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**V!21**

REVISTA V!RUS  
V!RUS JOURNAL

issn 2175-974x

dezembro . december 2020

ÁGORA  
AGORA

A PORNIIFICAÇÃO DO TRABALHO: UMA REFLEXÃO A PARTIR DE PAUL B. PRECIADO  
THE PORNIIFICATION OF WORK: A REFLECTION FROM PAUL B. PRECIADO  
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PT | EN



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How to quote this text: Beccari, M. N., 2020. The pornification of work: a reflection from Paul B. Preciado. *VIRUS*, 21, December. [online] Available at: <[http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/\\_virus21/?sec=4&item=2&lang=en](http://www.nomads.usp.br/virus/_virus21/?sec=4&item=2&lang=en)>. [Accessed: dd Month yyyy].

ARTICLE SUBMITTED ON AUGUST AGOSTO 23, 2020

### Abstract

This is a contribution to the twenty-first edition of *VIRUS*, “We have never been so digital”, addressing the link between digital technologies and precarious works. I propose a theoretical review about what Paul B. Preciado called “pornification of work”, with the purpose of pointing out the prominence of this notion in the context of the global pandemic of 2020. To delimit the concept, I point out its relationship with the idea of “biopolitics”, on the one hand, and its distance from the “post-Fordism” theorists, on the other. In the sequence, I explain how Preciado associates pornographic production with current ways of working. Finally, I argue that the pornification of work emerged in the pandemic situation under the sign of a multitude of disposable and available bodies. By specifying this dimension of the global pandemic crisis, my intention is to highlight the predatory character that the neoliberal economy has recently acquired and, by extension, the general precariousness of working conditions.

**Keywords:** Theory of work, COVID-19, Neoliberalism, Paul B. Preciado.

## 1 Introduction

One of the most immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which plagued the world in 2020, is a radical change in our working routines. Beyond the obvious challenges of physical isolation and online interaction, it is necessary to consider broader transformations in the productive chains and capital circulation. In what regards labour practices, one thing that became evident was the fact that the so-called “immaterial work”<sup>1</sup> has always depended on its precarious and disqualified “material” counterpart. In other words, that in order for something like the “home office” to exist, it is necessary that large masses of workers risk their lives taking care of the

sick, delivering goods or packing food. Tacitly, this division of labor is based on the idea that some lives are worth more than others. At the same time, there is a spread of the genocides of immigrants, transsexuals, blacks, etc., to the point that the expression "I can't breathe" has acquired a political meaning globally beyond the respiratory symptoms from the virus<sup>2</sup>.

Apart from the large portion of workers exposed to the "outside" of confinement measures, the restrictions on work spaces did not imply a reduction in the workload, but rather its displacement to the home and domestic life, in order to make such domains more useful for the exchange, and accumulation of capital. This transition overburdened women more than men, revealing not only the permanence of gender inequality linked to the division of labor in the home, but also that this sort of task is not even considered work, but a family care activity that is strategically separated from the economic system — thus guaranteeing its functioning. As Caroline Pérez well summarized (In Ramírez, 2020, our translation), "there is a tautology about the working woman: there is no woman who doesn't work, there is only unpaid women". Thus, if labor practices were, during the pandemic, reconfigured in such a way as to tacitly aggravate inequalities of gender, race, class, among others, it is important to examine the political conditions that make this asymmetric distribution of vulnerabilities in the scope of acceptable work (Lorenzini, 2020).

The Foucauldian notion of "biopolitics" was frequently mentioned in the recent philosophical debate that emerged around the pandemic<sup>3</sup>. And, with regard to the dimension of work, Stijn De Cauwer and Tim Christiaens (2020) showed assertively how the exponential precariousness of the workforce remains directly linked to a biopolitical regime. One of the most provocative texts published in this context, which inspired this article, is entitled "*Aprendiendo del virus*" ("Learning from the virus", our translation), where Paul B. Preciado (2020) assertively writes about the implications of digital technologies and information transmission in the constitution of subjects in a confinement regime.

