

The Body's Failed Labor: Performance Work in Sexploitation Cinema

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We see four women posed and positioned in front of a chain-link fence. Two are sitting on a concrete ledge and the other two standing. Behind them is a pier in New York City in the mid-1960s, the water's waves providing refracting reflections through the pattern of chain link, as long shots alternate with close-ups of each of the women's faces looking offscreen, some made obscure with dark sunglasses, their hair mussed by visible wind and other extradiegetic unknowns. The actors, seemingly nonprofessional in their carriage, exude a distressed, fatigued ordinariness that evinces the primacy of independent cinema's association with traditions of hardscrabble realism and the seepage of an actual situation, a condition of the film's production. Trash blows along the street, collecting at their feet. A female narrator, speaking in a collective mode on behalf of the profilmic figures, insistently intones:

You've seen us before, maybe not here, but it could have been in Chicago, in Hollywood, or in a bikini along the hotel strips in Miami. You've seen us on every street where a pretty body is an easy mark for a price. Our names, it really doesn't make any difference, you won't remember, nobody ever does. To the rackets we're Zero Girls, no present, in the future even less. Nothing. Zero. We're all owned by the Syndicate, body and soul. Or should I just say body. Because after a few nights you don't remember being a woman, or even having a soul. Men ask the usual questions, how did a pretty girl like you get started in this racket? Money. We don't even own ourselves.

Standing and sitting, waiting and wasting time, these women are announced to us as emblematic—of both the film we are about to see, its oncoming narrative pretext of prostitution, and of a larger social and existential condition—of

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Figures 1–2. Bodies in waiting. *The Sin Syndicate* (Michael Findlay, US, 1965)

a gendered labor, of bodies that have labored and will labor, and of their substitutability within a seamy market of exchange. Authenticating a place, a situation, a certain mode of production, the women perform a listless in-between temporality, a dead time between work, which is also another kind of work, working for the camera (see figures 1 and 2).

In its realist textures as well as its melodramatic hyperboles, this scene marks the opening of *The Sin Syndicate*, a 1965 sexploitation film directed by the New York filmmaker Michael Findlay.¹ This film—as well as many others of its era and of its particular mode of production—presents us with a challenge: how to theorize the conjunction of screen performance and labor both through and despite the terms in which they are made visible? This essay thus explores the problem of labor's visibility in analyses of nonprofessional acting and looks at the aesthetic stakes of performance in low-budget independent cinema. If craft, skill, training, and professionalism—in a conventional understanding of screen acting—necessitate a dematerialization of the conditions and techniques of work in the interest of diegetic illusion, naturalism or verisimilitude, what constitutes the labor of such visible, if emphatically ordinary, performance?

Discourses of film acting and screen performance as effortful work have a complex history in film studies, although the bulk of attention has been devoted to stardom, actors unions, and studio industrial organization.² The immaterial nature of cinema was considered, especially in classical film theory, to dispossess the actor from the presence of his or her audience and the audience from the live presence of the actor (Benjamin); to reduce the actor to a function of editing (Kuleshov), cinematography, and mise-en-scene (Balázs); and to collapse performing and being, actor and character.³ Indeed, the work of performance—screen acting itself—can be seen as a form of what recent political theorists and philosophers have come to call “immaterial” labor, as it has always been wrapped up in ontological concerns of cinema as a machine, a reproductive technology, and of the medium's capacity for aesthetic dispossession.⁴ Alienated from the product of their labor as well as from their audience in ways that are fundamental to the nature of cinematic production, circulation, and exhibition, the screen performers' physical presence is expropriated and refigured: reedited, reframed, and retemporalized.

More specifically, the normalizing functions of screen conventions—particularly in the classical realist text, and in the now ubiquitous influence of Method acting—place a premium on a model of professionalization and craft that aspires to its own invisibility.⁵ Yet when screen performance announces itself as a strenuous, ungainly act of laboring, as the listless, waiting, working female bodies of *The Sin Syndicate* do, it becomes belabored, overdrawn—simultaneously undermining itself at the very point where it makes itself known, makes itself appear. This is an essential paradox of non-professional performances in modes of production that exist outside the critical legibility of popular studio cinema, art cinema, and documentary

forms.⁶ It is a double bind catalyzed by, in the particular case of the sexploitation text and context here, the burdens and density of a specifically gendered and embodied screen presence. Such weightiness and obstinacy emerges in part from the way that female sexploitation actors make manifest or materialize a screen presence, in sexploitation's extraction from its acting bodies a quotient of fleshy exposure in the form of stylized, formulaic nudity, discomfiting a clear distinction between naturalization and denaturalization, staginess and improvisation, acting and being. As a form of "women's work" that cannot help but announce itself as such, one that must also mollify its spectator's blankly libidinal if anxious interests, female performers' bodies in sexploitation become the contested site of the mode's competing commercial motivations and aesthetic shapes. These investments and disidentifications are paramount to the contradictory process of watching these films.

