

# The concept of vicarious leisure in the film “The Second Mother”: Revisiting Thorstein Veblen in a perspective of socioeconomic phenomena

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## Abstract

The theoretical object of this study is the theoretical construction of the vicarious leisure of Veblen (1989), having Veblenian concepts as previous factors. The empirical object of this study is the Brazilian film *The Second Mother* by Brazilian writer and director Anna Muylaert (QUE HORAS, 2015), who won the Sundance Film Festival and the Berlin International Film Festival in 2015. In order to match Thorstein Veblen's interdisciplinary methodological proposal (1857-1929), this film was analyzed in a historicist perspective advocated by Kornis (1992). Using the categories "class division and its functions", "woman and property", "wealth and status", "work", "ceremony of honor", "conspicuous idleness and social distinction", "heredity and noble blood," "vicarious idleness," and "Brazilian sociocultural-cultural context," it is possible to see that the concepts of Veblen present an adherence to the current division of classes that could be more used to understand contemporary Brazilian phenomena. The issue of vicarious leisure and housework is a relevant economic and social issue and is a recent social debate, as seen in the discussion on the regulation of activity by the State. As the central point of Veblenian work, the transformations of the status quo of the form of consumption permeate the concept of conspicuous consumption for the distinction of status and honor of the Brazilian economic and social classes.

**Keywords:** Vicarious leisure. Film analysis. Thorstein Veblen. Economic Institutionalism.

## *O conceito do ócio vicário no filme “Que Horas Ela Volta?”: revisitando Thorstein Veblen em uma perspectiva dos fenômenos socioeconômicos*

### Resumo

O objeto teórico deste estudo é a construção teórica do *ócio vicário* de Veblen (1989), tendo conceitos veblenianos como fatores precedentes. Já o objeto empírico deste estudo é o filme brasileiro *Que Horas Ela Volta?* da roteirista e diretora brasileira Anna Muylaert (QUE HORAS, 2015), que foi premiado no Sundance Film Festival e no Film Festival Internacional de Berlim, ambos de 2015. Para confluir com a proposta metodológica interdisciplinar de Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), esse filme é analisado em uma perspectiva historicista defendida por Kornis (1992). Utilizando as categorias “divisão de classe e suas funções”, “a mulher e a propriedade”, “riqueza e status”, “o trabalho”, “a cerimônia signo de honra”, “ócio conspícuo e distinção social”, “hereditariedade e sangue nobre”, “ócio vicário” e “contexto sócio-histórico-cultural brasileiro”, tem-se como resultado que os conceitos veblenianos apresentam uma aderência à atual divisão de classes que poderia ser mais utilizada para compreender os fenômenos contemporâneos brasileiros. A questão do ócio vicário e do trabalho doméstico constitui tema relevante econômica e socialmente e teve um debate social recente, como exposto na discussão sobre a regulação da atividade pelo Estado. Como ponto central do trabalho vebleniano, as transformações do *status quo* da forma de consumo permeia o conceito de consumo conspícuo para a distinção de *status* e honra das classes econômicas e sociais brasileiras.

**Palavras-chave:** Ócio vicário. Análise fílmica. Thorstein Veblen. Institucionalismo econômico.

## *El concepto del ocio vicario en la película “Una Segunda Madre”: Revisitando a Thorstein Veblen en una perspectiva de los fenómenos socioeconómicos*

### Resumen

El objeto teórico de este estudio es la construcción teórica del ocio vicario de Veblen (1989), con conceptos veblenianos como factores precedentes. El objeto empírico de este estudio es la película brasileña *Una Segunda Madre*, de la guionista y directora brasileña Anna Muylaert (QUE HORAS, 2015), que fue premiada en el Sundance Film Festival y en el Festival Internacional de Cine de Berlín, ambos de 2015. Para confluir con la propuesta metodológica interdisciplinaria de Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929) la película es analizada en una perspectiva historicista defendida por Kornis (1992). Al utilizar las categorías división de clase y sus funciones; la mujer y la propiedad; riqueza y status; trabajo; la ceremonia signo de honor; ocio conspícuo y distinción social; herencia y sangre noble; ocio vicario; y contexto socio-histórico-cultural brasileño, se obtiene como resultado que los conceptos veblenianos presentan una adhesión a la actual división de clases que podría ser más utilizada para comprender los fenómenos contemporáneos brasileños. La cuestión del ocio vicario y del trabajo doméstico constituye un tema relevante económica y socialmente y ha tenido un debate social reciente, como se expuso en la discusión sobre la regulación de la actividad por parte del Estado. Como punto central del trabajo vebleniano, las transformaciones del *status quo* de la forma de consumo impregnan el concepto de consumo conspícuo para la distinción de status y honor de las clases económicas y sociales brasileñas.

**Palabras clave:** Ocio vicario. Análisis de películas. Thorstein Veblen. Institucionalismo económico.

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## THE CENTRAL PURPOSE OF THIS WORK

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This article revisits a perspective that has rarely been explored in studies of the works of Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929). According to Dorfman (1935) in *Thorstein Veblen and his America*, Veblen, the patron of institutionalism, offers us important concepts for the understanding of socioeconomic structures from a perspective that provides a counterpoint to classical theory and neoclassical economics. In addition to these concepts, Veblen’s works furnish us with a methodological perspective for the understanding of socioeconomic phenomena (SILVA, 2008).

As Silva (2008) argues, Veblen’s works utilize an interdisciplinary pattern of study. He provides us with a historical understanding of the form of social thought, in which one notes a criticism of neoclassical economics and the search for an understanding of sociological and historical perspectives. From this interdisciplinary approach to economic sociology, Silva (2008) presents Veblen’s vision of pluralistic social sciences which can offer us new horizons in the study of economics.

To accomplish this, the theoretical object of this study is Veblen’s (1989) theoretical construct vicarious leisure, which is based on the antecedent factors of Veblen’s concepts of wealth, status, consumption, leisure, labor, property, social function, class distinction, and heredity. These concepts, presented in more depth in the next section, contribute to a sociological and anthropological understanding of the empirical object of this study.