The philosopher goes back to his doctoral thesis on the Playboy mansion<sup>4</sup> to argue that the circular bed of Hugh Hefner, founder and editor of the erotic corporation, was a kind of prototype for the confined and ultra-connected subject who today gains shape in what Preciado calls a "pharmacopornographic regime"<sup>5</sup>. Hefner, after all, ran the most important magazine in the United States for more than four decades without even getting out of bed, wearing iconic pajamas in the company of the Playmates who inhabited the mansion. His bed was at the same time his office, a place to have sex and a stage for photoshoots and television footage. It was just not used for sleeping, since Hefner was addicted to amphetamines that eliminate fatigue and sleep. In fact, his life was literally pharmacopornographic: his extreme hedonism was inseparable from full-time work, a conjunction fueled by a daily cocktail of contraceptive pills and medications to keep production levels high.

Beyond the transformation of heterosexual pornography into mass culture, the silent biopolitical revolution launched by Playboy signified a challenge to the divisions that had been at the root of nineteenth-century industrial society: the separation of the spheres of production and reproduction, the difference between the factory and the home, and, along with that, the patriarchal distinction between masculinity and femininity. Playboy tackled that difference by proposing the creation of a new life enclave: the bachelor pad, connected to new technologies of communication. Its new semio-technical producer need never leave, either for work or to make love—and what's more, those activities had become indiscernible. [...] Playboy anticipated discourses on telecommuting and immaterial production that the management of the Covid-19 crisis has transformed into a national duty. Hefner called this new social producer the "horizontal worker." The vector of social innovation that Playboy set in motion promoted the erosion (and then the destruction) of distance between work and pleasure, production and sex. The life of the playboy, constantly filmed and diffused through magazines and television, was entirely public, even if the playboy never left his home or even his bed. (Preciado, 2020, n. p., our translation).

If today, in the pandemic situation, it is easy to recognize yourself in this "horizontal work" advocated by Hefner, it is obviously not based on a hedonistic lifestyle, but in order to feed another modality of pornography — of ascetic and sadomasochistic orientation — which now has a much more advanced technological apparatus than that revolving bed. Our bosses summoned us not only to confinement, but rather to a new work ritual, the key of which lies in how much we are individually willing to donate our homes and bodies to our employers. After all, once liberated from contagions and face-to-face idiosyncrasies, there seems to be more time left to sell not only our workforce, but a whole private dimension to be hyper exposed in collective teleconferences, where we see and hear more and more faces huddled in a same screen.

In this article, I propose a theoretical review about what, in Testo Junkie, Preciado (2018, p. 289, our translation) called “pornification of work”, thus recomposing a conceptual framework complementary to the aforementioned essay by the same philosopher. For that, I must point out some caveats. Starting with the notion of “pornography”, which is assumed here figuratively, not literally, bypassing the anti and pro-porn debates. But, as I point out below, the fact that the pornography industry is the biggest driver of cybereconomics is significant, guiding, to a large extent, a type of production and consumption of sex that is not as dissociable from work as we usually assume. And yet, for the sake of delimitation of scope, I will not address the “pharmaco” domain, which is, for Preciado, equally determinant for the maintenance of the current neoliberal regimes<sup>6</sup>.

I start from the premise that the pandemic made evident that neither the individual body, nor the so-called private and domestic sphere, escape from a certain labor logic. It is a logic in which the objective of all work is, first of all, to satisfy and to excite — either the other, oneself or, in any case, the flow of social interactions itself. To outline this pornification of work, I begin by resuming the notions of post-Fordism and biopolitics, which were put to the test in the recent context of the pandemic. Then, I explain how Preciado understands the main features of the current forms of production and consumption from the recent pornographic industry. Finally, I argue that the pandemic has functioned as a global laboratory for the pornification of work.

## **2 Post-Fordism and biopolitics**

In the 2000s, some Italian neo-Marxist thinkers — such as Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Paolo Virno and Maurizio Lazzarato — suggested that the current productive process of capitalism has knowledge, information, communication and social relations as its raw material. In this way, these authors situate in the 1970s the transition to a third type of capitalism, after the slave and industrial regimes. Such thinkers started from the thesis of Mario Tronti (2019), in *Workers and Capital*, according to which the workforce has always preceded and exceeded the capitalist production system in which it is integrated<sup>7</sup>. Tronti wrote this work in 1966, during the height of large-scale industrial production, which, however, was still based on a model that would have weakened in the late 1970s. This is the Fordist regime, in which material goods are produced standardized through repetitive work on the assembly line. This type of production did not disappear from the central countries, it has only migrated to countries where there is a low-cost labor force<sup>8</sup>, while the Western economy has increasingly specialized in the provision of services and so-called immaterial goods.