Sexploitation exposes the larger conditions of cinema's dependence on labor's invisibility, as it challenges discourses and conventions of acting as masterful, seamless, credible, or plausible—of a perforced naturalism bound up in a star-studio-continuity system of value. What are the conditions of an embodied filmic labor that persistently appears as "unskilled" in its refusal to cohere as part of the fabric of the film's fictional aims, or in the failure of the film's fictive aims to cohere around bodies? These fictional aims are themselves only partial due to the extent that sexploitation vacillates in its registers of display and denial of erotic indulgence. Thus, the surplus value of bodies put to work has unexpected and contingent effects. The tenor of such films, I suggest, insists on imaging labor *as* failure, even as it becomes the very place where the strenuous work of the film's construction is most clearly recognizable.

To propose, as I am doing here, that the labor of these bodies fails, or can only signify itself as failure, is perhaps to assent to the ideological terms of the films themselves and to the critical culture that surrounded them in their synchronic moment, as well as in the films' diachronic recuperation as a staple of "trash" genre connoisseurship. That the discourse of failure so resonantly attaches itself to sexploitation cinema and other low-budget independent modes of production from the underbelly of film history is hardly coincidental; rather, it serves as a trenchant reminder of the contest between commerce and art in film's history, a heady token of the sway of cinema's political economy over and above film's aesthetic aspirations. Jeffrey Sconce suggests that exploitation cinema emblemizes a larger tendency of cinephile weariness with the state of film culture: "By trading in obsolescent trash, exploitation fans stage a continual return of the repressed in film culture generally, lurking at the margins of the art's greatest achievements with a reaper like reminder of the entire form's inevitable collapse."⁷ The bodies of sexploitation's female performers, their indexing and refraction of the impoverished modes of production that employ them, are a rich site of this

disconcerting emblemization, in which exploitation modes unveil the bottom line of more capital-intensive, aesthetically aspirational modes of production, and in which material value overdetermines and overrides aesthetic value. And as Kay Dickinson aptly reminds us, industrial accident, mistake, and failure always bespeak a larger politics of labor and its stakes.⁸ Indeed, failure as a trope portends a wider economy of efficiency and productivity, and it is the very seemingly nonproductive bodies of sexploitation that do the most work for the necessities of the mode of production and for its spectators.

In contrast to competing models of studio-based stars and more legible, legitimated, aesthetically valued sites of corporeal performance, the work of nonprofessional performance in sexploitation films exposes the boundary between the diegetic and the extradiegetic universe of the films' production. To the extent that sexploitation films remind us of the gap between their fictional narratives and their conditions of manufacture, they materialize a compelling iteration of what Philip Rosen has outlined as cinema's intrinsic vacillation and overlay between document and diegesis.⁹ Sexploitation's actors' styles operate both as "too much"—too much unkempt and irregular, quotidian flesh exposed, bared, and made to spectacularize itself through the extended duration of nude display and performance—and as "too little"—stripped of motivation, plausible characterization, too ordinary, and lacking in the currency and cultural capital of charisma.

Added to this mix is the often-wrested relation between body and voice: due to economic exigencies, many of the films were made with postsynch sound, which draws out the disjunction between image and word, narrative pretexts and fleshly seductions. And if, in the sound film era, perceptions of actorly skill and craft in verisimilar codes are often secured and sutured through speech, dialogue, and vocal inflection, the performer in sexploitation films is divested of the ontological unity or authenticity bestowed by synchronous sound.¹⁰ This is a divestment that further reinforces the rupture between effect and intent, between the brazen staging of the body and that body's dramatization of a fictional character, however loose or provisional such characterization may appear. Through bodies that appear as both "too much" and "too little," sexploitation films make visible the seams of their own laborious production, and thus beg the question of the impact of the seemingly banal, amateur elements of the profilmic on our cinematic experience.

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American sexploitation films of the 1960s were notorious for their exceptionally low budgets, sensationally crass narratives of unbidden female sexuality, and their appeal to mixed registers of documentary realism and fictional spectacles of corporeal excess. This is a mode of production that developed in the interstice between the classical exploitation film and the rise of the hard-core pornographic feature in the early 1970s, in an era of loosening

codes of sexual representation, the reconfiguration of the film industry, and the shrinking of the Hollywood market.¹¹ Capitalizing on a post-Paramount era of expanded exhibition venues and a shortage of Hollywood and art film product, sexploitation films showed on a circuit of hundreds of traditional and drive-in theaters in the sixties, and also garnered occasional bookings in theaters not exclusively allied to this mode; by decade's end, varying accounts indicated that approximately six hundred theaters were regularly showing sexploitation films.¹²

Sexploitation's impoverished artisanal ethos is oddly wedded to the crass commercialism of its bottom line. Spectacle in sexploitation is organized around the nude female body in states of strategic yet nonexplicit exposure. Its mode tempers such sexual display with rhetorical and narrative strategies of denial in a logic of what I call "guilty expenditure": Sex can be bought and sold, but only at a particular cost. In the structured ideological economy of sexploitation— and counter to sexual liberationist discourses of the time—sex is never "free." Sexploitation's industrial anxieties and narrative preoccupations catalog a larger reflexivity around the changing marketplace for sexual goods and commodities in a liberalizing 1960s public sphere.

