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Sweat, Triangle of Sadness, and the Fragile Performance of the Influencer

Cristián Mora

It is difficult to avoid thinking of it. When you see –and we all do– influencers whose main occupation is to travel, try on new clothes, go to the gym regularly, and take cool pictures of themselves, you wonder if you could also have that kind of life. I am a 36-year-old doctoral student, so that thought only goes through my head as a fantasy. But that is not the case for younger people, whose cultural references depend almost entirely on Instagram, TikTok or YouTube, and whose role models –most likely– are active on social media. According to a study conducted by the agency HigherVisibility, 25% of people born between 1997 and 2012 (also known as Generation Z) in the United States plan to become social media influencers (Gen Z). Another inquiry, done by the financial company Remitly, analyzed the most searched jobs in Google per country: Influencer has the first place in countries such as Spain, Argentina, and Colombia, while youtuber takes that position in other Latin American countries such as Mexico, Peru, and Chile (The World's). Through the analysis of two critically acclaimed films about the influencers phenomenon, Magnus von Horn's *Sweat* (2020), and Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* (2022), this article argues that behind its highly valued aspects, the job of the influencer consists of a very fragile performance whose deep vulnerability is expressed both at a personal level –the porousness of private and public life, the emotional labor involved–, and a social level –the urgent need to attract the attention of others, the risks of being constantly exposed, the dependence on social media platforms, and the imminence of economic uncertainty–.

The first part of the paper introduces the traits of influencer's work, presenting it as a type of job that is essentially digital, but that also relies heavily on the body, which puts it in the middle of what we understand as immaterial and material work. In order to get to this conclusion, the article offers a brief theoretical review of the different elements that are associated with the concept of immaterial work. Then, the paper will focus on the depiction of the influencer's work in *Sweat* and *Triangle of Sadness.* While the former is centered both on the personal and social fragilities of its main character, the fitness expert Sylvia Zajac (Magdalena Koleśnik), the latter is more concerned with the social vulnerabilities that affect the models Yaya (Charlbi Dean) and Carl (Harris Dickinson).

An Ambiguous Type of Work

To start the discussion about the different aspects of influencer's work, let's think of a real example. Caroline Daur, @carodaur, is a young blonde German model and fashion blogger who started her blog when she was 19, in 2014. She had an Instagram account already, whose older posts have around one thousand likes today. At the beginning she posted pictures of herself working out, using the slogan of Nike as a hashtag, maybe trying to draw the attention of the sports brand. The other posts show her wearing different clothes every time, without traces of support from clothing brands. The situation looks very different today. Daur has 4.6 million followers, and she is constantly traveling around the world. There are pictures of her in fancy hotels and at exclusive events, such as the *Vanity Fair* Oscars afterparty, and the most fashionable clothing brands –such as Louis Vuitton and Dior– are usually tagged in her photos: now they pay her to wear their garments, and therefore to promote them. In other words, she made it. It was not a magic path, though. Yes, beauty was an important factor for sure. But as we can see in her Instagram account, there are many activities she has to do to maintain her influencer status: traveling, attending events, visiting stores, participating in make-up and manicure sessions, making photo shoots wearing clothes of different brands, maintaining a good-looking fit body, uploading numerous stories about what she is doing in the moment while addressing her audience, creating funny TikTok-like videos, posting pictures or videos where she promotes products even without her presence in the image, and replying to a few comments of her followers. Though she has some interaction with her audience, there are other influencers who do this more intensively, for instance participating in live sessions where they respond to questions in real time.

Caroline Daur's job is definitely part of the information society, or digital society, concepts that, according to scholar Christian Fuchs, "stress the importance of knowledge; the production, generation, diffusion and the use of information; and the rise of the computer and digital network technologies like the Internet or the mobile phone" (136). A key part of Daur's activities is to produce and upload content to social media platforms through her cellphone, with the goal of advertising both the clothes or accessories she is wearing, and herself as the ideal promoter. Philosopher Maurizio Lazaratto would say that her work belongs to the category of "immaterial labor," which is "the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" (132). However, the digital or immaterial is only one part of what she does. Thinking of more traditional jobs, in which the figure of a direct boss is still present, Lazaratto writes:

> The old dichotomy between "mental and manual labor," or between "material labor and immaterial labor," risks failing to grasp the new nature of productive activity, which takes this separation on board and transforms it. The split between conception and execution, between labor and creativity, between author and audience, is simultaneously transcended within the "labor process" and reimposed as political command within the "process of valorization." (133)

Though in Daur's case there is no specific manager asking for her subjectivity and personality to "be made susceptible to organization and command," which is how Lazaratto describes the cited shift in the productive activity, her work also blurs the split between conception and execution, labor and creativity, and author and audience. This means that the material part of Daur's job is at least as important as the digital/immaterial: there is no @carodaur without working out, traveling, attending beauty sessions, visiting stores and events, posing in photo shoots, and performing in front of the phone camera.

The complexity of influencer's work is not only limited to its mix of material and immaterial work. Jenna Drenten, Lauren Gurrieri, and Meagan Tyler quote multiple authors when affirming that "it has been observed that women's self-presentation on social media is highly sexualized," which would be explained by "wider cultural pressures that convey to women sexiness is both valued and a means of gaining attention" (42). According to the scholars, these cultural expectations of the female influencer are expressed through what they call "porn-chic" sexiness, which can be described as the use of the codes of pornography –the aesthetics of it– in order to generate attention. Though Caroline Daur is not the best example of this trait, because in most of her pictures she has a sober look –maybe we could call it a "model-chic" sexiness–, she still has a considerable number of posted pictures in which the "porn-chic" idea applies well. Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler write that sexualized labor of influencers is composed of three elements: emotional labor, which has been defined as the "management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display," and which "is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value" (Hochschild 7); aesthetic labor, which refers to the "capacities and attributes [that] are incorporated into the labour process to evoke sensory affect in customers and commercial benefits for organizations" (44); and sexualization, which has to do with how the body looks, and which "is fundamental in understanding how sexualized labour works to appeal to the senses of consumers" (44).

Considering that the influencer's work is immaterial, material, and sexualized, it has important coincidences with the contemporary experience of porn performers, according to the analysis provided by researcher Heather Berg in her book *Porn Work*. It is worth making the comparison to complete the profile of what it means to be an influencer and to start discussing the fragility behind it. A positive aspect that is shared by both types of job is that they have a component of pleasure: in porn work, this is related to the physical act of having sex, while in the case of the influencer, this has to do with the attention received, expressed in gifts and admiration. They are also autonomous workers, as Berg states: "They are both freelancers who must constantly be on the lookout for their next paid gig and self-marketers who cultivate a fan base to whom they market products and services directly" (135). The independence of their jobs does not only bring economic uncertainty in the immediate future, but also the lack of benefits such as health insurance and retirement savings. Apart from this, there is a fuzzy limit dividing leisure time and working time, or, as Berg puts it, "between being oneself and performing a character" (135). There is another

aspect of the last point: in both jobs, authenticity is highly valued. For the porn worker, this is more relevant when filming sex scenes than in social media: "Porn workers confront managers' and fans' desires for authentically invested workers and scenes that look real" (64). Influencers respond to a similar expectation from their audience, but in their case, this applies to the content they post, as it was reported in the results of a survey made earlier this year: "Consumers want authenticity from the influencers they follow, gravitating toward those that create relatable, original content or provide credible expertise" (Consumer). Finally, an important aspect for the porn worker and the influencer, and something that is likely the first entry barrier for both roles, is the high public exposure they must live with: "Online interactions with fans can require heavy emotional labor as performers must at once create relatable personas and establish boundaries" (Berg 136). As this brief review shows, there are plenty of aspects of the influencer's work that justify the aspiration of millions of young –and not-so-young– people to join the exclusive group at some point. Nevertheless, there are many traits, usually not as visible as the positive ones, that show a high vulnerability to mostly uncontrollable factors, such as public opinion, beauty trends, followers' behavior, brands' requests, and the state of the economy. All these characteristics are looked at in depth in the films that are analyzed below.

