the pimp. However, this oppressed woman, in order to preserve her fascination with power, must not lose her looks and follow the path of the character of Fantine from *Les Misérables* who, after having sold her charms, literally sells the attributes of this charm: her teeth and hair. Hence, the figures of ugly or deformed prostitutes are extremely uncommon. One such character however, is displayed in the movie *Monster* (2003) by Patty Jenkins. But behind the tomboy look of the heroine, the spectator has in mind the ideal figure of Charlize Theron... As a last resort the defiled femininity retains its assumed ultimate attribute: beauty.