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Bodies and work: A Study of Employment in the Service and Cultural Sectors

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ABSTRACT Professions linked to cultural production and those associated with the service sector share certain characteristics that are not easily identifiable if we limit ourselves to considering the tasks formally assigned and recognised as belonging to those who work in these fields. However, by focusing on the negative effects experienced by those engaged in such work, it is possible to assess some common harms. Through a series of interviews, this study aims to detect physical damage, emotional exhaustion, and the presence of aesthetic pressure in a set of activities connected with the service sector and with artistic and intellectual production. Physical strain and associated harm are taken as indicators of what we call economic exploitation. On the other hand, we present the emergence of aesthetic demands, as well as emotional exhaustion, as forms of cultural exploitation. Finally, we analyse situations that illustrate what we might describe as a realisable utopia. In these, the necessary work of reproducing bodies is only conditioned by the demands of activities that are both defined and meaningful.
KEYWORDS Economic exploitation, cultural exploitation, workplace injuries, service sector, cultural sector, occupational health

RESUMO As profissões vinculadas à produção cultural e aquelas associadas ao sector de serviços partilham certas características que não são facilmente identificáveis se nos limitarmos a considerar as tarefas formalmente atribuídas e reconhecidas como pertencendo a quem trabalha nestes campos. No entanto, ao concentrarmo-nos nos efeitos negativos experimentados por aqueles que exercem tal trabalho, torna-se possível avaliar alguns danos comuns. Através de uma série de entrevistas, este estudo tem como objetivo detetar danos físicos, exaustão emocional e presença de pressão estética num conjunto de atividades relacionadas com o sector de serviços e com a produção artística e intelectual. O desgaste físico e os danos associados são tomados como indicadores daquilo a que chamamos exploração económica. Por outro lado, apresentamos o surgimento de exigências estéticas, bem como a exaustão emocional, como formas de exploração cultural. Por fim, analisamos situações que ilustram o que poderíamos descrever como uma utopia realizável. Nestas, o trabalho necessário de reprodução dos corpos está condicionado apenas pelas exigências de atividades que são simultaneamente definidas e significativas.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE Exploração econômica, exploração cultural, danos laborais, sector de serviços, sector cultural, saúde ocupacional

Introduction

Workplaces and working time are central to people's lives. All occupations require workers to possess a set of competences and skills, which may be more or less defined. While these may, on the one hand, represent sound professional practice, they also shape the personal and collective identity of individual workers. Furthermore, beyond these requirements, bodies that work have the right to preserve their physical and psychological integrity, not only for their own personal wellbeing but also the quality of the work they do.

In this study, we set out to identify three types of harm or damage that people may suffer during work: physical exhaustion, emotional fatigue and aesthetic pressure. Although these types of harms are often interrelated and co-exist, they are considered separately for analytical purposes. The analysis seeks to explore whether these harms respond to some form of exploitation—economic, cultural, or both—or whether they may be related to other causes, such as the intrinsic demands associated with particular types of work or the mere passage of time. We also consider whether such demands produce particular forms of exclusion and how these may be rooted in specific dominant cultural models.

In our theoretical framework (Moreno Pestaña, forthcoming), we refer to economic exploitation in forms of employment where workers' contributions are not fully recognised. Such work is characterised by low wages, precarious working conditions, and bodily effects associated with illness. Indeed, the very presence of work-related physical or psychological ill health may be considered an indicator of labour exploitation, as such circumstances prevent the reproduction of the body. Moreover, we consider work exploitative when it cannot be sustained without therapeutic support. Cultural exploitation, in turn, refers to employment that requires the exercise of tasks related to cultural production that contribute nothing to the activity itself—in terms of performance or at a technical level—but which are harmful to the worker. Such activities may be of an aesthetic, emotional, or even sexual nature.

To assess the three types of harm—physical, emotional, and aesthetic—and whether they involve forms of exploitation, we examine workers from two different occupational groups: customer service workers in the retail and hospitality sectors of the service industry and workers involved in cultural production in artistic and intellectual spaces. The analysis centres on whether workplaces characterised by

dominant cultural discourses or practices result in specific forms of cultural exploitation. We also consider whether work in the service sector, particularly those occupations involving interaction with the public, are subject to similar effects and, if so, how these manifest.

1. Study design and methodology

The findings presented in this article are part of research conducted within the framework of the *Cátedra Extraordinaria "Filosofía Social de la discriminación corporal"* (Instituto de las Mujeres–University of Granada).[1] The study employed a qualitative methodology, collecting data through in-depth interviews and a workshop with trade union delegates from the service sector. This approach enabled us to reconstruct the employment trajectories of 63 individuals in total: 54 through individual interviews—carried out between October 2023 and February 2025—and a workshop with 9 participants—carried out on 17 April 2024. For the purposes of this article, the analysis focuses on 23 participants—20 from individual interviews and 3 union delegates from the workshop.[2]

Table 1. Profile of study participants

Interviewee	Age	Occupation
Sebastián*	27	Supermarket employee / Union delegate
Almudena	23	Shop worker / Artistic work
Miguel*	36	Shop worker / Union delegate
Patricia	23	Tattoo artist / Occasional modelling work
Begoña	39	Dance teacher
Darío	29	Airline cabin crew member
Ana*	Middle-aged	Home-care worker / Union delegate
Julio	49	Playwright / Actor

1 Extraordinary Chair "Social Philosophy of Bodily Discrimination" (Women's Institute, University of Granada)

2 The basic data on the profiles of the interviewees, whose trajectories underpin our argument in this article, are available in Table 1. The three people whose names are marked with an asterisk is to identify those who took part in the workshop with trade union delegates. The names used to identify the interviewees are fictitious, in order to guarantee their anonymity and protect their identity.