The Most Beautiful People

"I started watching a fitness influencer on Snapchat (…) I was studying my own reaction to her intense posting a lot, the prejudice I had, and the way I was skeptical to her lifestyle, the way I thought it was shallow, I felt it was shallow, and I had problems accepting her kind of happiness, or happy-go-lucky attitude," said Magnus von Horn, the Poland-based Swedish director of *Sweat*, in an interview about the origins of the film (Interview). The filmmaker's critical thinking about his own point of view coincides with the topics depicted in the movie. Sweat tells the story of a few days in the life of Sylvia Zajac (Magdalena Koleśnik), a fitness influencer with 600,000 followers who shares workout routines, healthy dietary habits and recipes, sportswear sent to her by brands, and everyday moments of her life. Though the film shows a few of the interactions of Sylvia with her fans –in fact, it starts with her sharing the same physical space with them, while leading an aerobics class–, most of the time we are invited to observe the rest of the activities she does. It is basically a response to von Horn's concern about the fitness influencer he followed on Instagram: Can she really be so happy? What lies behind this shallowness? Why can't I just accept her attitude? The movie addresses these questions by rejecting the possibility of never-ending happiness, but not depicting a black-or-white situation: it offers a nuanced view of the influencer's work/life, whose fragility is marked by the need for an authentic performance, the high exposure to the public, and other issues such as disconnection with people in real life, and the complete dependence on a social media platform.

The central topic of the movie is what is a performance and what is not, which is closely related to the diffuse boundary between work and free time. Sometimes the division is clear: for instance, when Sylvia starts a live session, she shows the sportswear sent to her. Before connecting with her followers, her face does not express any particular emotion. Once she is connected, we can see her constantly smiling, a body attitude that falls into the category of emotional labor (23:24). On other occasions, the division is not clear. The best example is the viral video where Sylvia opens up with her followers and shows them her vulnerability by saying: "You often ask me why I'm single. Why I don't have a husband or a boyfriend. The truth is that I didn't choose to be single (…) I'd really like to have someone close... Someone who would take my hand and say 'Sylvia, my love, everything will be alright'" (15:56). She starts crying while giving this speech, which does not stop her confession. At the same time, the revelation of this video is framed in a way that opens the door to doubts about its content. We understand that it was posted at a time prior to what is shown in the film, so we only have access to it when Sylvia opens her laptop and enters a website that reads: "Sylvia Zajac Crying: What's Going on in the Trainer's Life?" She clicks on the video, and only then we see it, with her, while she looks at it with a serious face. Is she still processing what she did? Or is she checking if she did it right? In other words, is the video an authentic confession about her vulnerability? Or is it a self-marketing strategy? The answer is tricky, because in the rest of the film, we note that she really lacks a romantic partner, though the director never delves into the reasons: maybe she cannot find one, or maybe she does not want one. In any case, knowing that authenticity is the most valued trait in influencers, anything that she (or any real influencer) does in front of the phone

camera is suspected to be a performance. That is a point of fragility by itself: the credibility of her persona, given the known economic interests involved, is always under the suspicion of the audience, which functions as a judge.

The dichotomy of authenticity/performance has its most ambiguous chapter in the final scene of the movie. Sylvia is invited to a TV show, where she is expected to lead a televised fitness session. However, she is surprised by the reproduction of her viral video, and by the questions about it. "Do you have to expose yourself like this? Do you think that we can show everything off these days? That it's all for sale? Isn't this too much?" asks the female presenter. Sylvia responds:

> It comes with the job (…) What's wrong with the fact that I admitted that right now there's no-one in my life who loves me? Does that mean that I am weak? Or pathetic? In that case I want to be weak and pathetic, because that's when I'm myself (…) I want to be weak, pathetic Sylvia, because weak, pathetic people are the most beautiful people. (1:33:00)