That object is the Brazilian film *The Second Mother* (2015) written and directed by Anna Muylaert (QUE HORAS, 2015), which won the World Cinema Dramatic Special Jury Award for Acting at the Sundance Film Festival and the CICAIE and Audience Awards at the Berlin International Film Festival. In Brazil, the film attracted a cinema going audience of around 450 thousand people, was broadcast on network TV, and was later available on the internet. It also was well received internationally, was sold to 22 countries, and was Brazil’s nominee for the Best Foreign Film Oscar (SCHERDIEN, BORTOLINI and OLTRAMARI, 2018). To be consistent with Veblen’s interdisciplinary methodological proposal as presented by Silva (2008), we will analyze this film from the historical perspective proposed by Kornis (1992). In the analysis of fiction films, Kornis (1992, p. 245) emphasizes the “[...] importance of the characteristics of the society that produced and consumes a film and the work itself, as well as the relationship between the film’s authors, society, and the film itself”. That is, one should not analyze a film and its screenplay in light of its theoretical object, but should rather consider the entire social and production structures that have produced it. Both our empirical and theoretical objects will be described in more detail in the following sections. To guide this study, we have adopted the following research question:

- How does the theoretical construct of Thorstein Veblen’s vicarious leisure explain Brazilian socioeconomic structures in the film *The Second Mother* from an interdisciplinary perspective?

*The Second Mother* has been the empirical focus of several articles in a number of fields of study. In the legal area, Nunes and Rodrigues (2017) have investigated the history, rights, and affective ties related to the role of a maid and evaluate this case as a common phenomenon in Brazilian society. Faria (2017) meanwhile discusses gender, housework, and migration through a discursive analysis of the political and social evolution of domestic servants who live in this reality. In addition, Maia and Gomes (2017) analyze the film from the perspective of lodging, focusing on the role of the maid’s daughter who stays in the employer’s home, in order to highlight all the social aspects involved in this situation. A study by J. Santos (2015) seeks to analyze the work of maids through the film’s focus to understand gender issues and labor relations in Brazil. Ribeiro (2015) highlights anthropological questions in terms of what Brazil thinks of this film, and its controversial impact on a society based on the series of conflicts depicted in the film.

In terms of studies in the area of Administration, Ferraz, Moura-Paula, Biondini et al. (2017), analyze the film from the perspective of ideology and subjectivity in labor relations. The authors argue that the subjectivity of housewives is built on the ideology that influences this working relationship and the relations which are common to the family sphere where this drama takes place. These family relationships have a strong affective appeal, which hinders the effective formalization of the working relationship, presenting characteristics that differentiate it from other sectors and classes.

Another study in the field of Administration that deals with labor relations in its analysis of the film is Scherdien, Bortolini and Oltramari (2018), which presents the relationship between the maid and the family with whom she has worked for several years. This study seeks to understand the historical-social moment, portraying a panorama of studies of labor relations. According to this analysis, the environment in which *The Second Mother* develops, reproduces the cosmos of the Brazilian social structure and its conflicts.

*The Second Mother* is relevant from an artistic, social and academic point of view, because it deals with several issues and concerns that bear on the field of Administration. However, none of the aforementioned authors has studied the subject of the Veblenian perspective using the ideas of *vicarious leisure* and *conspicuous consumption*.

Among the phenomena covered in the film which constitute subjects of social discussion, we have: 1) emigration from the Northeast to the Southeast of Brazil in search of better working conditions; 2) Silent conflicts within the domestic employer-employee relationship; 3) class conflicts from the perspective of rights and privileges; 4) recent social class mobility in Brazil; 5) democratic access to public education; and 6) sexual harassment by the social patriarchy. Some of these subjects have been addressed in a number of studies (BRUNO and FREYRE, 1954; FREYRE, 1937; FREYRE, DIAS and MONTENEGRO, 1961; TEIXEIRA, 2015; TEIXEIRA, SARAIVA and CARRIERI, 2015; VOGELZANG, 2016).

This article is divided into its theoretical framework, research method, analysis, and final considerations. The theoretical framework presents the concepts of Thorstein Veblen, the theoretical construct of vicarious leisure and the Brazilian social and cultural context. The methodology then presents a characterization of the research, the description of the object under study and the perspective and structure of the analysis. Finally, the analysis and the final considerations present the study's findings and the evolution of this field of study, highlighting the relevance of Veblen's concepts and theoretical constructions to the understanding of contemporary Brazil.

## THEORETICAL REFERENCES

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Considered the father of economic institutionalism, Thorstein Veblen is the founder of the only original American school of economics (EKELUND and HIERBERT, 1999). Known for his eccentric behavior, Veblen seeks to understand the “why” of things from the role of the social actors that constitute the so-called business system (MACAGNAN, 2013). As Macagnan (2013) argues, Veblen rejected contemporary theoretical paradigms imposed on him to construct a new theoretical proposal. Thus, he provides a contrast between human nature and the rationalist issues of classical and neoclassical authors. From this perspective, his work has become important from a methodological point of view and due to his unique critique of capitalism (EKELUND and HIERBERT, 1999).

Veblen adopts the evolutionary perspective that there is a struggle between the institutions that shaped the past and those that are trying to invade the present. Therefore, the process of natural selection of institutions goes through an evolution of structures. Such changes are not only the result of this selection process, in which the predominant institutions establish themselves, but constitute “[...] special methods of life and human relationships” (VEBLEN, 1989, p. 194).

Veblen's classic work written in 1899, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* introduces important concepts to the understanding of society. This work presents the relationships between classes and their cultural institutions which are immersed in their habits and customs. The concepts derived from Veblen's vision are symbolic indicators. Rocha and Barros (2006) argue that status symbols are phenomena which are capable of building a structure which consists of the differences between classes. That is, they are a series of habits and customs that are articulated by a series of people, social groups, lifestyles, tastes, perspectives, and desires that surround us all in a permanent system that communicates power and prestige in social life. As Macagnan (2013) argues, from a Veblenian perspective, the individual is an agent who acts in the world amidst a cultural evolution in which the leisure class emerges with the goal of appropriating habits and customs.