Marina	Middle-aged	University lecturer
Esther	48	University lecturer
Rodrigo	34	University lecturer
Olga	29	Online university lecturer / Lawyer in a private company
Andrea	30	Call centre worker / Previous experience in luxury hotels
Marcela	45	Casino receptionist
Micaela	51	Visual artist and teacher in an art academy
Carmen	36	Singer / Restaurant cook
Alfredo	25	Doctoral researcher under contract at the university
Francisca	42	Executive in the health sector
Fernanda	40	Artistic director and playwright
Javier	34	Physiotherapist
Augusto	36	Musician and cultural manager
Jacinta	51	Shop worker
María	39	Supermarket worker (cashier assistant)

The sampling process took a number of considerations into account. First, occupations were identified on the basis of professional culture, understood as a set of dynamic rules governing professional performance. This implies that workers in certain professional cultures are more likely to be exposed to demands associated with physical appearance—for instance, those in public-facing work, whether in retail or in specific artistic and intellectual activities. Second, drawing on what we understand as conditions of "labour citizenship" (Alonso Benito, 2007), we considered the degree of protection afforded to those performing these occupations. The extent of such protections depended on the clarity with which professional roles are defined, the presence of trade unions, the outcomes of collective bargaining, and employment stability.

On this basis, the extent to which an occupation involves tasks that expose workers to, or protect them from, economic and cultural exploitation depends on the specific context in which it is situated. In the following sections, we analyse the effects of jobs in the service sector and in cultural production in terms of the physical, emotional, and/or aesthetic harm they produce.

2. Physical exhaustion

A first characteristic of occupations marked by economic exploitation is that they are physically very demanding and require high levels of energy expenditure. A second is that many jobs are poorly paid, with the full extent of productive activity not being economically compensated. Regarding the former, the physical demands of the job and the resulting wear on the body were recurring themes in the accounts of participants employed in retail, supermarkets, hospitality, and sports facilities. For those working in shops and supermarkets, physical strain was associated with the diversity of tasks and the pace of work, which allowed little time for rest apart from very brief meal breaks. Sebastián described his daily routine in a supermarket as follows:

> My official job title is cashier-stocker, but in the company, physically speaking, well, just imagine the pallets that arrive at the shop, they're huge pallets, that weigh, with boxes that can weigh between five and twelve kilos, and that's for the first three hours. I mean, we start at 6:30 and don't finish 'til nine. It's non-stop, just restocking, restocking, restocking all the time, with a set schedule. Then we're also exposed to low temperatures. We have a freezer room where you go in and it's minus 24 degrees. Another physical aspect is working on the till, and, although you can finally sit down, mostly we stand because it's more comfortable.

The pace of work and the variety of tasks described by Sebastián are very similar to Almudena's account of work in clothing shops:

> There are always three of us in the shop and we all do everything: tills, stockroom, and serving customers. Every hour we go up and restock what's been sold. And then we are constantly folding clothes if we're not at the till or dealing with customers. That's basically it. And then, when the shop closes, we finish the restocking, check all the stock on the shop floor and in the stockroom, do the till, close up, and go home. That's every day. So basically, we all do everything.

There are, as such, only minor variations in work tasks across sectors and companies. In all cases, the work involves activities such as receiving goods, restocking the shop floor, keeping the sales space tidy and clean, serving customers, and operating the till. If the tasks per-

formed in these jobs are similar, so too are the consequences for workers' bodies. Study participants consistently reported foot, leg, and back pain, which worsened the longer they spent in the same job. Miguel, aged 36, had been working as a shop assistant in a fashion shop for sixteen years and, although he remained in good overall health, he had begun to feel the physical toll on his body:

> As a physical job, well, there's the foot pain, you're always on your feet, on the move. And then there's the trainers they give us, as part of the uniforms, which aren't, we think, aren't the most appropriate. Back pain, yeah, in the end, after so long in the shop. Yes, you definitely notice at the start when you're younger, but in the end, you get aches and feel ground down because when I was 20, when I started working, I looked different, you know, different. The daily grind takes its toll. Well now, my back, for example, these past six months the aches have been worse, worse. And then we're always up against the clock, for example, the time to get your tasks done is so limited or they just give you more than you can handle. You have to do this, you have to restock… but as soon as you finish restocking you have to go to the fitting rooms, and when you're done in the fitting rooms, run, you've got to close the till. So there are loads of tasks that…

As we have just seen, the work entailed in these occupations is physically very demanding—the bodily effects are a constant theme of the interviews, and range from ailments such as varicose veins to back and foot problems. To keep up with the pace of work and ensure the reproduction of the labour force—so that workers are ready for a new day's work—it becomes necessary to strengthen the body through exercise and to seek physiotherapy or podiatric care. All of which, of course, must be paid out of generally meagre wages.