Once again, Sylvia cries. This time on television, and after pronouncing these words, she says that she has had "a few intense, rough days," which we know is true: she has been stalked by a man, a situation that is analyzed in the following paragraph. When asked about the details of the situation, she answers: "I might tell you, if you follow me on social media," in a smart move to get more followers hungry for authenticity and drama. Immediately after having this intense conversation, Sylvia confirms that she feels good to do the arranged fitness session: she walks to another spot in the TV set, looks at the camera, smiles, and starts the routine, showing no traces of the previous drama. There are no traces of the "weak, pathetic" Sylvia either, because she looks as beautiful –because of her body, not her weaknesses–, strong and self-confident as always. Is she performing an authentic character as a marketing strategy? Or is she claiming her right to be genuinely authentic? The debate of the critics makes clear that this is the big question. "Sweat cleverly stages the ambiguity of the crying-to-camera post: her revulsion [to the man who stalked her] is so visceral that we're never quite sure if Sylvia's own video was an honest outpouring of emotion or a calculated attempt to sell feelings alongside fitness," wrote Leila Sackur for the cultural magazine *Frieze.* On the other side, Marijeta Bozovic argued in *Slavic Review:* "When she too sobs about her loneliness in in a video post, jeopardizing her promotional contracts, Sylvia is right. Nobody loves her. None of these people know how to love. The only exception may be that silly little dog—and the ultimately compassionate camera" (643). Though Bozovic has a point –what Sylvia says fits with what we see–, she just takes into account one part of the picture; the other part, which was analyzed above, motivates Sackur's doubts about Sylvia's authenticity. Again, the film states that the influencer has no choice but to live with these questions.

Another important point of fragility, which was briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph, is the cost of high exposure. In Sweat, this is not only expressed by the solitude of the protagonist, who apparently only knows how to connect with the abstract entity of the public –her followers– through social media, but also by the harassment of one of them, a man in his 40s who parks in front of Sylvia's building. She notes his persistent look for the first time when she goes out to walk her dog (18:07). After an ellipsis, she returns to the building, and the man is still there, staring at her from behind the window. Annoyed, she decides to approach the man and talk to him, but she discovers that he is masturbating. Desperate, she throws her dog's poop at the man's window, and enters the building. The next time we know of him is because he sends Sylvia a video apologizing for his behavior and crying. In the video, he says: "I just wanted to say that we're very much alike. I also want someone to hold hands with (…) I know that I am not good enough for you" (26:45). The following night she discovers the man parked in the same spot, and she tells her date if he can go to talk to him. He does it, but he does not only talk to him: he violently beats him. Feeling guilty, Sylvia helps the man to get to a hospital (1:20:00). This situation shows how exposed Sylvia is when she posts something: in this case, the man felt that they had a connection in their vulnerability, which in his mind gave him the right to harass her. Sylvia's success is paired with the grow of her fanbase, which means that she cannot decide or limit who sees her content. The performance of authenticity, of being a "friend" to her followers, can also generate misinterpretations: that happens to her stalker, who seems to have a mental illness. Sylvia also takes advantage of the violent event: in the TV show, she repeats the man's line "I am not good enough," and she looks for the empathy of a massive audience when describing herself as

"weak" and "pathetic," traits that she sees on the stalker: she always looks at him with a mix of rage and disgust. Even though she helps the man, she does not go further: she leaves him in the hospital without trying to contact a family member, for instance. The next morning, she is on television identifying with him, which is yet another way in which the film invites us to wonder about both Sylvia's authenticity and her willingness to do whatever she needs in order to broaden her fanbase.

The final scene that I will analyze shows one more point of fragility in the influencer's work: the conscience that all their success depends on a particular social media platform. This topic appears in a casual encounter between Sylvia and a former high school classmate while they are at the mall. The protagonist attempts to stop the conversation very quickly, but she cannot overcome her friend's enthusiasm. Thus, we see them sitting and talking, an interaction that works as another example of Sylvia's difficulties to engage in an in-person relation –this also happens when she attends her mother's birthday, and when she goes to a party–. After Sylvia's classmate tells her that she just has a miscarriage, and cries because of it, Sylvia feels the need to prove that her life is not perfect, that she has problems too, and tells her: "Sometimes I feel like quitting my job. I'd like to delete my Instagram account, because no-one would really miss me. I know it. It would just take one click and everything would disappear" (32:40). Even though Sylvia's issue seems superficial next to a miscarriage, it is still honest. She is referring to the vulnerability of the influencer's work, which depends on many factors: the popularity of the social media platform that they use, the attention they get from the users of that platform, the perception of authenticity they convey to their followers, and the match between the way they look and the look that brands want to be identified with. All this, without mentioning the economic fragility that every independent worker faces.