What the authors of post-Fordism learned from Tronti was his emphasis on living work, that is, on the capture, by capital, of the workers’ body dimension. But while Tronti considered only the physical and mechanical integration of bodies in industrial production, the post-Fordist paradigm encompasses networks of cooperation in which the entire extension of individual and subjective life becomes a source of profit. An airline or bank, for example, profits less from the physical work of its employees than from their social, intellectual and collaborative skills. Thus, to the extent that our ability to interact and cooperate with other people becomes, in the post-Fordist regime, a direct source of profit, social life itself as an incessant network of interaction and cooperation — or the “crowd” , in the lexicon of Italian authors — becomes part of the capital accumulation process.

Currently, even in the so-called post-colonial countries, such as Brazil, in which the old Fordist model can still be found, most workers are no longer directly on the assembly line, but sell their social skills in the service sector<sup>9</sup>. As Virno (2013) points out, industrial work itself has become less and less rigid, to the point of infiltrating the spaces of home and daily life. With this in mind, Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 30) preferred to call the post-Fordist mode of production, “biopolitical production”. This Foucauldian terminology is extended by the authors, who emphasize the emancipatory potential of a biopolitics beyond the government of the populations: “Resistances are no longer marginal but active in the center of a society that opens up in networks” (Hardt, Negri, 2000, p. 25).

It is worth remembering, though briefly, the original conception of biopolitics. In the course *Il faut défendre la société* (“Society must be defended”, our translation), from 1975-76, Foucault (1999) presented this concept to investigate the history of public health policies. He argued that, although the epidemic phenomenon is as old as that of urban agglomerations, it was only from the 17th and 18th centuries that governments considered the disease a permanent risk that requires a continued policy, aiming for the first time to manage population life while a healthy and productive workforce.

Mbembe (2018) observed that Foucault, in order to highlight the productive character of power relations, would have neglected the role of colonial oppression and the exploitation of the working class — focusing instead on the forms of sexual and racial segregation. The Cameroonian philosopher's notion of necropolitics goes back to a non-Eurocentric historical perspective of colonial and racist dehumanization directly linked to

the exploitation of the working class<sup>10</sup>. But biopolitics, as Daniele Lorenzini (2020) pointed out, always covered colonial and racial inequalities by establishing all sorts of hierarchization of lives, based on the production of vulnerabilities as a means of government.

It should be noted that biopolitical production, as Hardt and Negri defined it, is not only distant from Foucault's conception, but also more abstract and less precise, at least in the face of the pandemic scenario that we are experiencing. First, because the discussion of Italian philosophers seems missing the historical tendency of capitalism to favor a small group of highly qualified and intellectual workers, to the detriment of a mass of disqualified workers. For example, albeit digital platforms require an instrumental mastery of the digital language, they nevertheless deepen that same trend. Second, as Angela McRobbie (2020) and Stijn De Cauwer and Tim Christiaens (2020) pointed out, the notion of "immaterial work" tends to neglect the precarious and disqualified jobs that resulted from post-Fordism, and which today proliferate even in called central countries. The thousands of employees who work at Amazon's distribution centers, for example, have not entirely left the assembly line: they still operate under the commands and monitoring of a machine. Something similar can be seen in the sectors of transport, marketing, distance education, etc.

In other words, despite the increase, in the last decades, of the demand for qualified work, a certain "proletariat" did not cease to exist. Instead, it expanded and dispersed through outsourcing and subsidiary companies. In fact, at first glance it seems to be a dematerialization process: Airbnb does not have properties, Uber does not employ a single driver. What happens, however, is that most material charges — instruments, office hours, training, health risks, etc. — ends up being transferred to the individual worker. There is, in general, a virtual platform that, through an inaccessible algorithm, distributes tasks and rewards to workers who, in turn, compete more than cooperate with each other. The tacit rise of this paradigm does not seem, therefore, to favor that emancipatory potential that Hardt and Negri attribute to what they call "biopolitical production".