A similar situation was found in the arts, where work is characterised by a striking degree of legal anomie: lack of stable employment contracts, sporadic public and private funding, galleries and music event producers retain very high percentages of earnings, as well as minimal labour legislation and trade union representation. All of which results in a highly deregulated sector. Most of the artists we interviewed did not earn a living from their artistic work. Holding multiple employments caused significant physical strain across various occupations such as painting, theatre directing, singing, and dancing. Almudena, a 23-year-old visual artist mentioned earlier, combined her painting work with a

job as a sales assistant in a clothing shop. Both activities took a toll on her body:

> Interviewer: Okay, and do you think your job in the shop has had physical costs for you, I mean, how do you feel?
>
> Almudena: Yeah, what I was saying about my legs and the shitty shoes. I mean, honestly, it's been awful. I think I'm getting a bunion, really, I'm not joking. At the start, that first month, going up and down to the stockroom, and being all the time, I mean, you don't get to sit down for even a moment, and there are days I'm there nine, ten hours. It really wears you down, but well, you do get used to it; I'd spent five years at university not taking care of myself, but well, yes, mostly it's the shoes, I'd say, and that they don't let us [change them]. I asked, I said, "look, these shoes, for the love of God," and they said "if you want to stop wearing them, you have to go to the insurance company to get authorisation." Like, I can't just wear similar ones. I don't want to go through the insurer, and if they can't make me insoles that fit, they'd have to issue some special ones. I can't. It's all bureaucracy.
>
> I: And as for your work as an artist, do you think that has a physical cost?
>
> A: Yeah, but that's because I don't look after myself properly. Like what I said about the gloves or the spray—I work a lot with spray paint, and I really should wear a mask, at least, but I don't. And I know that affects the lungs a lot, it's the worst, it's worse than smoking these days, really, it's true. Really. But yeah, I think it's mainly the damage to my skin from the chemicals, the turpentine and everything—they get cracked, they peel, I've got cuts everywhere, all over the place.
>
> I: Right, yeah, yeah, exactly.
>
> A: But otherwise, well, and my back too, that's hard, because I have to, they [the artworks] are large formats, and shifting them from the floor to the wall, hammering, lifting, moving, yeah, that takes its toll, I think.

Patricia is also a visual artist trained in Fine Arts. She decided to dedicate herself to tattooing—a creative activity that offers more stability as its closer to everyday life and has a broader market. Even though she does not have to supplement her income with another job, self-em-

ployment comes with a persistent sense of insecurity that she found exhausting, mostly at an emotional level, but also physically:

> (…) in the end it does create a bit of anxiety because, whether you like it or not, no matter how well I do it and all the care I put into it, if a client doesn't want to come and get a tattoo, I can't convince them. And since it's not a basic necessity, you know those (…) earnings (…) won't be regular, because maybe one week is really good and that week I manage to pay the rent, and then there are two weeks when I don't tattoo anyone. So yeah, it's very stressful because I'd never even been registered as self-employed or anything. And now it feels like the thing that causes me the most stress with my work situation. But well, it's absolutely normal for my type of work, and in the end, I know that everyone worries about that. I mean, unfortunately so.

There are some occupations, particularly in the performing arts, where physical strain is at times intrinsic to the activity itself. In such cases, the issue is not economic exploitation but rather a deterioration of the resources needed to perform the activity—damage caused by the very nature of the work and accentuated by the passage of time. Begoña, a teacher and urban dance performer, works at an academy as well as performing in shows. While she did not report any financial difficulties, nor any negative physical or psychological effects for her working or personal life, the very activity she most enjoyed caused injuries to her body:

> I mean, I've got a lot of physical wear and tear. Yeah, I mean, I've been dancing for many years and people might say I look fine, but inside I've got my issues. But I don't complain, I don't show it, and I don't complain because I think complaining just makes things worse for yourself. So I don't complain; I just keep going, as far as I can, and when the time comes, it comes, and that's that. When I was 13, I was diagnosed with chondromalacia patella in both knees and my doctor told me I couldn't dance. And I said, "Me? No chance." I said, "Don't stop me from dancing—you'd take my life away." What did I do? I went to a physio and said, "I've got this, what do I need to do to keep dancing?" "Strengthen your quads." "Okay, let's strengthen those quads." And from then on, it's been all good for me (…)
>
> For me, being a dance teacher is something that really fulfils me. (…) So then, later on, imagine that I can't keep dancing. Well, other projects, maybe open

a clothes shop or something like that, because I really like clothes too. I don't know. But for now, in the long term, I want to keep teaching as long as my body holds out.

Begoña's account is important because it enables us to distinguish between *physical exploitation*—bodies worn down by the excessive demands of work—and *bodily resource*—bodies that may deteriorate through the performance of activity and the passage of time. In the first case, the demand is both inhumane—the body suffers—and futile—the suffering undermines the activity. The second case represents a situation in which the individual is willing to pay the price in exchange for a profession that provides satisfaction. In this respect, it would be worth examining the conditions under which some individuals consider themselves to have sufficient resources to accept the physical and psychological cost of performing their work. Notably, Begoña's words convey a passion for her work that is absent from all the previous accounts.

In the academic field, exposure to economic exploitation is similar. University lecturers often have to wait many years to achieve job stability, earn decent salaries, and end their dependence on multiple occupations. However, in many cases, such stability is achieved thanks to institutionalisation and regulation of academic hiring processes, which contrasts with employment in the arts. Of the six university lecturers interviewed, four held permanent positions with full-time contracts, and two were in the process of achieving stability. Of the six artists interviewed—three visual artists, a theatre director, a singer, and a dancer—and whose employment trajectories we analyse in greater depth, only the latter reported no economic hardship, no harmful physical or psychological effects of their activity, and no unpaid work demands.