To understand this better, Veblen analyzes the social system from the point of view of two classes: the leisure class and the lower class. While the leisure class engages in government, sports, religious, and warfare activities in conjunction with its surrounding individuals, the manual and industrial jobs and day-to-day tasks are performed by the lower class. In analyzing private property from Veblen's perspective, one realizes that it is established by a struggle between individuals. The pursuit of private property goes beyond the satisfaction of needs, and represents the (re)production of symbolic aspects of prestige and esteem provided by the social environment to which these people belong. Therefore, the attainment of these properties must be demonstrated, for “[...] the demonstration of consumption expresses the capacity for property” (MACAGNAN, 2013, p. 132).

As Macagnan (2013) argues, this Veblenian thinking is still present today, now with refined methods, but still with the same purpose: conquering property in a predatory and non-productive manner. In doing so, rituals and ceremonies are performed

to demonstrate their abilities. As Ekelund and Hébert (1999, p. 488) argue, these ceremonial institutions that surround private property are characterized by a “love of money”.

This aspect reveals a fact about the leisure class. Its relationship with the production environment is a means and not an end to the process of accumulation of wealth. In analyzing society – and its economic institutions – as an industrial or economic mechanism – Veblen (1989, p. 199) states that “[...] these institutions are habitual methods of continuing the vital process of the community in contact with the material environment in which they live”. To Veblen institutions are predominantly mental habits within particular relationships and actions of the individual and the community. That is, the *modus operandi* of an individual’s life can be understood as a set of institutions that act occasionally or procedurally within society. These mental habits – institutions – are received in a hereditary manner, in accordance with aspects of the past and they are not fully consistent with life in the present.

Therefore, institutions are a result of the past and the present, formed from the permanent struggle between old and new habits. As Veblen points out, technological dynamics and ceremonial habits are driving forces that change society. Such forces under dispute can be identified by their “[...] economic interests, economic and mental habits and they are manifested in conventions, laws, contracts, transaction functionality, and the interest due in contracts”, among other things (MACAGNAN, 2013, p. 133). As Veblenians argue, Veblen’s critique of the classics is that they understand the subject as a profit-maximizing economic being and fully aware of his actions, from pleasure to pain or from satisfaction to sacrifice (MACAGNAN, 2013).

Veblen’s contribution to economics and management stems from the evolution metaphor of the institutionalists who oppose the classical view of stability and equilibrium and from the perspective of individuals who guide their actions with a given rationality. Another important contribution of Veblen is the interpretative methodological approach, based on hermeneutics and ethnography developed through the analysis of the habits and customs of the time within an industrial society (VEBLEN, 1989; SILVA, 2008; HÜBLER and LAVARDA, 2017).

The work of Thorstein Veblen is fundamental to the schools of institutional economics (ZAJDSZNAJDER, 1980; SANTOS, 2003), evolutionary institutionalism (HÜBLER and LAVARDA, 2017), economic sociology (SILVA, 2008) and to understanding conspicuous consumption (ostentation), a subject that is relevant to the anthropology of consumption (RESENDE, 2017, SALLES and CAMATTA, 2014).

To use Veblen’s theoretical system to interpret *The Second Mother* we have developed concepts that support the analysis and theoretical construct of vicarious leisure, in addition to the construction of the social, historical, and cultural context of the Brazilian cinema.

## Conceptual categories of Thorstein Veblen

To Veblen, (1) the Division of the Classes is based on the habits and customs of the leisure class which directs the habits and customs of the other classes. With the evolution of the modes of production and the transformation of the individual in terms of work, some characteristics of axiological weight have emerged to differentiate these subjects within the social organization of the Veblenian vision. As Veblen argues, historically the leisure class has been characterized as not having functions linked to the production of goods, which has been an expression of superiority. Productive work has always been considered by primitive societies to be less honorable and has been delegated to women and slaves.

Veblen highlights governmental, military, religious and sports occupations as the ones that influence the honor of the leisure class. These occupations are prominent in the organization of society to this day. Another factor also mentioned by Veblen has to do with culture and altruism. Members of the leisure class, because they do not engage in productive work – which would be at the base of the socioeconomic organization – have the time to devote themselves to cultural development and works of social charity related to religious spirit. These acts are still valued socially in Brazil, and they have maintained their status of honor and nobility.

As is prominent in primitive social organizations, the social institution of property begins with (2) The Appropriation of Women. To Veblen, the violent appropriation of women is related to a vision of them as “trophy,” symbols of status and honor. To the author, this custom has resulted in viewing wives as property with a family structure under the command of a man.

As Veblen points out, the function of men in primitive societies was reduced to consuming what women produced. Women displayed substantial consumption to ensure survival and the continuity of work. Therefore, Veblen argues that unproductive consumption is a sign of honor and achievement, a prerequisite for human dignity. As their economic role evolved, women became the symbol of respect for the home. The woman was allowed to consume, to bring honor to the home and, consequently, to the man, the “owner” of the family.

As Veblen argues, the role of the woman has evolved. In the beginning, in the presence of archaic institutions, she was a man’s servant and a producer of goods for the Lord’s consumption, and then she began to consume ceremonial processes and goods produced by him. However, she still remained a servant, in the interest of the so-called “home’s well-being” and the need for consumption imposed on her the social position of a captive servant. These were characteristics of the leisure class. In less affluent classes, a woman absorbs certain characteristics of the leisure class in pursuit of similar honors; however, she has less honorable and frequently less well-paid jobs than men do. The relationship between the genders is part of the history of the formation of Brazil, as highlighted by the work *The Masters and the Slaves* (FREYRE, DIAS and MONTENEGRO, 1961), as well as the works of Santos (2015), which seek to understand the relationship between gender and domestic work, and Faria (2017), which presents a reflection on the historical context of domestic migrants who leave their cities and their homes to live and work in urban centers.

To Veblen, (3) Wealth is directly linked to status. Even in fairer societies in terms of the distribution of wealth, it is not possible to eliminate all individual needs, for the essence of these needs is the desire to override others in the accumulation of wealth. Such a phenomenon to Veblen is due to the struggle for honor based on an “odious” comparison in terms of prestige among individuals.