The "pornification of work" described by Preciado, on the other hand, not only accurately assimilates the Foucauldian conception of biopolitics, but also updates it and "penetrates" it sharply. Although Preciado's focus is not on pornographic work itself, his thesis is based on the ways (and platforms) in which this type of work guides others, and this is what pornification means: "Let's say it bluntly: in the porn economy, there is no work that is not destined to raise the stick, to keep the global stick upright" (Preciado, 2018, p. 308, our translation). For the Spanish philosopher, the raw material of contemporary capitalism is not information, communication or social relations, but masturbation and ejaculation. And this sort of work cannot, in any way, be considered immaterial, since its matter is biological, carnal, although it can also be virtual, impersonal and impalpable. Understanding it requires, in fact, thinking more carefully about the notion of pornography.

### **3 From pornography to pornified work**

Pornography is a marketable masturbatory device that, according to Preciado (2018, p. 283, our translation), "works in an ambivalence: it is a hidden and marginal aspect of the contemporary cultural industry, but it is also the paradigm of any other type of post-Fordism production". The author counted more than 1.5 million adult websites that can be accessed from anywhere on the planet. "The sex industry is not only the most profitable market on the Internet: it is also the most profitable model", since it implies "minimum investment, direct sale of the product in real time and standard format, immediate satisfaction for the consumer" (Preciado, 2018, p. 41-42, our translation).

Amateur productions, in particular, no longer represent an emerging market, as this modality has become the most consumed. The recent access by the lower classes to the means of pornographic production has broken a monopoly that, until the beginning of this century, was still controlled by the big porn multinationals. Anyone, after all, who has a body, a computer, a video camera, an Internet connection and a bank account can create their own page and enter the sex industry. More than ever, therefore, sex has become (or, according to Preciado, it turns out to be) an engine of capital, an abundant commodity and a virtually inexhaustible resource.

The pornographic industry thus provides a specific mode of production and consumption that, in turn, is not reduced to orgasm: "the goal is not the production of pleasure, but the control of political subjectivity through the management of the excitation-frustration circuit" (Preciado, 2018, p. 318-319, our translation). Many buying, selling and competition strategies have been progressively transformed since when pornography effectively became a mass industry — which, coincidentally, coincides with the apex of the pharmaceutical industry: "There is no porn without the Pill or the Viagra. Or, conversely, there is no Viagra or Pill without porn" (Preciado, 2018, p. 53, our translation). The contraceptive pill, whose chemical components are already the most consumed drug in human history, consolidated a distinction once considered immoral: not every sexual act implies reproduction, and vice versa. On the one hand, the costs of large-scale manufacture of medicines are increasingly lower — although the costs of research and development of medicines are high —;

on the other, porn videos are increasingly cheaper to produce and distribute. In both cases, what is produced and consumed are not things, but chemical reactions that aim at easing pain or fulfilling desires.

If, in the 1950s, some theorists such as Marshall McLuhan, Buckminster Fuller and Norbert Wiener claimed that communication technologies work as an extension of the body, today pornography seems to reverse this logic: the individual body works as an extension of global technologies — whether of communication or, in general, of production and consumption. Pornography, in fact, is not reduced to a representation of sexual interactions, as it reveals that these practices are always staged, regulated and reproduced in a chain of production of subjectivities. Indeed, there is not an external power that comes to expropriate, repress or control the individual's sexual impulses; rather, pornography connects individuals to a market that not only gathers sexual impulses, but also produces and intensifies it.

This productive dimension went unnoticed by Marx (2000) and Engels (2017), who considered prostitution as a servile and unproductive work (in the sense of not generating products or results), which, more precisely, proceeds as a structural counterpart of the bourgeois institution of the monogamous marriage. The relationship between prostitution and pornography is not immediate, nor is it simple to make (these do not belong, for example, to the same economic sector). But Preciado points out that, in the scope of work, both categories are currently the most precarious and, at the same time, those that most absorb new workers. This observation is accompanied by a keen perception by the philosopher that the type of work that, in each historical moment, is the most precarious and abundant accurately defines the form of production that characterizes an economy. In his terms:

It is the body of the male and female cotton pickers and their mandatory reproduction what defines the plantation economy; it is the woman's body what defines white heterosexual reproduction; it is the body of the mine worker what defines the economy of the steam machine; it is the body of the replaceable worker what defines the concentration camp; it is the body of the factory worker what defines the Fordist economy. The work and specific type of exploitation that define the pharmacopornographic economy today is sex work, and the paradigmatic body of this production model is that of the migrant whore, that of the transgender sex worker or that of the porn actress/actor (Preciado, 2018, p. 302, our translation).