Both the service and the artistic sectors can expose workers' bodies to economic exploitation. The social recognition enjoyed by artists does not protect them against such abuses. An absence of employment contracts and labour legislation leads to even greater exposure to instability than in the service sector. So, while symbolic recognition does exist, it does not correspond to any significant form of material recognition. Indeed, it may be inferred that the high social esteem generates a silent acceptance of material exploitation. Although there are organisations, regulations, and some forms of collective professional struggle, their impact and reach are far less than in other fields of employment, at least in Spain. The question that arises is why so many artists continue

to accept such conditions. Claude Poliak uses the term "universes of consolation" to refer to unrecognised, alternative artistic subworlds that are well organised and have their own institutions. All kinds of aspiring artists—the relegated, the withdrawn, and the waiting—inhabit these spaces. They persist in the hope of accessing the more established artistic field, as well as a belief in the alternative (Poliak, 2006, pp. 233–234). We would also add that this helps explain the structure sustaining the intense material exploitation in these subworlds, as well as the desire that motivates people to remain in them.

3. Emotional exhaustion

In addition to the physical costs of employment, there are also emotional—and even sexual—demands that contribute nothing to the performance of the work itself, merely serving to generate situational hierarchies. What we see here is the introduction of specific cultural tasks that are alien to the work activity, parasitic upon it, harmful to workers, and irrelevant to professional performance. Such practices flourish in contexts of cultural exploitation. The analysis of the interviews identified different types of emotional overload: unrecognised emotional management work, which at times involved being exposed to aggression; demands to remain involved in damaging social networks; and work relationships that caused emotional strain. In all of the cases, the emotional cost was unnecessary to the work but persisted because of the demands of employers, clients, and even co-workers, whose own positions are at least partly sustained on these same demands. In this respect, we are dealing with a form of cultural exploitation.

Almudena, the shop worker and artist mentioned earlier, describes the emotional management work she has to carry out on a daily basis when dealing with customers:

> In the shop, well, it's tough, honestly, dealing with the public and that type of people, the 'ladies' or posh people, really up themselves, people can be really unpleasant. It's so bad that many days when I leave work I want to cry, because of the way people treat you, yeah, yeah, yeah (…) and it's like one in ten, one in ten customers is nice, I mean, one in ten, when I'm at the till, that I say, "Good morning, thank you" and they answer kindly.

Customers' expectations of servility from those who serve them is relatively common in retail sales and, in the case of this worker, involved emotional labour of the highest order simply to keep working—an impact to which she should never be subjected. Sebastián, the first of the workers we cited, recounted several episodes of verbal aggression and even one case of physical assault by dissatisfied customers at the supermarket where he worked. Managing customer anger, with its heavy emotional cost, was most commonly observed among the young male workers who participated in the study. Another of our informants, Darío, who had been working for seven years as a flight attendant for an airline when we interviewed him, described similar experiences with passengers. Both cases suggest that these workers are assigned to the role of managing conflict and violence in their interactions with customers.

The sexualised dimension of aggression and abuse that workers are often forced to endure—including, in its most extreme form, sexual assault—intensifies in the case of women. Ana, a union delegate in the domestic service sector, told us about how frequently these women experience such violence. The sexualisation of their work is sustained by the complicity of customers and employers: the former tend to justify their behaviour by blaming the women, while the latter impose no sanctions on their customers. This collusion between customers and companies creates a conflicted space in which the boundaries of the job and its associated tasks remain blurred.

In the artistic field, cultural exploitation associated with unnecessary emotional burdens is also linked to employment instability. Informal social networks serve as an entry into the field and a means of maintaining positions once attained. However, they expose individuals to situations that cause anxiety and emotional strain. Julio, a playwright and actor, described the exhaustion he experienced from the constant demands of social engagement. In addition to the castings typical of the acting profession, he spoke of endless parties and festivals that also entail continuous emotional exposure:

> (…) I have been to theatre festivals with my company, and that's a kind of place where, well, you have to smile: "you have to go here, you have to go there". You have to socialise with everyone, everyone. But I can't stand it, I can't stand it because, as I said at the beginning, I can only socialise up to a point. So I can't do it. But there are people who can, people who do it really

> well, and I admire them. I admire them because it's work. I knew someone who might do five castings in one day, crossing Madrid from one end to the other like bim-bam, you know? And then you'd go to this party. You know this guy, you know that one, you meet so-and-so. I couldn't do it, I couldn't. And it's very similar, well, to a theatre festival, because when you go as a director and all that you have to make contacts too, and then it's like… "Look, this person's important, he's a distributor from the Basque Country, go talk to him," that kind of thing. I don't know, I don't have those social skills (…)

Julio and Almudena are both exposed to what we might call the personalisation of artistic work, a shift that emerged in the era of modern art. In this context, value no longer resides in the nature of the artwork itself but in the recognition of the artist as a figure (Heinich, 1998, pp. 27–28). This affects not only the aesthetic appreciation of objects but also how individuals circulate within the field. Art dealers, theatre programmers, and collectors want to know the artist personally, which seems to help guarantee their privileged position. In Thornton (2009), a collector is quoted as saying: "We meet the vast majority of artists, because when you're acquiring young work, you can't judge it by the art alone. You have to judge it by the character of the person making it" (Thornton, 2008, p. 88). Employment, therefore, depends on people's moods and on the vagaries of personal relationships. In this respect, workers are exposed to emotional strain derived from activities that have little to do with the artistic practice of acting or painting.