As a nonunion arena of production, sexploitation producers drew their female casts from workers employed in the nude and "figure" modeling and stripping professions. Actors were generally paid \$50–150 a day for film shoots that usually lasted approximately a week. Budgets on sexploitation films typically ran from \$10,000–40,000. Most sexploitation actresses were not stars, but rather amateurs and unknowns who had limited prior acting experience and were working to gain a foothold in the acting profession through employment in sexploitation. In the New York sector of sexploitation production, which is here my principal object of analysis, the main purveyors of these adult films were a small network of producers. Given the size of this network, across the numerous films from these outfits, one can observe the return and reappearance of until then "no-name" actresses in primary roles—Darlene Bennett, Dawn Bennett, June Roberts, Linda Boyce, Gigi Darlene, Sharon Kent, and Cherie Winters, among many others. Sexploitation film became an anchoring locale, a network for their employment, perhaps even an informal "training ground," although we can only speculate the extent to which certain actresses became recognizable to the predominantly male audiences of these films. However, the corporeal appeal of sexploitation to these audiences no doubt resided in the mode's capacity to seize on the erotics of a relatively anonymous, nonactorly talent base. In contrast to the studios' star system and its manufacture of polish, poise, and glamour in contemporaneous star figures such as Elizabeth Taylor, Audrey Hepburn, Raquel Welch, Jane Fonda, Kim Novak, and Natalie Wood, the ordinariness of sexploitation's amateur female actors without question provided a more *vérité* object of male sexual fantasy, literally proffering the girl next door, the office girl, or the shop girl.

Female nudity was a central component of sexploitation cinema's box office success and promotional lure, even as the films, while diverse in generic form, often aspired to narrative fiction—with many features taking dramatic cues and influences from melodrama, film noir, and action films. Capitalizing on legal decisions that decreed nudity, if presented without prurience, as no longer in and of itself obscene, independent producers launched a series of “nudie cuties,” revolving around women in states of undress in picaresque comical burlesques, inaugurating sexploitation as a mode of production.¹³ By 1962–1963, only a few years after the arrival of the nudie cycle, censorial and professional battles regarding nudity in Hollywood films emerged. Feeling the pressure from more-permissive foreign imports and from independents, some Hollywood producers were requiring actresses to do nude scenes for which they began to garner criticism. The Screen Actors Guild came to the defense of actresses who were feeling pressure to assent to such working terms. In one article, the head of the actors' union proclaimed that producers “are not asking actresses to act anymore than if they ask her to jump from a high building.”¹⁴ This statement articulates how the discourses around acting as a professionalized, institutionalized field of work were threatened by the injunction to bare the female actor's body. The *act* of stripping could not be made equivalent to the skills or craft required of *acting* professionals. One form of embodied labor, screen acting, could not be reduced to the substrate of the actor's body itself. As a consequence, screen nudity was rhetorically allied with *mere action* (a functionalist trope to which I return), and a metaphorically and professionally suicidal action, at that. Nudity in this fraught context was discursively figured as unredeemed, brute activity without creative exertion, and therefore antithetical to an idea of acting as an expressive, artistic vocation. Furthermore, critics claimed that the low-budget sexploitation endeavors employed nonprofessional actresses, therefore casting a shadow of moral reprobation on more-serious—that is, bigger-budget Hollywood—pictures:

The American producers who ask actresses to perform in the nude are making films for a mass market. They insert a short nude sequence that is used purely as audience bait, rather than for artistic reasons. The situation is more serious than the activities of fly-by-night producers, some of them unemployed cameramen, who make cheap films that deal with little else but nudity. The so-called “nudies” use strippers and photographers' models, not professional actresses.¹⁵

These debates about the impropriety of nudity across sectors of the film industry reveal the ways in which sexploitation's cinematic legitimacy was disqualified and demeaned despite its market influence. This diminution through differentiation operated through a classed marginalization of sexploitation's female performers, even if at this time, major stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and Carroll Baker represented a new

willingness to bare all in studio bankrolled productions.¹⁶ Gendered labor was thus prioritized according to the institutionalization and legitimacy of the employer, which bestowed a cachet of professionalism to the performing worker. And sexploitation film, as a result, was rendered a nonprofessional—or even unprofessional—sphere of employment. Any parallel or similarity in the uses of nudity in Hollywood and exploitation film product could consequently be dispelled by stark economic differentials, in the distinctions between artistry and commercial gain, and between high-minded acting professionals and lowbrow, inexperienced strippers and models.