It is in this light we must assimilate the concept of pornification of work: not as, literally, a pornographic work<sup>11</sup>, but as a model of production and consumption that, unlike the description of post-Fordism theorists, is less "immaterial" than invisible. Pornification therefore designates a mass workforce that, however, remains on an underground level, out of sight, in the sphere of unemployment or the absence of unions and labor laws — on the illegal or marginal side. As a shadow of immaterial labor (of information and communication), the pornified work is another productive economy that depends on underpaid individuals who are deprived of any labor rights. Indeed, instead of a social cooperation that, as the philosophers of post-Fordism speculated, would make the crowd able to resist and overcome their exploitation, what prevails today is the impulse of a predatory self-entrepreneurship from which, under the aegis of services by apps and their obscure algorithms, most of workers compete with each other for productivity, scoring, accomplished goals.

Employees at an Amazon distribution center are hired and fired by a system that tracks their productivity in real time; delivery drivers spend most of their days running on their motorbikes and bicycles (which are their assets, not the company's); public relations departments only interact with the public online, often through standard scripts and automated robots.

All of these workers are on the threshold of formal work, of citizenship and even of humans. In the context of labor relations, there is a heated debate underway on the legitimacy of considering whether these people are workers or not. In the case of Uber drivers, for example, there is no employment relationship and, therefore, they cannot be formally considered as workers. Instead, they are framed as self-employed entrepreneurs. Thus, although they are subordinate to a company and, by extension, are subject to the order of commercial law, these people are not protected by labor law. In Brazil, this controversy had repercussions in the course of the pandemic, when many delivery drivers, with the support of part of the press, began to mobilize the population regarding the need to regulate this type of work<sup>12</sup>.

Around the world, moreover, the formation of unions has been explicitly discouraged and collective bargaining for better working conditions has become almost impossible. These are circumstances unfavorable to the collective policy of the working class, paving the way for a general pornification of work — a process that, again in a shrewd way, Preciado understands from the connections between the sex industry and prisons:

Pornification of work therefore clearly marks the mass of outsiders from the labor market, that is, those who

In pharmacopornism, the areas of pornographic production and sex work occupy a structural position similar to that of prison. The cartography composed by the circuits of the sex industry, the penal complex and the domestic spaces is composed of enclaves of maximum exploitation, true oases of *übermaterial* capitalism, dystopian reserves of biopolitical experimentation at the heart of current democratic societies. Pornography and prison are the only two industries that operate in our democratic and humanist societies under a pro-slavery regime similar to that of the plantation economy: racial and gender segregation; minimum or nonexistent wages; suppression on unions and on the right to strike; absence of paid holidays or paid days due to illness or unemployment insurance. The sex industry and the prison industrial complex are the two areas in which workers have been entirely deprived of all civil rights and of any economic or moral privilege over the work that is expropriated (Preciado, 2018, p. 330-331, our translation).

have the most precarious contracts and the least covered social protection systems. Pornified labor, moreover, also makes explicit — in the wake of recent concepts such as “precariat” (Standing, 2014) and “cybertariat” (Huws, 2017) — one of the fundamental aspects of current lockdown policies: the appropriation, by capital, of private life.

#### **4 Final considerations: exploration by other means**

The coronavirus pandemic opened up and accelerated the social problems of the neoliberal economy. Transposing Preciado’s argument about the pornification of work into this context, we could say that contemporary dynamics of online work seem to be “the continuation, by other means, of the economy of slavery at the center of Western democratic societies” (Preciado, 2018, p. 331, our translation). If I am referring broadly and vaguely to an “online work”, it is because, in the midst of the general crisis of a pandemic world, we see a multitude of digital bodies accumulating at the disposal of capital.

As an emblematic case, this was the year that Amazon proved its economic hegemony, with double-digit growth in share prices, combined with a relentless neglect of its employees’ protests. If the company maintained a reliable status in the market, it is because its mission is restricted to the immaterial work of managing and promoting its online platform, so that the delivery of goods to people’s homes is a subsidized work (outsourced or offered to freelance professionals) which does not involve any employee of the company<sup>13</sup>. If one of the imperatives of the Fordist regime was to extinguish the costs with the qualification of the workers (insofar as each worker should be limited to a simple and repetitive operation), in the current pornification of work it is a question of abolishing the costs with employees in general, so that many companies can act like a “pimp”, who takes all the profit obtained by supposedly self-employed workers.