In this way, “ownership now becomes the most evident proof of an honorific degree of success as distinct from heroic or remarkable achievements. Property thus becomes the conventional basis of social esteem” (VEBLEN, 1989, p. 33). Even today, no honorable position in society, in general, exists without being associated with property (in its broadest sense). Thus, it is necessary to obtain and accumulate property in order to preserve honor and social prominence.

Individuals with refined tastes feel a “spiritual contamination” in performing routine tasks of lesser social value which have historically been attributed to women and slaves. This separation in (4) Work is related to the comfort provided by living conditions. People who engage in activities that are despised by society and within society have low-cost housing and engage in mundane tasks that do not provide space for high-minded thinking (VEBLEN, 1989).

This is why people try to emulate this behavior which reveals the repugnance and futility of the leisure class. Capable individuals reject socially undesirable jobs, but accept jobs that are valued by leisure class individuals, as this allows them to maintain a superior status within their immediate social group. As Veblen (1989, p. 42) argues, “it is not enough for a man to simply have wealth or power. He must show his wealth or power to everyone because without this proof they will not give him his due consideration.” The idea of Veblenian success is related to making odious comparisons with others, and this, therefore, is agreed by the goals of human action to be success. Demonstrating superior force in the essential conditions of life is necessary so that the members of the leisure class can live in comfort without any difficulties (VEBLEN, 1989).

Veblen presents (5) Ceremony as consisting of practices or good manners which are signs of prestige in the processes of culture and consumption, entitling the individual who adopts these practices to respectability in the cultural sphere. Within the labor process, as the evolution of industrial organizations has occurred, ceremonial practices have been identified as explicit (and implicit) norms that regulate ownership in terms of its scope and consciousness. Another element of class separation is the creation of these high-minded actions, which hinder the poor’s access to these good practices and makes it impossible for high-minded people to be ever be considered poor (VEBLEN, 1989).

(6) Conspicuous leisure is the consumption of goods without a practical function. As Veblen argues, one of the forms of distinction of the leisure class is conspicuous consumption, which occurs when the individual needs to demonstrate his wealth by means of what he consumes. This consumption is no longer for survival, but for maintaining status and honor. In this way, the individual continually strives to maintain an increasing refinement of behavior, such as the consumption of a singular education, the consumption of luxury goods and various forms of consumption.

Other characteristics of conspicuous leisure are the possession of many women and of servants who are involved in providing comfort and the production of goods for the owner of the home. The consumption of certain delicacies, rare garnishes and adornments, luxury items, beverages, and specific foods of the upper class (including excessive drinking and drugs) are expensive and therefore attribute, through ceremony, noble and honorific values to those who consume them (VEBLEN, 1989).

(7) Noble blood is transmitted in principle from a father to his children in a hereditary way which calcifies social class mobility. This traditional principle confers the conditions of the leisure class which are signs and indications of noble blood. This institution of noble blood combined with inheritance has, along with industrial development, led to a concentration of property among a small group of individuals. This has elevated the conventional pattern of wealth of the upper class by changing all the signs and symbols of Veblenian concepts of conspicuous leisure and vicarious leisure, to the extent that the vicarious class begins to consume the status symbols of the leisure class (VEBLEN, 1989).

## Vicarious leisure

When purchasing power gives the individual the chance to have servants who produce more for him than he needs, that individual has created conditions in which he will enjoy greater comfort because servants will perform all of the (non-productive) domestic work. This is the institution of vicarious leisure, the central concept of this study which is supported by the concepts presented above. To Veblen, the individual, in the person of the lord, the possessor of merit and honor, of his social position and self-respect, creates the need to have specialized servants - who serve more as a status symbol than there being any real need to perform their services. Having a large number of quality servants is an indicator of respectability.

Veblen, in analyzing the qualities of a good vicarious servant, states that good servants must know their place and perform their tasks properly, for domestic service is a “spiritual” rather than a mechanical function. Thus, specific norms regulating vicarious leisure arise. Having domestic servants costs time and resources and, over time, those who want to occupy a position of vicarious leisure can't have held any position linked to the productive service. The servant must be trained to be useful in satisfying the taste of the lord in terms of the services performed and demonstrate dominion over the other employees dependent on him. Beyond this, in principle the servant serves to emulate respect and prestige (VEBLEN, 1989). Therefore, when the domestic servant does not have the necessary training to perform a function, this symbolizes a discredit to the master who maintains him, that is, it demonstrates an inability to obtain good employees.

As Veblen points out, leisure class individuals need to devote themselves to conspicuous consumption which takes up an exhausting amount of their time. The attention devoted to personal relationships with the servants in order to emulate some degree of respectability is generally regarded by the leisure class as unpleasant. The presence of the employee class is tolerated in the face of the requirements of morality and respectability demanded by the leisure class. Vicarious leisure, in these terms, is only possible with support from status or paid service; so, if the servant's behavior demonstrates a lack of resources, then the main reason for keeping the servant has disappeared (VEBLEN, 1989).

One important point is the consumption of individuals in charge of vicarious leisure. The higher this class's consumption is, the greater honor their employer holds. Therefore, the better the uniform, the working accommodations, the food and the conditions offered that characterize this vicarious consumption of goods, the greater the status of the leisure class. This consumption is designed to demonstrate the wealth and honor of the lord (employer). However, vicarious consumption can never be greater or better than the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class (VEBLEN, 1989).

Veblen presents several concepts to construct his theory that describe the behavior, habits, and customs of the leisure class. In other words, the institutions that influence his object of study. Moreover, as the author argues, these institutions have not ceased to exist, however, they have modified their methods for the establishment and perpetuation of the leisure class.