Favorable Circumstances

Ruben Öslund's *Triangle of Sadness*, winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 2022 and Best Picture nominee at the Oscars the following year, is a very different movie. The goal of the Swedish director is not to explore specifically the influencer's work, but to offer a satire about the functioning of the world economy, which is done by following the steps of a couple of successful young models, Yaya (Charlbi Dean) –also an influencer– and Carl (Harris Dickinson). "I thought it was problematic to discuss sexuality and beauty as currency from a female perspective. So, wow, great, let's do it from a male perspective. Everybody who has this currency is aware of it, because we are human beings and have been trained in socialising since we were born" (Ruben Östlund Talks), said the filmmaker in an interview, highlighting his particular interest in "sexuality and beauty as currency." The male model is also an excellent figure to talk about inequality, he found in his research, because men who do this job "are earning maybe only a third as much as the female models," and often they "have to manoeuvre past powerful men in the industry who want to sleep with them, sometimes with the promise of a more successful career" (Ruben Östlund Talks). Due to the purpose of this paper, the analysis will be centered on three aspects of the film that reflect Öslund's main ideas, and that also show the fragility of the influencer's work, represented in Yaya: economic uncertainty, the mix of working and leisure time, and the dependence on a particular social order.

The economic issue is presented very early in the film, when we see Yaya and Carl at a very fancy restaurant (9:44). The scene starts after they eat, when the waiter puts the bill on their table. Yaya is distracted putting on her makeup, and Carl realizes that she is implying that he should pay for their dinner, which he resists doing until he mentions the situation to her. From that point on, they have a tough argument in which they talk about the distribution of money in their relationship, the application of gender roles in their expectations of each other, and finally, the relevance of money. The discussion continues for a couple of scenes, while they go to their hotel, and when they are already there. The issue for Carl is that she makes him pay too much, even though he makes less money, a fact that is mentioned a couple of times. Yaya, on the other hand, is embarrassed to talk about money because that is not "sexy." In the middle of her desperation over the discussion, she tries to pay the bill, though her credit card is rejected. This is the first signal of a millionaire façade. We know that she makes more money than Carl, but how much money is that? And what is the relation of the money she makes with the money she spends? How much does it cost to maintain a luxurious life to show off on Instagram? The questions are never answered, but they make us think about the economic fragility of the influencer. Then, when they get

to their room, Yaya reveals more about her economic vulnerability: "It is not about money (…) What if I fall pregnant and I can't go on working? I need to know that the person I'm with intends to take care of me. Otherwise, I am wasting my time (…) I'm a model, honey, the only way for me to get out of this life is to become someone's trophy wife." Then Carl asks her if she sees their relationship only as a way to "increasing the followers on our Instagram, and all of that." She responds that "it makes sense," because they like each other, and it is also "good for business" (9:40). Yaya's thinking sounds cold, but it reflects how mixed are her working persona and her private persona. Given that she understands that her main currency is her body and beauty, every step she takes is calculated in terms of the benefits she could get with it: dating an attractive male model at the moment means many likes on social media, getting brands' attention, and probably even receiving attention from the press. She is making the most out of a job that could be lucrative, but extremely short-lived. Sooner or later, brands are going to be looking for younger, more beautiful women –or women who are not pregnant–, and she is going to be left behind.