The so-called immaterial work is, therefore, only the tip of an iceberg whose submerged body is composed of a myriad of impoverished, marginal and exhausting works. The virus that has plagued the world has clearly shown that, in short, the more companies invest in immaterial labor, the more disposable life becomes. The business models of companies like Amazon, Uber and Alibaba prioritize the management of their own brands, relegating their workers to an algorithm that manages them according to their performance and compliance. And, in the context of a pandemic, when many people lose their material jobs, these companies can count on an extremely helpless and virtually infinite reserve army to aggravate, as never before, the predatory conditions to which these same workers are subjected.

The pornification of work depends on available, vulnerable and disposable bodies. What establishes and normalizes this type of work is the old principle of biopower, which segments the population into different levels of exposure to death and impoverishment, especially in terms of class, gender and race. In this sense, the pandemic situation has become a privileged laboratory for experimenting, on a global scale, the pornification of work, with the probability of implementing this model of biopolitics as a long-lived program of mass segregation.

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**1** Or what post-Fordism theorists (like Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno) called "intellectual work", "cognitive work", "non-objectionable work", etc.. Below, I clarify how these concepts are insufficient under the perspective of Paul B. Preciado.

**2** I refer to the murder of George Floyd, an African American who was strangled by a white police officer on May 25, 2020. The episode had worldwide repercussions, corroborating, in a somewhat premonitory way, an essay that Achille Mbembe (2020) had published a few weeks before, entitled The Universal Right to Breath.

**3** See, in this regard, the compilation made by Úrsula Passos (2020) of the texts that had the greatest repercussion until April 2020.

**4** Thesis defended in 2010, in the postgraduate program in Theory of Architecture at The Princeton University, with the title *Pornotopia: Architecture and Sexuality in Playboy During the Cold War*. See: Preciado (2014).

**5** As Preciado (2018, p. 36, our translation) clarifies and develops in *Testo Junkie*, “the term refers to the biomolecular (pharmaco) and semiotic-technical (pornographic) government processes of sexual subjectivity, of which the Pill and Playboy are two paradigmatic results”.

**6** Preciado has in mind, above all, “a process of privatization of the current nation-states, which will be gradually absorbed by the pharmaceutical and pornographic industries” (Preciado, 2018, p. 407, our translation). In this regard, it is enough to note how much the pharmaceutical multinationals have been running a fierce race not only for the vaccine against COVID-19, but also for the best negotiations with heads of states.

**7** “Labor-power is not, therefore, just potential labor but also potential capital” (Tronti, 2019, p. 155). It means that, once captured by the process of capitalist accumulation, the labor force is subjected to a gear of capital, in order to nullify all its potential.

**8** Although, it must be stressed, this has not been a homogeneous process. As I emphasize ahead, the Fordist regime is still in force, even in central countries.

**9** In the specific case of Brazil, however, it is necessary to bear in mind that, historically, most workers have always been outside the Fordist model, since unstable formal / informal labor relations have always prevailed. Furthermore, as Ruy Braga (2003) argues, in *A nostalgia do fordismo* (“The nostalgia of Fordism”, our translation), the implantation of Fordism in Brazil was not successful and was never fully consolidated.

**10** “This process was, in part, facilitated by racist stereotypes and the flourishing of class racism which, by translating the social conflicts of the industrial world into racist terms, ended up comparing the working classes and the ‘stateless people’ of the industrial world to the ‘savages’ of the colonial world” (Mbembe, 2018, p. 21, our translation).

**11** It should be noted that, in the porn industry, production still follows a certain Fordist principle: to cause ejaculation with a minimum of audiovisual plans and sequences, in the same way that an assembly line must produce a car in the shortest possible time.

**12** See, in this regard: Schavelzon, 2020.

**13** Regarding Amazon’s treatment of its employees, De Cauwer and Christiaens (2020, p. 125) summarize: “Amazon’s core business lies in self-promotion in the media, so it invests in immaterial labor to manage its public image while underinvesting in the deskilled labor that performs the actual material work of sorting and transporting packages”.