Based on Veblen, we present the theoretical categories we have used to analyze *The Second Mother*:

**Box 1**

**Theoretical categories of Thorstein Veblen**

The division of classes and their functions	The leisure class performs governmental, sports, religious, military and altruistic activities. Non-productive activities enhance social prestige, as they provide time which can be devoted to spiritual issues, art, and aesthetics. The lower class, however, performs all of the productive work to promote the comfort of the leisure class.
Woman and property	In primitive societies, women were treated as property or a trophy to be displayed. As a result, we have marriage as property. The woman was the maid and servant of the man and the producer of goods for the consumption of her master. She began to consume ceremonial processes to give prestige to her master and his home.
Wealth and status	The conventional basis of social esteem is private property (wealth). Even today, no honorable position is possible without being based on property (in its broadest sense). It is necessary to obtain and accumulate properties in order to preserve honor and social prominence.
Work	It is not enough that a man simply has wealth or power. He must demonstrate this wealth or power in front of everyone, for without clear proof, others will not give him his due consideration. Therefore, he can accept a job to maintain his superior status in front of his acquaintances.
Ceremonies as signs of honor	Ceremonial processes or good manners are signs of prestige in the processes of culture and consumption, which confer upon individuals who perform these practices a degree of respectability in cultural processes. In the evolution of industrial organizations, ceremonies have been identified as rules (explicit and implicit) that regulate the scope and awareness of propriety. A ceremony is a demonstration of social distinction.
Conspicuous leisure and social distinction	Conspicuous consumption occurs when the individuals need to demonstrate their wealth by means of what they consume, such as the consumption of a singular education, the consumption of luxury goods, the possession of many women, of servants who occupy themselves with the comfort and production of goods for the master, as well as the consumption of certain delicacies, rare garnishes and adornments, beverages and specific foods of the upper class (including excessive drinking and drugs).
Heredity and noble blood	Noble blood is transmitted in principle from a father to his children in a hereditary way that calcifies the mobility of the social classes. This traditional principle confers the conditions of the leisure class which are signs and indications of noble blood.
Vicarious leisure	When purchasing power gives an individual the chance to have servants who produce more for him than he needs, that individual has created conditions in which he will enjoy greater comfort because servants will perform all of the (non-productive) domestic work. Specialized servants serve more as a status symbol rather than the existence of any real need to perform their services. Having a large number of quality servants is an indicator of respectability.

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Veblen (1989).

The institution of vicarious leisure is present within the theoretical construct of the leisure class and is based on conspicuous consumption, and its impetuses such as the concept of women as property, the view of wealth as status and even heredity's calcification of social mobility. Veblenian concepts are interrelated like mental structures that strengthen the institutions observed in his work. Considering that the analysis of these institutions is complex, we have adopted the set of theoretical categories presented in Box 1.

As Silva (2008) argues, Veblen used an interdisciplinary methodology in his work through the use of history, sociology and anthropology, among other forms of knowledge that enhance the interpretation of institutions. In the following section we will present the social, historical, and cultural context within which *The Second Mother* has been produced and consumed.

## The social, historical and cultural context of Brazilian cinema

Brazilian cinema underwent a transformation with the establishment of the Audiovisual Law in 1993 and the creation of the National Cinema Agency (ANCINE) in 2001, which created the conditions for increased film production and regular success (CALDAS and MONTORO, 2006). In addition, while having maintained certain characteristics of the Cinema Novo movement of the 1960s, the resumption of national cinema has involved certain changes, such as: a focus on social psychology as compared to the social teleology of Cinema Novo; a commercial language dominated by telenovelas; a focus on marginal social figures; and the return of the hinterlands and the slums, which are now portrayed in a different manner (CALDAS and MONTORO, 2006; SANTOS, 2015).

An example of this process is the great box office success of *City of God* (CIDADE, 2002), where the slum is recognized as an isolated, autonomous territory where poor people kill each other, omitting the connection between violence and poverty, and omitting the responsibility of the upper classes for the problems of inequality (VOGELZANG, 2016).

The documentary *Maids*, which was highly praised by critics (DOMÉSTICA, 2013), addresses the domestic work issue in a realistic way: during a single week, seven youths became amateur filmmakers and filmed the daily lives of their domestic servants. The material was given to director Gabriel Mascaro, who compiled the most remarkable moments to produce this documentary. This subject has been dealt with in a number of films which have been recently released in Brazil. As Vogelzang (2016) argues, *The Second Mother* symbolizes a dispute between “independent” films and those produced with the support of Globo Filmes for the national audience. *The Second Mother* focuses on an emotional appeal, with the protagonist’s potential social ascension being directly related to contemporary social changes in Brazil. Vogelzang (2016) argues with the film’s focus on middle-class urban places and “contemporary” forms of “class co-existence” in these locations. This film is aligned with other recent films such as *Neighboring Sounds* (O SOM, 2013) and *Casa Grande (Mansion)* (CASA GRANDE, 2014), which depict Brazilian class relations. “This ‘trilogy’ seems to follow the historical trajectory of economic-cultural booms in Brazil, from Recife through Rio de Janeiro to São Paulo” (VOGELZANG, 2016, p. 7).

As seen in the movie *Casa Grande (Mansion)* (CASA GRANDE, 2014), the experiences of the maid and the nanny demonstrate that these relationships have still not been solved socially, as highlighted in the book by Gilberto Freyre *Masters and Slaves* (FREYRE, DIAS and MONTENEGRO, 1961). The plot’s social focus highlights the reality of slaves who cared for, breastfed and raised the children of their owners, only to see their own children being mistreated and sold, even though most of them were the owner’s children. Today, this social structure of slave quarters can still be observed in the back rooms that normally are allocated to maids in the houses in which they work (VOGELZANG, 2016).

## RESEARCH METHOD

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This work analyzes *The Second Mother* from Kornis’s (1992) historical perspective in light of Thorstein Veblen’s theoretical construct of vicarious leisure (and other concepts), transposing the Veblenian interdisciplinarity presented by Silva (2008), in order to understand the socio-economic phenomena of contemporary Brazilian reality. In order to accomplish this, our approach is based on the works of Yin (2009) and Creswell (2010) in terms of conducting exploratory research of a qualitative nature based on a case study. This section characterizes our research, the research object, and our data analysis.

### Characterization of the Research

This work is a case study because it focuses on observing, identifying, analyzing and classifying documents relating to a social case without altering them so that they may be interpreted. It also is a qualitative study, because it uses a research instrument and analyzes documents that confirm these characteristics (CRESWELL, 2010; YIN, 2009).