Cultural exploitation linked to emotions was also present in the academic field and appeared in all the interviews conducted. In this case, work-related stress was principally associated with peer relationships. The nature of academic activities and their organisational division—competitions, classes, conferences, publications, project funding, accreditations, and so on—produced a kind of internal competitiveness that was also related to personalisation practices. Far from encouraging genuine collective work—sustained over time and oriented towards scientific development, shared activities, and collective achievements—positions within the academic hierarchy are defined through a game of sterile confrontations that produce emotional strain and serve only to preserve the privileges of the few. Marina, a tenured professor of medicine, explained.

> In my experience, mine, it's a competitive world where, generally, people don't give you much support. It's [the support] not there. I mean, it's like I always say, "I want, I don't want to do this, but I don't want you to do it either." So that means, well, sometimes the people around you, those above you, make it difficult for you. It's not a pleasant environment in that sense. Personally, in that respect, I had a better experience in private companies than in the public sector. The atmosphere was more… people were much more understanding, kinder. In my experience it's a very competitive world, where people aren't happy if things go well for you or if you achieve something. So that often leads to lots of indirect confrontations, because me personally, I've never had a direct one, because I just don't get into that. But still, it does discourage you sometimes, and it's not a pleasant environment.

Esther, a pharmacy lecturer, experienced the same pressure and provided details on the activities that generate such discomfort:

> We're constantly pushing each other, setting higher and higher goals, and that's really stressful and can even make you undervalue yourself or doubt your own abilities. Why? Because you're constantly measuring yourself against projects you've applied for and get, articles you've published, research periods. There are a million things in the university: teaching periods, research periods, awards for this and that, "I've published this," "I haven't published that," "I've got a grant from the regional government," "I've got one from the Ministry," and "I've got…" And we're always like, "I got invited to a conference," "I didn't," "I got invited." So we're always comparing ourselves to each other and that causes… I don't know, maybe some people have big egos and that's fine, but if you don't… and I don't, it makes you feel bad. So yes, constantly. I think it's a big mental effort to stay up to date.

Rodrigo, a modern history lecturer, described how personal effort takes on a competitive form: "Well, that was a pretty difficult period, but the experience, the hours I was able to build up in that contract, that's what I think helped me make the leap later, when I applied for the post in Madrid. Exactly that, having more hours than the other competitors [candidates], right?" Pressure and emotional strain were also evident in Olga's account of combining part-time work as a lawyer in a firm with teaching in an online university: "Then there's another angle, so to speak, which is the competition, the competitiveness between colleagues, which at times can create a quite toxic working environment.

And, well, you have to learn to handle that and not let it affect your day-to-day work, your job, your performance."

Olga's words offer a key insight. When emotional tension permeates and undermines work activity it constitutes a form of cultural exploitation that emerged in each of the three types of work we analysed: unrecognised emotional labour and exposure to violence in customer service work; exposure to informal social relations as a way of securing and sustaining artistic activities; and the constant competition and peer conflict faced by workers in academia. In other words, servility, anomie, and competitiveness, respectively, seem to define these three professional fields but ultimately weigh them down, to the benefit of only the few.

4. Aesthetic pressure

In addition to the emotional labour discussed in the previous section, we must also consider aesthetic forms of strain, encompassing everything related to the body—morphologies, care, changes—as well as appearance—clothing, image. This aesthetic dimension helps us to identify elements that function as mechanisms of exclusion or inclusion in certain work environments. To do so, we can consider the cases of Andrea, who had worked on the front desk of several luxury hotels, and Marcela, a casino receptionist. In their interviews, both described the importance of appearance in their work and agreed that their physique—both are slim—may have helped them to get their positions. Andrea, however, was particularly aware of the way appearance functions as a factor of exclusion. The luxury hotel where she worked selected a specific body type, one deemed to best embody a particular brand image. She described how racialised and ethnically marked bodies were excluded from such work:

> Andrea: In the receptions of luxury hotels, depending on the profile, [appearance] is very important. In the last hotel I worked at, we had a trainee who wasn't kept on because the manager thought she was ugly (…) which, for example, I've never seen happen to a man. No, I've never seen a similar situation where [they say], "I'm not taking this guy on because he's ugly." No. I've never seen that. I've only seen it in the case of that girl, which I found shocking…

Interviewer: And they actually said it like that, explained the reasons just like that?

A: Well, the thing is, I had a really good relationship with my supervisor, and the manager told my supervisor: "No, look, not that girl, I don't think she fits our profile." That was it. Why? If, at the end of the day, she's capable, why is it so important that she look good? I don't know.

I: And was it more about her appearance, her body?

A: Well, it's because she didn't meet the standard protocol of what they consider pretty. I mean, I don't even know how to put it, because I don't think it matters either, right? But yes, according to their standard, well, she didn't meet it. It's also the case that, she was also, maybe it played a role, Latina, with very marked Latin features. But I don't know, like a large face, a flat nose. And that was it. So no, so he didn't like her. I don't know. You can't really explain it because there isn't any. I mean, there isn't any. It's different if you said, "Look, she was an intern and I don't think she's suited to this," but no…

In this extract, we can see here how appearance, ethnic markers, and gender intersect in a process of exclusion governed by an imposed model of excellence. While the physical and emotional demands we discussed earlier reveal mechanisms of economic and cultural exploitation, aesthetic demands appear to combine processes of exclusion, domination, and cultural exploitation that are particular to each case. This tension is evident in working practices. Andrea's account highlights the importance of an appearance defined by a particular ethnic morphology, although exclusion can also be based on other physical features such as body weight (Moreno Pestaña, 2016).