Arthur Morwitz, a producer at Distribpix, discussed the nature of casting female actors in sexploitation films in the mid-1960s, notably characterizing sexploitation performers as actresses rather than nonprofessionals:

When we first did casting—1965, '66, '67—it was always a big deal to get the girl to take her clothes off. We designed a casting information sheet which went through a whole bunch of bullshit questions—"Do you have a driver's license?"—and finally the key question was "Can we see what you look like nude?" And there was always a little hesitation and then finally, "OK" and she'd take her clothes off ... the women were mostly actresses, and that was part of the problem—it was kind of a compromise for them when they had to take their clothes off ... before you were allowed to show such strong sexuality you had to have a lot more dialogue in the films and many more things just to make it interesting.¹⁷

As articulated by Morwitz, the logic of casting itself, in the incrementally disingenuous pretense and progression toward the subject of display, maps directly onto the aesthetic experience of the sexploitation film as a narrative form that houses and frames the gradual disclosure of spectacle. The assent to nudity was something that needed to be negotiated and was clearly a site of contestation between aspiring actresses and producers. Via Morwitz's account, sexploitation performers' resistance to nudity presented the other side of the equation, and we can thus see the work of their performances bound up in an independent film economy that capitalized on the fuzzy border between amateur and professional, and between narrative and aesthetic legitimacy and the cynicism of commercial and erotic attractions.

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Sexploitation's performance elements archive this overt commercial imperative to *stage* unclothed bodies for the camera. Nudity becomes itself a constitutive element of sexploitation's mode of address that at times troubles or arrests the films' narrative pretexts. Nudity returns the performing body to a kind of fleshy documentary facticity that necessarily undermines but also exposes the conditions of working bodies and the body's work. Adding a layer of reflexivity, sexploitation's narratives were often *about* sex work and erotic labor. Prostitutes, madams, nude models, burlesque dancers, and strippers permeate the cycles and genres of sexploitation film: the 1960s working

girl gets converted in some fashion, invariably, into a sex worker. The nude photographer's studio, the brothel, the escort agency, the vice dungeon—all become spaces for sexploitation to converse with itself about itself and thus to allegorize, through neighboring industrial models, its own production and consumption of sexual commodities.¹⁸ Significantly, sex work is a form that has a maligned and contested status as proper, legitimated labor, and historically continues to trouble what is made to count as work. It is also a vocation that most directly challenges a set of ontological questions regarding the labors of performance, and the labor of privatized intimacy—the relationship between authenticity and artifice, between real pleasure and its mimesis, and between acting (playing a role) and being (oneself).

Consequently, I examine how bodies are frontally placed and made to move in front of the camera and bidden to perform the daily tasks of the sex worker, a laborer whose interstitial time, between johns and jobs, reads as liminal leisure, limpid frivolity, dead time—all by virtue of the baring and exposure of the body. What kind of work does this body do—and appear to fail at *doing*—within the regime of verisimilar performance? And how does this body work in the service of the twinned measures of sexploitation's documenting and diegetic aims? I suggest that sexploitation partakes in a performative iteration of “acting-as-recorded-action,” which in its most austere, minimalist forms—that is, on the lowest end of the budget scale—registers as a form of corporeal description and durationally extensive portraiture. Noël Carroll has deployed the notion of “acting as action” in an analysis of Buster Keaton's comic performance style. He suggests that Keaton's signature feats of physical dexterity involve an interaction with the world of physical things, pointing to the structuring nature of a bodily intelligence:

When we think of film acting, what comes to mind, generally, are the pretenses, mannerisms, and implied motives that a performer employs to give substance to a certain fictional being ... we must also bear in mind a more basic form of acting, viz., the sense of acting as being involved in a process of “doing” ... the terrain of Keaton's activity is less significantly the social or the interpersonal and, more importantly, the realm of objects and the physical world.¹⁹

There are certainly many significant contrasts that we might see between sexploitation's amateur acting and the corporeal skill of Keaton's “doings” as an authorial, performative signature in his films. Yet Carroll's attentiveness to action makes us apprehend the sense in which certain modes of cinema—particularly ones preoccupied with the spectacle of the body—foreground the profilmic body's compelling acts, activities, and motions. My sense here of acting as action in sexploitation further differs from Carroll's analysis of Keaton because in the sexploitation context, it represents an aesthetic imprint—not so much of a guiding vision of the author or performer, but of a set of larger industrial and cultural conditions for that very work. In sexploitation, the acting body, in conditions of being staged, posed, modeled, or bidden

to perform quotidian actions, aligns with adjacent forms of erotic visual culture—such as the photographic pinup and the strip show. Channeling on the one hand the poise, stillness, and arrest of a photographic address, and on the other, the authenticities and contingencies summoned by live performance, the sexploitation body bears the weight of vacillation between numerous representational registers. It also resonates with a particular penchant of postwar art cinema (discussed by Karl Schoonover elsewhere in this dossier) toward the amateur, nonprofessional body to make manifest the capacities of cinematic duration through the visible, felt time that performance work takes.