Another relevant choice in this study’s methodological development is the interdisciplinary vision adopted by Silva (2008). By understanding social institutions, the economy will display a new scientific pattern, and will seek interdisciplinarity and a



dialogue with history, sociology and anthropology, among other forms of knowledge to improve the interpretation of institutions. Veblen’s work also reveals dissatisfaction with a growing rigidity in the social sciences and the delimitation of supposedly isolated fields of knowledge. However, the economic sociology perspective seeks to restructure these limitations (SILVA, 2008).

## Object

To define the object of this research, we have sought a concept of films for interpretation proposed in the objectives set out in the work of Kornis (1992). This is why a film is understood to be a document that needs to be analyzed. To Le Goff and Nora (1976, p. 23) this document is a product of those who have power relationships within a given society and reflects its social context.

In a vision inspired by Michel Foucault (1926-1984), Le Goff and Nora (1976, p. 25) argue that this document can be understood to be a monument that results from the interactions of a historic society that later proposes a future that may be a deliberate image or not. “At the extreme, no document is true. Every document is a lie [...] It is necessary to start by demonstrating this, demolishing this construction of a monument to deconstruct this reconstruction and to analyze the production conditions of these monument documents.”

This definition makes it possible to interpret the film as a construct that alters reality through an articulated set of information: images, words, sounds and movements. A film’s various elements are aesthetic features that make up cinematographic language and provide a specific meaning that transforms and interprets what has been cut out from the real (KORNIS, 1992).

## Documents

Several documents were used to carry out this research. In addition to the film *The Second Mother*, we used the other films mentioned above (CASA GRANDE, 2014; SOM, 2013; DOMÉSTICA, 2013), and academic works related to film (FARIA, 2017; FERRAZ, MOURA-PAULA, BIONDINI et al., 2017; RODRIGUES, 2017, RIBEIRO, 2015, SANTOS, 2015, SCHERDIEN, BORTOLINI and OLTRAMARI, 2018, VOGELZANG, 2016). We also used information in the media about society’s behavior and the film’s reception. In order to create the conditions for analyzing the film, we had to use new techniques to permit the interpretation of what is interposed between the camera and the filmed events (KORNIS, 1992). As Kornis (1992) argues, the context of production, exhibition, and reception includes a whole set of variables that must be considered in analyzing a film.

## Analysis and analysis categories

In order to analyze the film, it is necessary to understand the “principle that the image is an immediate reflection of the real and that, therefore, it translates the truth of the facts” (KORNIS 1992, p. 243). Although we can understand a film to be an object from a historical point of view, fiction films are objects of analysis, since no genre of film can be the truth at the end, regardless of the type of process or cinematographic method that originated it (KORNIS, 1992).

Demite and Leite (2015) argue that film language has an aspect of aesthetic reality related to the subjectivity of the individual who produces it and receives it as well from the spectator who thinks, interferes with and transforms the story and its process of significance. In order to analyze a fictional film, Iron (1976) argues that one has to understand the social characteristics of the person who has produced it, those who consume it and the work itself, as well as the relationship between the authors of the film, society and the film itself. In this way, you will have a chance to understand what is invisible. The film, from this point of view, goes beyond its content, and goes beyond illustration – it escapes the logic of confirmation or denial of the document per se.

As Kornis (1992) argues, there may exist a counter-history and a counter-analysis of society. Thus, it may go beyond the goals of the director and present the ideology of a society that “unmasks the character of a political and social reality” (FERRO, 1976, p. 47).

In analyzing the film, the theoretical categories of Veblen presented in Table 1 will be used: (1) The division of classes and their functions; (2) Woman and property; (3) Wealth and status; (4) Work; (5) The ceremony as a sign of honor; (6) Conspicuous

leisure and social distinction; (7) Heredity and noble blood; and (8) Vicarious leisure – the central concept of the study. These categories emerge from the work *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (VEBLEN, 1989), through observations of the behavior, habits, and customs of primitive peoples in an anthropological, historical and sociological approach to analyzing economic relationships. These categories create a particular vision for Veblen, exerting an institutionalized force on the individuals to maintain a set of relationships between the leisure and lower classes. Each conceptual category functions as a mental impetus that characterizes the institutionalization of the functions and habits expected of each individual.

In order to highlight aspects of these latent concepts in film and society, we use qualitative analysis to compare the plot and the facts highlighted in the film that corroborate the behavior of the leisure class that conspicuously consumes vicarious leisure. In addition to the film, the ways in which it affects society are discussed as well as aspects of Veblen’s proposal which are discussed in the light of related works.

Following these methodological assumptions, we will present the film’s technical specifications and a synopsis of the film and will then analyze the events that occur in the film and the social structure that characterizes them, followed by their categorization using Veblen’s concepts and arguments.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE FILM *THE SECOND MOTHER***

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### **Technical specifications**

Name: The Second Mother

Release date: 2015

Country: Brazil

Genre: Drama

Running time: 114 minutes

Written by Anna Muylaert

Produced by Cláudia Buschel

Cinematography: Barbara Alvarez

Art direction: Marquinho Pedroso

Edited by: Karen Harley

### **Synopsis**

Val, a woman from Pernambuco, moves to São Paulo to earn enough money to raise her daughter Jessica. To do this, Val leaves her daughter in the interior of Pernambuco to be Fabinho’s nanny, and lives full-time in the house of her employers, Carlos and Barbara. Thirteen years later, Jessica calls her asking for help to go to São Paulo to take a college entrance exam (the same test that Fabinho will take). Val’s employers welcome the girl with open arms, but when she fails to follow certain protocols by circulating freely around the house, the situation becomes more complicated.

### **Film characters**

Val (Regina Casé) [vicarious leisure] is a Pernambucan woman who leaves her native state and goes to São Paulo in search of a better life. She works as a maid in the residence of Carlos and Barbara, where she does everything: washing, cooking, setting the table, washing the dishes and taking care of the couple’s son, Fabinho, as if she were his mother. In return, she is forced to leave her daughter Jessica in the Northeast abandoning the affective role of being her mother.