The artistic and intellectual fields are particularly interesting to analyse because they allow us to question whether homologous bodily models are mobilised in spaces governed by a dominant culture. The dominant body type has its roots in the cultural elites of the nineteenth century (Moreno Pestaña, 2020). At that time, the bourgeoisie had already distanced itself from popular spaces through restraint, stylisation, and refinement (Elias, 2016). The bodily norms of our time have inherited aspects of these restrictive models, which gradually spread across different social spheres. The interviews with artists reveal an

ambivalence: on the one hand, a rejection of unifying aesthetic pressure regarding ways of dressing and adornment; on the other, an acceptance of bodily care practices such as dieting and physical exercise. What is most valued is plurality in appearance, associated with the idea of individual freedom in all spheres, as Almudena expresses it:

> Interviewer: Right, and within the world of artists, do you think that apart from aesthetics, which seems to matter quite a lot, physical appearance is also important? Do you think it matters at all?
>
> Almudena: I think we see it differently, so no, not really. In my group there's a bit of everything, physically, nationalities, I mean everything. I mean, the groups I have with artists are really mixed groups, in terms of aesthetics, nationality, ways of thinking, even politics, even in the way of… I don't think so. I think not in the groups we create, not in this space.

Micaela, a 51-year-old artist, also stated that freedom is what matters most in artistic environments: "In Fine Arts, is there pressure to dress or present yourself in a certain way? I don't think so, I really don't. In that sense, the feeling I have now is that people were very free to do what they wished." Nevertheless, later in the interview, she acknowledged that youthfulness can be important:

> Interviewer: I see. So, thinking generally about women artists, do you think physical appearance affects their job prospects or professional capacity?
>
> Micaela: Yes.
>
> I: In what sense? How? How do you think it affects them?
>
> M: Physical appearance and age. The older you get, some doors are closed. I have the feeling that some doors are closed, but well, there are others open too, or you have the key to open others.

Patricia, the tattoo artist, like Almudena and Micaela, believed that artistic culture is based on diversity:

> I'd say, I don't know, in Fine Arts I came across all kinds of people, all kinds of looks, and I think diversity is something that is really embraced, as much

> in a physical sense as your own self-expression, the clothes you wear, the hair you have. Yeah, it's something that, I think there's less prejudice and that, I don't know, it just happens naturally without it being like "I'm fat, I'm thin," not paying attention to the body itself but to how you use it to express yourself artistically, so to speak.

A body that expresses itself artistically is a cultural resource. Diversity can signal the coexistence of plural bodies not subjected to alienating models. But it may also reflect the demand for originality that so characterises the artistic field. The absence of job security is often experienced as freedom. However, the lack of precise regulations—in relation to types of contracts or the definition of tasks—and aesthetic diversity may respond to the same logic: the very nature of the artistic tends to resist the acceptance of rules, even though, in practice, these are tacitly adopted. Patricia suffered from an eating disorder, Micaela was aware of how the passing of time may cut short her career opportunities, and Almudena saw the physical demands of her shop work as a kind of slimming workout. In the service sector, many of the women interviewed were acutely aware of the importance of appearance for obtaining employment, while also recognising how irrelevant this requirement is to the actual performance of their work. The artists we interviewed lacked this awareness because the dominant bodily model is woven into the very fabric of the field. For it to take effect, it cannot be perceived as an imposition; it must be experienced as natural.

In the performing arts a different perspective was apparent. The exposure of the body on stage creates a greater awareness of the conditions that affect it. Julio, the playwright, pointed out that the type of physical appearance required has little to do with acting ability, because there is a tendency "to give the leading roles, even if they are less talented—this is absolutely proven—to the most handsome men, the most beautiful women, the ones with the best bodies." Carmen, a singer in an orchestra and a cook, explained that she was required to wear very little clothing on stage, which she found denigrating as it was unrelated to her ability to perform: "when they showed me the costumes my head exploded. They are prejudices, I know, but I had never dressed like that to go out in public, I mean, almost in my underwear." Moreover, not being properly covered up in the cold posed a risk to her voice:

> If on top of that you have to strain your voice because of a sound problem, because everything isn't properly equalised or whatever, then it happens. And apart from that, the damp, the cold. I remember the last performance I did with the orchestra was in October, it was only one degree out. One degree! (…) And us with those costumes that don't cover anything. Nothing. Regardless of what you want, it doesn't keep the cold out, does it?

We suggest that exposure to harm from the very resources that generate profit for the company, stems in part from the perception that the worker and her labour are replaceable. Carmen was clear that she was not given the means to preserve her labour power:

> But it's not well paid. Even the orchestras, those 120 euros, that's not well paid. Not well paid, because I'm working four hours singing and dancing. And besides, they start at half past twelve at night. Do you know what I'm putting myself and my voice through? You end up damaged (…) No one is going to pay for your voice.

The university lecturers' accounts of physical appearance in the workplace were similar to those of the visual artists: academia is a very free environment where everyone dresses as they wish. The difference, however, is that eccentricities and personal flourishes do not seem to be accepted, as everything has to conform with a sense of "normality"—the word most frequently used in these interviews. According to Marina, "at the university here we all dress normally, and when you go to give a talk somewhere, maybe you don't dress as you do every day, but still within normality." For Esther, "you go smart but not formal. So, I don't remember ever wearing anything that, for me, wasn't just normal clothes." Rodrigo says: "I wore a shirt and that was it. I didn't stand out, I didn't overdress or underdress." Alfredo was struck by this balance that seems to emerge as if by magic: "It's odd, you know. It's odd because almost no one ever comes in high heels." Physical activity and dieting are also part of this normality.