If we look at one staple scenario of sexploitation's repertoire of recorded, eroticized actions—the shower scene—we can see these principles at work. Sexploitation films of this period abound with such scenes, in which the mode's promise of female nudity is couched in everyday situations of domestic intimacy that facilitate the exposure of a performer's flesh. In *The Sin Syndicate*, for example, which details the stories of women who work as prostitutes for a mob ring and employs postsynch sound, an extended shower scene is prefaced by a sequence in which a stationary take (in long shot) reveals one prostitute lying on the floor of an urban apartment's living room and reading a magazine, as two other women in underwear enter the room to sit on the couch. They discuss details of their employment and pay before they agree to the suggestion of a shower and then walk toward the camera and out of frame.

A cut to the bathroom reveals a medium shot, from waist up, of a showering woman's back, hair wet, as she soaps her arms and neck against the bathroom's tiled background. While we cannot see the actress speaking, the voice track relays a conversation between her and another woman, who remains offscreen, about the upcoming evening's job and which johns are most profitable. The shot cuts away to the second woman, in profiled close-up, who is looking into the shower and remarking (via the disembodied voice) that the showering woman has a beautiful body, to which her coworker replies, "I better have, it's the only thing I have to depend on." The observing woman enters the shower, and they share soap. The subsequent shot presents their two bodies in profile as they soap each other's backs, at times turning slightly to reveal bare breasts. The documentary denotative quality of this sequence, as the voice track prattles on in dialogue severed from these bodies, registers the rote activities of eroticized banality in the suggestiveness of a "lesbian" scene. Corporeal gesture and routine action here are neither ostensive nor theatricalized, but merely acted *as actions*. Thus, the work of these bodies barely secures any aspiration to characterization, nor does it tamp down the corners of the film's thinly veiled fiction. Herein lies the paradoxical *productivity* of these bodies and their function in sexploitation cinema, that is, in their lack of fixity, in the interstice between aleatory descriptiveness and the formulaic necessities of a barely plausible narrative universe (see figures 3 and 4).



Figures 3–4. Acting-as-action anatomized in the sexploitation shower scene.
The Sin Syndicate (Michael Findlay, US, 1965)

What can be said then of the historicity and fleshy recalcitrance of these bodies—standing, lying, gesturing before us in the diegetic universe—that cannot help but convert itself into the indexicality of document? In the descriptive nature of many sexploitation performances, the “directions” of the director-producer are clearly gauged and transcribed in the visibility of the generic functionalism of certain gestures. To speculate, these instructions whisper “stand there, read this line, look in the mirror, make sure your breasts are visible, look to the camera but not into the camera, look at yourself, take your time, look at the other actor.” Performance archives the instructional and functional necessity of these scenes, particularly as they are oriented around a set of locations and situations—the couch, the bed, the shower scene, the morning preparatory ritual—in which the body’s apparency must distend duration, must provide the meat of spectacle, but not without the awkwardness of self-awareness. These are instructional gestures, and gestures bound by instruction.²⁰

The “nudie cutie” short *The Roommates* (US, 1965), directed by Barry Mahon, pares away even further at the terms of sexploitation’s corporeal staging in this form of dilated, erotically charged duration. Short films such as this were often made by sexploitation producers like Mahon to be shown alongside a fifty- or sixty-minute sexploitation feature to augment the “main event” distributed to grind house theaters. In *The Roommates*, a narrator, played by director Mahon himself, introduces the scenario through an overbearing voice-over in which he announces that what we are being made privy to is the private life and space of two of his employees (played by Darlene Bennett and an unnamed actress). He runs a men’s magazine, and the women we are watching in their domestic dishabille are his models. We see quite explicitly the logic of a directorial injunction to “act naturally” in the transcription of their average morning, habitat, and in the rote performance of their habitus. The preparatory gestures of lax morning ritual are bound up with the voice-over, reflexive to the point of tautology, taking account of their staged lifeworld, which moves from the women waking up, emerging from their beds, showering, making coffee, sitting nude on the couch, and returning to bed until they are called for a modeling job.