Carlos (Lourenço Mutarelli) [leisure class], an artist in crisis, seeks in Val’s daughter a chance for a new beginning and a way to give new meaning to his future. He ends up becoming emotionally attached to Jessica and subjects her to acts of sexual harassment.

Barbara (Karine Teles) [leisure class and wife-property] is a famous stylist who spends her time on her commitments and thus is always absent from her relationships with her son and husband, and is responsible for overseeing the employees and their home. In a way, Barbara outsources her son’s care to Val.

Fabinho (Michel Joelsas) [leisure class by heredity] is the son raised by the maid, who in turn dedicates herself to him in a way that she could not dedicate herself to her daughter. He is in the same phase of life as Jessica and goes to take a college exam at the same educational institution that she does.

## Thorstein Veblen’s Categories of Analysis

### *The division of classes and their functions*

The film presents in its plot the relationship between classes: employer and employee. The characteristics are directly linked to the social history of Brazil, such as the fact that the character Val is from the Northeast and has to go to São Paulo to “earn a living” in order to support her daughter. In terms of classes, the characteristics of the *leisure class* are represented by the employers, and of *vicarious leisure* represented by the nanny/maid. The breaking point is precisely the nanny’s daughter, who questions Veblen’s view of heredity and a lack of social mobility. Jessica’s character calls into question the ceremonial practices that differentiate the classes analyzed here. Jessica constantly questions ceremonial practices laden with rules, habits, and customs that differentiate the employer from the employee and demonstrate the attempt of the leisure class to emulate a respectability that is called into question in the film, such as Val’s discourse that she considers herself to be almost Fabinho’s mother and her employers consider Val to be practically a member of the family. We can analyze Val’s situation based on the moment when she gives a present to the wife and at a later moment in the film, the wife disdains her present, which reveals what is unspoken: there are different customs and habits among the classes.

As a backdrop to the film, recent events in Brazil have put this class differentiation in check. A recently passed law has created regulations for domestic servants which symbolize a historic gain for a class that, since slavery, has had no legitimacy within the political and social organization of the state. After years of social gains, in which there has been a significant reduction in the inequalities between the social classes (the economic rise of a significant portion of the population), it can be seen in this country that the differences are still enormous. In the last election for president, votes, and debates indicated a strong polarization between the Southeast and the Northeast; the rich and the poor; and the right and the left, among others. As proposed by Kornis (1992), one can understand the film as a result of these conflicts between classes and the way in which these classes interpret or consume this film. Several people who recognize themselves as poor, left-wing individuals from the Northeast, have identified with Val’s story. The director and writer Anna Muylaert based the film on stories that she has followed during her life. The script took 18 years to complete according to Anna Muylaert (RIBEIRO, 2015). In addition, the stances of the media have illustrated social disagreements in the audience’s reactions to the film, which have generated controversy across the country. There were employers and employees who denied the conflicts depicting their relationships in this film, while others identified with the conflicts evident in Jessica’s situation.

Araujo and Lopes (2017, p. 209) describe an account of blogger Cynara Menezes, from the blog Socialista Morena, about a dialogue between a mother and daughter soon after watching the film:

She recalls that she observed a conversation between a girl at the cash register and a client, and when it was her turn to pay, she questioned the young woman about the relationship between the two, and the woman told her: “No, it’s my mother. It’s because she works as a nanny all week and she’s only goes home Sunday morning. We only see each other when she comes here to the supermarket to buy something.”

The discomfort generated by the film is due to its realistic portrayal. Anna Muylaert emphasized in an interview that she intended to reflect society (PEIXOTO, 2015). Another article by the journalist Nina Lemos in *Trip* magazine (2015) tells of her experience in watching the film abroad. She highlights the perception of the Germans about the film, because they could not believe that a relationship between an employer and employee like this could exist in Brazil:

I'm at a movie theater in Kreuzberg, Berlin, and I know it's like this in real life in my country. The audience, made up of Brazilians and Germans, laughs nervously. I suspect that the nervous laughter was more from Brazilians like me, who know this situation well and know that slavery exists in Brazil in a sinister way. And in a way that we still have not been able to stop. [...] On the way out, I met a Brazilian friend, accompanied by a European boyfriend, who said: "It was a little embarrassing." We agreed that we felt utter shame.

The adversarial relationship between the leisure class and vicarious leisure is something which has been at the heart of Brazilian reality since its origin (FREYRE, DIAS and MONTENEGRO, 1961). In another account described by Araújo and Lopes (2017, p. 211), university professor and blogger Lola Aronovich wrote in the blog, *Write, Lola, Write*, tells a story of a young woman in relation to the film: "Yes, I am Jessica... Jessica was practically a pure and simple portrait of me. I've never identified as strongly with any character as I have with Jessica".

An article by the journalist Ingrid Fagundez (2015) records the thoughts of Maria Lima, a former daily maid who now is a union representative:

Yes [the story is real], and the story is old because we are all immigrants, we have come from the Northeast to São Paulo in search of a better life. It is an old story that is known and recognized worldwide, and I thought it was very good. Everything is true. She wants to be the mother of the other woman's child, to be part of the family, but in reality, it is nothing. This is always a relationship of inequality.

The aspect addressed by Maria Lima refers to the subjective and affective gender issues involved in domestic work. In analyzing the film from an organizational point of view and in terms of labor relations, Ferraz, Moura-Paula, Biondini et al. (2017, p. 273) argue that there is a structure of values and ideas that allows the naturalization of these relations between classes in order to sustain exploitation and oppression by offering the chance to "be a part of the family without being part of the family." Affectivity is an ideology that conceals the existing labor relationships and hides what Veblen understands to be a woman as property or the conspicuous consumption of vicarious leisure. That is, "being part of a family operates through the performance of practices attributed to women in a patriarchal society: care, cleaning, food, etc., which allows Val to be a 'mother' without being a caregiver" (FERRAZ, MOURA-PAULA, BIONDINI et al. al., 2017, p. 273). Next we will examine the woman as property.