In *Unshrinking: How to Fight Fatphobia*, Kate Manne (2024) explains that in academia intelligence is associated with thinness:

> When presenting at philosophy conferences, and simply walking around my own department, I have often been assumed to be a secretary, a caretaker, or, at nearly forty, a student. "You don't look like a philosopher," said a

> senior male figure, looking me up and down, at one of my first professional workshops (119).
>
> I've come to realize that my discipline's fatphobia has affected me deeply. It communicates—again, in ways subtle and not—that not only are fat bodies a moral and sexual problem; they are a sign of intellectual failure too (p. 121).

Normality, in this case, involves not only dressing in a balanced way but also maintaining an appropriate body weight. Wearing high heels or having a non-normative body are seen as signs of lack of lucidity and mental discipline. These demands weigh most heavily on women. Manne (2024) also highlights how misogyny operates:

> (…) take a hierarchy, any hierarchy, and use it to derogate a girl or woman. We value intelligence: so call her stupid, inane, clueless. We value rationality: so call her crazy and hysterical. We value maturity: so call her childish and irresponsible. We value morality: so call her a bad person. We value thinness: so call her fat and, implicitly or explicitly, ugly (p. 102)

Even in positions protected from economic exploitation, the delicate balance of what counts as normal generates tension around the definition of femininity. In the 1970s, *Woman: Dress for Success* was a best-selling book that instructed women on how to dress in a way that was neither overly seductive or masculine (Entwistle, 2002, pp. 228–229). Concern with beauty is most often associated with femininity and tends to be stigmatised as superficial and, as Manne explains, as a possible sign of stupidity. Francisca, a senior executive in a pharmaceutical company, referred to situations marked by strong aesthetic pressure which, in the case of a woman, can easily shift from recognition to disrepute, or even to outright aggression. She recounted the following situation involving a younger female colleague and clients:

> One of my colleagues is a woman, she's young, she's Latin American, and she's attractive. So everything pointed to them treating her badly one day in a meeting, right? To treat her as stupid and ignorant.

In conclusion, workers in the service sector and the performing arts are keenly aware of the arbitrary use of bodily appearance by employers and, at times, by clients and audiences. In artistic and intellectual fields,

while this demand exists, it is not spoken of. Rather the aesthetic mandate is played out through a balance—"creative" in one case and "normal" in the other—that places working bodies under constant tension. Fernanda, an artistic director and playwright, put it as follows:

> Anyone who really took image seriously could make thousands of comments about me. But me, I don't particularly care about painting my nails, for example. Still, in recent years I've found myself getting a manicure for the summer presentation, or the autumn presentation, or whatever, or going to the hairdresser just before, to try to look as presentable as possible, what's understood as presentable, which is that extra effort women make culturally to be presentable.
>
> (…) In a place I've been familiar with for a long time and where I've spent a lot of time in different parts of my life, I never felt judged, never felt people had opinions about me, or pressured. It was always like a kind of welcoming or subtle approval, you know? A sort of subtle approval.

Despite all the aesthetic investment she mentioned, she did not experience it as direct pressure or unrecognised or unpaid labour, only as being subject to "a sort of subtle approval."

5. Resistances at work

The three work demands discussed above also give rise to specific forms of resistance. Javier, a self-employed physiotherapist who works in a private clinic, a care home, and a sports club, explained that his work is not only physically strenuous but also carries a considerable emotional burden. He justified his sometimes-heavy workload through his commitment to his clients and by the satisfaction he derives from providing a service that allows him to fulfil a life-long ambition to help others. In this case, neither economic nor cultural exploitation is evident as physical and emotional effort are compensated by public service and professional fulfilment.

Augusto is a 36-year-old musician who emigrated to Germany to study and benefit from better working conditions. He explained that the hourly rate for music teaching is high; it is set by the musician and is generally accepted. Recognition, however, is not only economic:

> I mean… a huge difference, because they really value art in general. Over there it's just, it's amazing. That's the most valuable thing of all. I'd say you feel super valued as an artist, and not only economically, though that too, because at the end of the day that matters too. But it's like, you say "this is my price" and that's fine, not like, "well, this is my price."

Furthermore, aesthetic pressure is less pronounced. CVs are submitted without photographs to reduce discrimination and, according to the interviewee, there is no need to get too dressed up for interviews. Despite finding a place where he could pursue his profession free from exploitation, his vocation for public service brought him back to his home region, where he now runs self-managed musical projects. Although he acknowledged that the emotional strain is high, he compensates for it, like Javier, through his social commitment: "[it is] a question of militancy for the rural world".

There is also the possibility of resisting cultural exploitation by avoiding it—either through prior experience of it or through an awareness that certain circumstances make access to other jobs impossible because of changes to market trends. Age, for example, is a limited factor which restricts access to occupations that favour younger workers.

This type of knowledge led Jacinta to accept a job in a shoe shop just before turning 50 years old. She had studied psychology and, after several unsuccessful attempts at civil service exams, began work in a real estate agency and later a children's clothing shop. When that shop closed, she realised that finding work in a similar shop was no longer an option because of her age, even though her physique and appearance might once have worked in her favour. Jacinta practised athletics in her youth, stays slim, and likes to dress smartly. In the shoe shop where she now works, she perceives no demands regarding her image or her body, and describes her tasks as simply those of managing a shop and making sales, without further impositions or conflicts.