The other point of fragility that is shown in the movie, and that expands the way it is suggested in *Sweat*, is the dependence on a certain social order. In the film, Yaya is getting the benefits of a successful influencer. She receives gifts –such as the shirt Carl is wearing in the scene of the restaurant– and invitations, such as the luxurious "vacations" that she and Carl have on an exclusive cruise together with extremely wealthy people. "Vacations" in quotation marks, because she must post pictures of herself enjoying the experience: we see Carl helping her to do this when she is sunbathing, and when she is having lunch (29:00; 35:30). Just like Sylvia does in *Sweat*, Yaya performs for the camera: she makes a sexy face for the first picture (the "porn-chic" aesthetic), and smiles for the second. After the first hour of the movie everyone's vacations begin to tremble because of a big storm. The constant swaying of the cruise makes people vomit, and the bathrooms' pipes collapse, which ends up with the ship full of human waste. To top it off, the cruise is attacked by pirates, which causes a shipwreck. As a result, the second part of the film takes place on an inhospitable island. Yaya and Carl are part of the few people who reach it. The issue is that, once there, they must survive basically using nature's resources, and they are not prepared. The only person who can deal with the circumstances is Abigail (Dolly De Leon), a brown-skinned woman in her 50s who worked as a cleaning lady at the cruise, and who knows how to hunt and set fire. In that context, when everybody's life depends on her skills, she becomes "privileged," even though, at the beginning, there was a timid attempt to maintain the order of the cruise, with her at the bottom. She takes advantage of the situation, keeping the largest portions of food, and sharing the only shelter they have with women first, and then with Carl, who is willing to exchange his body for some privilege –just like male models must do in the fashion industry, according to Östlund–. In this new order, in which there is no internet, no phones, and no preconceived hierarchy, Yaya is adrift. She does not only lose Carl –at least at night–, but she loses her status: her former currency is worth nothing under these circumstances. The shocking second-last scene of the movie, however, gives Yaya a second chance. While she takes a walk with Abigail, they encounter a luxury resort: a few beach lounge chairs, and an elevator. At the beginning, they celebrate together. But the audience knows what this means: for Yaya, recovering all the privileges –the currency– she had before the shipwreck; for Abigail, losing her status and going back to the bottom of the social scale. The scene ends when Abigail is about to hit Yaya's head with a rock. That is the last time we see them before the movie ends. It is easy to forget that the world we live in has an arbitrary order, that the way things are is not natural, that people who are at the top of the social ladder, and at the bottom of it, are there because of a history –economic, racial– of favorable circumstances. That is the value of *Triangle of Sadness*. It is a necessary reminder that the inequalities we see today are the result of a model of society that was installed by landowners and continued by business owners, and that is organized around capital. For the film's characters, it took only one accident to turn the social order around. It is as fragile as that. And given that influencers benefit from the current system, a change of this nature would be a disaster. Now, it is evident that the movie works as a satire, and even as a fable, and that even though the social order is fragile, it is well cared for by the most powerful people in the world. Yaya and Sylvia are safe for now. But, taking revolutions out of the picture, what if Instagram loses its appeal? What if, as Yaya puts it, they get pregnant? What if they are "canceled" because of a comment they make? It would take one accident –such as a shipwreck– to lose their coveted status.

Conclusion

This article aims to contribute to society with a deep reflection on what I call the fragile performance of the influencer, identifying the most important points of vulnerability in this role that have been signaled in the press as a "dream job" for many. First, the article provides a theoretical review of the concepts related to labor that fit the influencer's work: immaterial, material, and sexualized work. Using the Instagram account of German model and blogger Caroline Daur was useful to illustrate what aspects of the influencer's work belong to each of these categories. Then, throughout the analysis of the representation of the influencer in von Horn's *Sweat*, and Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness*, the article attempts to describe in detail some of the points of fragility that affect influencers, both in personal and social terms. These could be summarized as the porousness of private and public life; the fuzzy distinction between working and leisure time; the affective labor required to interact with the public, and to receive constant judgments; the constant need to attract the attention of others; the risks of high exposure; the dependence on social media platforms, and on a specific social order; and the imminence of economic uncertainty. The last point applies to influencers who are already successful; if that is not the case, economic uncertainty is a basic condition. Maybe the high visibility of the positive points of being an influencer and the ignorance of the points of vulnerability is what makes it a desired possibility in different places around the world. Considering that it is still a new phenomenon, and that the first generation of influencers is still active, it could be a matter of time before we start seeing a more complete picture of it in the public discourse. One thing that would be fascinating to see in the future is how female directors are depicting female influencers in film. In this article, I analyzed two movies directed by male filmmakers, whose example of an influencer is a woman. It could be interesting to see if women are thinking about the phenomenon of the female influencer in a similar way to Östlund and von Horn, or if they are interpreting this aspect of reality in a different manner, which could illuminate new points of fragility, or maybe enter into discussion with some of the points highlighted in this research.

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