Mahon, as “boss,” insists on his workers’ laziness and reiterates their preference to be close to the bedroom and their fondness for sleep and relaxation. Dramatizing his employees, his performers, doubly—in the diegesis and extratextually, in a time of nonwork—the narration persists in devaluing domestic labor and converts it into a performance of ease, lassitude, and non-productive time. Yet the larger productivity of these nude bodies fuels the entire premise of the film and enacts a series of hypostasized banalized actions, quotidian activities, as long as they are performed in the nude. The microaesthetics of performance work here locates itself in the conjunction between the quotidian and legible action of goal-oriented domestic tasks—showering, making coffee—and the contingencies and expressivities of their

enactment in the paused duration of the time these tasks should take. The puffing of a cigarette by the performer while she brews the coffee (see figures 5 and 6), the self-conscious smiles of the actresses as they seat themselves on the couch to drink the coffee, and the hesitancy of looking toward the camera or avoiding its gaze, circumscribe the liminal nature of this form of performance work, just as it stages itself as leisure or interstitial time (see figures 7 and 8). This short executes sexploitation's inducement to show nude bodies, leaving those bodies to place themselves and inhabit the profilmic space in unpredictable ways—to occupy a register between the constraints of generic formulas and the contingency of indexical inscription. At the same time, the film also presents a scenario of nonwork *as* work, through a simultaneous fictionalizing and a documenting collapse of the relations between employer and employee. The narrator's dramatized intrusion and displaced facilitation of the spectator's voyeurism into his workers' private space, provides the site of manifestation of his "employees'" very public labors.

This is a reading that may bring us perilously close to the ways in which sexploitation embodies, literally and figuratively, an anachronistic modality in its performance styles. These performances can be understood as non-teleological, untimely channelings of cinema's earlier histories, caught in a dynamic tension between making nudity appear in an arrest and dilation of movement that allies itself with the posing and modeling of other erotic forms, such as the photographic pinup, and in the necessity for actresses to perform acts, actions, to move in proscribed ways in a registration of naturalistic habitus, to *do things*.

In his analysis of the development of the star system and its interrelationship to changing discourses of screen acting, Richard deCordova argues that a complex transformation occurred in the shift from a photographic model of corporeal performance to one that could accommodate and respond to the emergence of cinema as a narrative fiction form in the period of 1907–1909. He states that “the increasing dominance of the fictional film rendered the photographic conception of the body (posing, modeling) problematic, and called for a model that could account for the body as a site of fictional production. The theatrical model (‘acting’) met this requirement.”²¹ He further claims that only later did the discourse of acting become coincident with conceptions of expressivity, art, and interiority. What is relevant and suggestive about this very distinct historical moment in early cinema for an understanding of sexploitation performance is the way that the latter returns us, due to conditions of economic and aesthetic exigency, to another framework for understanding the functions and aims of acting as action. Posing and modeling are traced in and leave traces on the performance texts of sexploitation films precisely because the nude, exposed actress's body fluctuates in its capacity to be a bearer of what deCordova cites as “fictional production.” As Linda Williams explains in her analysis of early still and moving image pornography, “the tension between pose and act is an important part of the



Figures 5–6. Maryann makes coffee and languidly pauses over a cigarette. *The Roommates* (Barry Mahon, US, 1965)



Figures 7–8. The diffidence of labor, staged as leisure. *The Roommates* (Barry Mahon, US, 1965)

fascination of every erotic or pornographic image, plunging spectator-observers into a perpetual indeterminacy about the acts observed.”²²

The dynamic of stillness and movement in sexploitation film can be seen rendering itself as, on the one hand, an inadvertent form of descriptive portraiture, and on the other, an observational realism that inheres in corporeal dailiness. Williams’s object is primarily the hard-core image, and her inflection of “act” describes and intimates a sexual act. Yet what we can garner by drawing these disparate historical contexts together is the way that sexploitation films replace and displace sexual activities—which must remain unseen due to censorial regulation—onto the function of the nude body in states and scenes of daily, quotidian, authenticating *action*. This action retains an element of leisurely repose, attempting but failing to deny its own effortful, laborious bearing as *acting*.

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The labored performances enacted by the nonprofessional, untrained, quotidian bodies of sexploitation films—and, more broadly, other cult film objects—have become, in retrospective viewings, the substance of these “trash” genres’ irrecuperable and at times unintentionally auratic aesthetics. They have become the mark of their anomalous distinction as “bad”—at the height of indexical inscription and the nadir of aesthetic valuation. The performance elements of these films represent an unwitting materialization—a bodying forth, *through* and despite these bodies—of failed conventions and stylistic modes, that is, of aesthetic illegitimacy. “Bad acting” in cult and exploitation cinema is often announced and pronounced as self-evident to any remotely discerning viewer. But the “obviousness” of this evaluation also somehow makes bad acting elusive as a textual object. In his recuperative essay on “bad movies,” J. Hoberman analogizes bad acting with the larger aesthetic *raison d’être* of these films, which seem to appear beyond redemption. Discussing the underground filmmaker Jack Smith’s adulation of the B movie actress Maria Montez, Hoberman writes:

It was precisely because Montez was so unconvincing as an actress that Smith valued her performances: “One of her atrocious acting sighs suffused a thousand tons of dead plaster with imaginative life and truth.” The truth is that Montez is always herself. Montez vehicles are unintended documentaries of a romantic, narcissistic young woman dressing up in pasty jewels, striking fantastic poses, queening it over an all-too-obviously-make-believe world. ... Montez’s transparent role-playing and her unconcealed delight at being the center of attention, were more authentic to him than the naturalism achieved by successfully phony actresses. The often poignant, heightened realism induced by such a failure to convince is the key to the objectively bad film.²³

Montez’s “failure to convince” can become the linchpin for a counteraesthetic—bad movies, trash film—and a countersensibility, elsewhere identified and anatomized as camp.²⁴ Yet there is something more deeply resonant in the

categorical conflation of a B movie actress's nonnaturalistic, histrionic performance style and a whole swath of subindustrial film products. The qualities of Montez's performance, which Smith so effusively and queerly salvaged, point to the intertwining of labor and acting as a fundament of cinematic artifice—a relation that only a “bad” performance can unveil. In the preference for a performance style that fails in “phoniness,” over the normative model of a “successful phoniness,” Hoberman suggests that a different model of realism emerges that is counter to classical realism's verisimilar standards. This is a realism that is inadvertently historicist, one that blurs the relation between the diegetic and extradiegetic aspects of cinematic experience and their relation to spectatorial knowledge.²⁵ This blurring requires an unpredictable quotient of excess, a radical juxtaposition between intent and effect. Montez becomes an emblem of or, rather, a metonym for a mode of production and reveals the gap between that mode's aspirations and its differential execution. Her “objectively bad” acting makes visible the seams of the *work* that performance takes and the work cinematic performance presents as *not work*. Jack Smith's ability to glorify and mystify Montez relies, among other things, on her films' industrial location in the history of the Hollywood system of A and B pictures. Yet, the decidedly unglamorous and beleaguered figures of *The Sin Syndicate* and *The Roommates* are hardly expressive of a Montez-like exuberance and thus fail to take their place in a fantastical, “make-believe” cinematic world, or in the transparent pleasures of role-playing. In fact, sexploitation's performance work, its very terms, seem to *exhaust* even this sense and definition of “bad acting” forwarded by Hoberman vis-à-vis Smith. To insist too forcefully on economic determinism—low budget versus higher budget—to account for such exhaustion may seem too vulgar a way to link aesthetic evaluation and cinematic value. Yet questions of value—both abstract and material—are precisely what are at stake. Montez's performance can be revalued, and reevaluated because her performance insists on itself as not work, in the evidence of her performative pleasure. The less-enthused, more meagerly compensated bodies of sexploitation actresses exhaust and are exhausted, indexing the situation of their working conditions, in the service of a pleasure that remains deferred, decidedly out of frame.

* * *

Is it possible that we see such performance work only when it fails, that is, in its functional negation—or do we *see* work only when it is poorly remunerated, on the cusp of an aesthetic strike, and ill-suited to its diegetic world? And what are the implications of seeing it as *not work*? The thorny nature of the overlap that sexploitation stages among acting as labor, sex work as labor, and the non- or subprofessional, nonunion laborer as actor get folded over onto a set of aesthetic evaluations and gendered metrics and matrixes of performance itself. Performers' bodies and their labor index sexploitation's mode of production, even as this mode consistently questions the validity of labor's embodied, sexed forms. That is, the marginality of nonprofessional actresses'

labor, its compounding of particular inequities in aesthetic, cultural, social, and economic registers, manifests itself in content and form—the sex worker who is not, cannot be, working; the actress who is not acting but presenting for the spectator and for her employer her corporeal activity, made to collapse with her daily, actual, “real,” authentic self. This formulation may seem an oxymoron, but it is one that persists in our larger understanding of the varieties of marginal, precarious, underpaid, temporary, contingent labor that continue to define the existential, and material sphere of our contemporary life. This work, this labor—deskilled, untrained, and easily replaceable—matters the most because it is the most pervasive, but also because it makes itself visible by virtue of its capacity and inclination, at any moment, to stop working, to not work.