A second case illustrates how this kind of workspace can serve as a refuge for those fleeing cultural exploitation. María studied tourism and works as a cashier in a large retail store. Although the work is physically demanding, in her current job she feels free from the mental and emotional burden she experienced in her previous role at the same company's travel agency. She offset the physical strain of working at the till by doing sport to build her strength. She also compensated for the loss of prestige and social recognition linked to her former job by

regularly volunteering a few hours a month in her company's corporate social responsibility programme, where she receives both symbolic and material reward, since the time dedicated to this activity gets her away from the till.

Thanks to this change, María has been able to achieve a better balance between her work and personal life. She recently turned down a promotion to head cashier because she feared that the workload would lead to stress and psychological exhaustion like she had experienced at the travel agency. Now, the emotional freedom gives her time to pursue her love of reading and writing, and also to spend more time with her husband on shared interests. Her case suggests that even those in the most demanding occupations may be capable of imagining and enacting practices that make work a space free from exploitation.

Begoña, the dance teacher and performer, primarily defended the professional culture of dance. On the one hand, she resisted her classes being instrumentalised as a showcase, or as a means of losing weight or sexualisation. On the other, like Javier and Augusto, she had a very clear understanding of the social function of her work as an educator and role model for her students:

> With young kids you've got to be really careful with language, spoken and body, and also with music. Music is really important, because as soon as you put… I love reggaetón, but, for example, I know I can't play a reggaetón song for a little girl. Even if she knows all the lyrics already because of her parents, in my classes I filter a lot, so music is really important. What do I do? What I usually do in my classes is a bit of what the academy teaches: I give them some dancehall, some hip hop, some afro. In other words, I broaden their musical culture so they learn to listen to and differentiate between different musical styles instead of getting boxed into just one.

Begoña's defence and definition of dance as an art form, and her sense of responsibility and vocation to it guard against exploitation. Yet working conditions do not always allow for this kind of protection. We have already seen that Carmen's work as an orchestra singer took place under conditions that were harmful to her and her art. Nevertheless, she resisted where she could—for example, by successfully negotiating to wear warmer clothes on stage. Carmen drew on a model of performance she knew from Cuba, her country of origin: "Like a Cuban orchestra, that's like a musical group, you know? Where there's a guitar or what-

ever else, and we're all dressed casually and sing in front of the audience. You don't even have to dance, right?" Here, Carmen resists a model of on-stage femininity based on bodily display: "When singing, no, I don't wear make-up (…) I didn't come into this life to be uncomfortable, just to look good for someone else."

Like Begoña, Augusto, and Javier, Carmen also has a vocation for caring for others. Having already completed a degree in Pedagogy, specialising in Musical Arts, at the time of the interview she was studying Early Childhood Education, combining her studies with her work in an orchestra and her job as a cook. The effort required to sustain multiple occupations while studying was evident: she got up very early to study, avoided late nights, and neither drank nor smoked. Whereas with the other study participants resistance to exploitative conditions is realised in the present, here it is a future ambition. A utopian ideal of work that enables her to endure extreme working conditions in the present. Carmen's circumstances and outlook remind us of Poliak's artistic "universes of consolation," but with a key difference: here, utopia lies not in gaining access to an elite space restricted to the few, but in achieving dignified working conditions based on personal fulfilment and caring for others.

6. Conclusions

Occupations in the field of cultural production and those in the service sector share certain characteristics that would not be easily identifiable if we restricted our analysis to formally defined and recognised work activities. However, by focusing on the negative effects they produce among workers, we have identified three types of common work-related harm: physical damage, emotional strain, and aesthetic pressure—the latter sometimes being the cause of the first two. Physical deterioration or injury that cannot clearly be attributed to the ageing of the body or the loss of vitality is an indicator of what we call economic exploitation. Aesthetic demands and emotional strain, in turn, are linked to what we define as a form of cultural exploitation. Finally, we have observed labour situations that exemplify what might be described as a "realisable utopia", in which the work required to reproduce bodies is conditioned only by activities that are clearly defined and meaningful.

In addition to the similarities across the different types of occupations analysed, we also observed some particularities. In certain artistic professions, such as dance, the activity itself can be highly demanding for the body, yet also bring benefits to those who practice it. In such cases, we found no evidence of economic exploitation, but rather a need to assess the resources workers deploy to cope with a level of physical wear and tear that intensifies over time. On the other hand, economic exploitation in the artistic and intellectual worlds tends to be sustained by the high social value attached to these professions. This gives rise to various forms of abuse. Individuals remain in such positions—indefinitely so in the case of artists—while the exploitation is concealed by the illusory promise of one day attaining a position of prestige. The same can occur in service sector occupations. The difference here relates to the fact that the promise of professional advancement derives from the ideal of non-exploitative work. In contrast, in the cultural sphere, hope resides in the possibility of accessing minority spaces governed by dominant models of legitimacy that continue to reproduce exploitation both internally and externally.

We also observed that in each type of profession, the emotional burden of cultural exploitation has specific forms: servility in service jobs; legal anomie, which forces artists to rely on an arbitrary web of personal networks; and competitiveness, a characteristic of academic labour relations. Each of these exposes individuals to demands that are not formally defined in their occupations, but which benefit those who impose them while harming workers and undermining job performance. With regard to arbitrary aesthetic requirements, we found that they reveal not only cultural exploitation but also processes of exclusion and domination—particularly evident in the service and performing arts professions we analysed. Workers are also aware that appearance can limit access to certain jobs, as the application of aesthetic criteria is based on models external to the logic of work itself. In artistic and intellectual professions, the dominant bodily model is embedded in the very structure of the field and is experienced as natural, concealing the numerous harms it produces and thereby amplifying its effects.

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