Notes

- I would like to thank Michael Lawrence, John David Rhodes, and Karl Schoonover for their feedback and conversation during the course of writing this essay.
1. Findlay went on to make numerous films in the sexploitation subcycle of the “roughie” in collaboration with his wife, Roberta Findlay, among them *Take Me Naked* (US, 1966), *The Touch of Her Flesh* (US, 1967), *The Curse of Her Flesh* (US, 1968), and *The Ultimate Degenerate* (US, 1969), many of which are marked by extreme scenarios of punitive violence mixed with sexual content.
 2. See, in particular, Barry King, “Stardom as an Occupation,” in *The Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul Kerr (London: Routledge, 1986), 154–184; Danae Clark, *Negotiating Hollywood: The Cultural Politics of Actors’ Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
 3. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 228–231; Bela Balazs, *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* (New York: Dover, 1970), 60–88; Lev Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film: Writings*, trans. and ed. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 67–71.
 4. For political conceptualizations of immaterial labor, see Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy*, trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emory, ed. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 132–146. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe immaterial labor as “labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication,” in *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 290.
 5. Recent scholarly treatments of acting have begun to challenge the dominance of the Stanislavskian influence of Method acting and its lasting convention as the sole way to parse the impact and textual features of screen performance. Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Frank Tomasulo, eds., *More than a Method: Trends and Traditions in Contemporary Film Performance* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004); Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke, *Reframing Screen Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).
 6. For example, in one of the central books forwarding more attentive analyses of acting, James Naremore proposes three modalities in which amateur actors have been used in film history: in neorealism, in which nonprofessionals are

- mixed with professionals; in “local color” films,” which selectively use amateur actors to authenticate elements of the story; and in modernist or Brechtian films, which deploy amateurs in service of a mode of distancing and a foregrounding of the constructed aspects of the cinematic fiction. Naremore implicitly accounts for three modes of production or aesthetic modalities—art cinema, Hollywood cinema, and political modernism—yet the smaller subindustries, in which no-name actors are more readily put to work, are implicitly omitted. James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 273.
7. Jeffrey Sconce, “Movies: A Century of Failure,” in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 291.
8. Kay Dickinson, *Off Key: When Film and Music Won't Work Together* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
9. Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 147–200.
10. Pamela Robertson Wojcik elaborates on the importance of synchronous sound to conceptualizations of the seamlessness of film acting: “As film acting becomes sound-film acting, the (real or apparent) integration of body and voice becomes key to perceptions of “authentic” film acting; the recorded voice is effaced as recorded, assumed to emanate from the actor’s body and to occupy a different space from other sounds, such as nondiegetic music and effects.” Wojcik, “The Sound of Film Acting,” *Journal of Film & Video* 58, no. 1–2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 74.
11. For the definitive historical account of the classical exploitation film, see Eric Schaefer, *“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
12. Eric Schaefer, “Gauging a Revolution: 16mm Film and the Rise of the Pornographic Feature,” *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 3 (Spring 2002): 5–6.
13. Russ Meyer’s *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (US, 1959) is credited as the first “nudie cutie.” Murray Schumach, “Nudity Featured in Film Quickies,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1961, 51.
14. Murray Schumach, “Union Opposing Nudity in Films,” *New York Times*, October 1, 1962, 37.
15. Ibid.
16. Monroe’s last, uncompleted film, *Something’s Got to Give* (George Cukor, US, 1962), was widely known to have included a nude swimming pool scene. Jayne Mansfield gained the mantle of the first known star to appear nude in *Promises! Promises!* (King Donovan, US, 1963). Carroll Baker, who had appeared in the controversial Elia Kazan film *Baby Doll* (US, 1956), became a vocal advocate on behalf of her own choice to do nude scenes in Hollywood films; Murray Schumach, “Hollywood Candor: Carroll Baker Defends Her Nudity in Films,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1964, X9.
17. “Confessions of a Vice Baron Symposium” (unpublished roundtable transcript by Michael Bowen, New York University, Spring 2003).
18. Some representative titles include: *The Hookers* (Jalo Miklos Horthy, US, 1967), *Hot Skin, Cold Cash* (Barry Mahon, US, 1965), *Rent-A-Girl* (William Rose, US, 1965), *The Agony of Love* (William Rotsler, US, 1966), and *Aroused* (Anton Holden, US, 1966).
19. Noel Carroll, “Keaton: Film Acting as Action,” *Interpreting the Moving Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

20. While outside the purview of this essay, some of the characteristics of sexploitation performance and its summoning of action and duration no doubt could be productively placed in dialogue with the performance stylistics of sixties' underground cinema, particularly the films of Andy Warhol.
21. Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 35.
22. Linda Williams, "Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the Carnal Density of Vision," in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 33.
23. J. Hoberman, "Bad Movies," in *Vulgar Modernism: Writings on Movies and Other Media* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 14. The text Hoberman refers to is Jack Smith's paean to Montez, published in *Film Culture*. Jack Smith, "The Perfect Filmic Appositeness of Maria Montez," *Film Culture* 27 (Winter 1962–1963): 28–36. The films Montez made for Universal Pictures include orientalist adventure epics such as *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins, US, 1942), *White Savage* (Arthur Lubin, US, 1943), *Cobra Woman* (Robert Siodmak, US, 1944), and *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (Arthur Lubin, US, 1943).
24. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 275–292.
25. Jeffrey Sconce further elaborates on this relation between attention to the diegetic and extradiegetic components of cult films in what he terms "paracinematic taste cultures." Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 371–393.