### *Woman and property*

The issue of gender is treated in a tangential way within the film. However, to Veblen the origin of vicarious leisure is the woman, which is also Gilberto Freyre's impression (FREYRE, DIAS and MONTENEGRO, 1961), in terms of the origin of the Brazilian family. When the employers consider Val to be practically part of the family, this reflects a habit of identifying Val a property and it is therefore hereditary – and thus includes Jessica as well. When Carlos, the employer, falls in love with Jessica, we identify the accumulation of wealth, something mentioned by Veblen when he argues that woman, in the sense of property, can be accumulated to symbolize wealth. Jessica's youth and vivacity are a *status* symbol that Carlos wants, and he does not see anything that should impede his desire – even his marriage. In this sense, it is possible that Barbara may be substituted by her husband, because she, as Carlos's property, according to Veblen's concepts [vicarious leisure and marriage-property], has lost her symbolic value of *status* and honor to Jessica.

In analyzing domestic work in Brazilian popular music, Teixeira and Mafra (2014) have concluded that domestic work is part of an imaginary world related to the subalternity of the individual and the deliberate sexual objectification of women, corroborating Veblen (1989). As Ferraz, Moura-Paula, Biondini et al. (2017, p. 273) argue, "[...] the sexual division of labor, which is also a consequence of the social division of labor, constitutes an element present in the subjectivity of being a servant in Brazil. And to be a servant is to be in a place of inferiority within the structure of social relations".

The issue of gender lies in the genesis of the film, written and directed by a woman, with features women as the central characters: Val, Barbara, and Jessica. These women represent a social logic and how subtle attitudes can break this logic and reveal naturalized attitudes (SANTOS, 2015). They are 3 women with 3 different realities, and there is a social abyss that separates them. Santos (2015, p. 348) argues that it is necessary to break with universalizing discourses and to understand

intersections in this instance, in which “there is not only an ‘essence of being a woman’, but also several possibilities in terms of feminine existence which are related to all the other factors that form the identity of an individual.”

The plot extrapolates the film as well as its reception in Brazilian cinema, which, dominated by men, was also a source of conflict. Director Muylaert faced a controversy when two directors displayed coarse, biased and disrespectful behavior during an interview about the film, and they had to issue apologies later. One of the directors had his films suspended from the city circuit in question for a year, and this case was widely publicized in the media (RIBEIRO, 2015).

### *Wealth and status*

To Veblen it is through the demonstration of wealth that status is acquired. The way to demonstrate wealth is found in the characteristics of consumption that differentiate the classes. These two devices create the possibility of class differentiation: it is not enough to be rich, it is necessary to demonstrate wealth. The film has several moments in which this differentiation is revealed; in short, it is up to Barbara to define what are the spaces and habits of the employees.

There is an emblematic scene in the film (49:53): the meeting of Jessica and Carlos in the studio. Carlos tells Jessica that he has stopped painting pictures and that he is not sure why. Jessica asks him how he’s doing in terms of money and whether Barbara is the one who’s supporting the family. Carlos smiles, smoking a cigarette, and says:

I know it doesn’t look like it, but the money is mine. My father worked a lot, made a lot of money, and I inherited it.

That is, the character of Carlos is a legitimate perpetuator of Veblen’s leisure class. The relationships between the individuals of the film and work demonstrates their social distinctions, as we will discuss below.

### *Work*

The relationship between the employers and work illustrates the main occupations of the leisure class. Carlos, an artist in crisis does not deal with production issues, but rather the accumulation of non-production related knowledge that differentiates him in terms of class, as can be seen from his discussion with Jessica about art. Carlos attends clubs, dedicates himself to art, music, and issues related to leisure.

Barbara, despite dedicating herself to her work, shows signs of emulation in the non-futility of her occupations. However, she is a stylist, a function that determines conspicuous consumption, an activity classified by Veblen as unproductive and socially prominent and respectable. In the film, Barbara gives interviews and dinners with noble members of society, dealing with questions of honor and thus this strengthens the concept of the leisure class. The son has no productive occupation, he is only dedicated to accumulating culture to differentiate himself and secure his position in the leisure class, which has already been defined by his family’s status. Barbara outsources the raising of her son to Val, because daily tasks should not be exercised by the leisure class. During a large portion of the film, Barbara takes care of the social ceremonies, which further their honor and prestige.

### *The ceremony as a sign of honor*

Certain habits and customs differentiate the owners from the employees. Where they sleep, how they dress, what spaces of the house they can occupy, all of this is part of the axiological system proposed by Veblen (1989). Even though she has worked for the family for over 10 years, Val has never been able to use the pool. In the emblematic pool scene, she enters the pool (even if it is an attitude of disrespect) which symbolizes her freedom and calls Jessica to tell her what she is feeling. The barrier between the employer and the employee has broken down.

Another emblematic scene occurs when Jessica, as a joke, falls into the pool and Barbara changes the water, a clear sign of contempt for everything the lower class uses and anything that can bring disgrace to the family. So, Jessica asks Val about what she cannot do:

Jessica: I do not know where you learned these things: you cannot speak, you cannot do that. Is it written in a book, where does it come from? Who taught you this? You came here and they explained these things to you?

Val: No one needs to explain, no, every person is born knowing what can and cannot be done. You sound like you're from another planet. (Scene at 1:04:20)

It may seem fiction, however, after the film, there have been several reports of such ceremonies of distinction. As Araújo and Lopes (2017, p. 213) argue, “[...] there are things that we are born knowing,” in describing Gabriela Nascimento Ananias’s account of the *Blogueiras Negras* blog:

I was the obedient daughter of the maid, so I received a box of coconut water. Meanwhile my head-shaved sister was getting ardent rebukes from my grandmother for using the owner’s son’s hair gel [the damn hair gel!] in his bathroom while she was working with my grandmother, who was also a housemaid. She has never been able to move throughout this world again, even as the granddaughter of the maid, precisely because she did not understand tim-tim and tim-tim about what people like us have needed to know ever since we were born (ARAÚJO and LOPES, 2017, p. 214).

Another account described by Araújo and Lopes (2017, p. 214) was by Jéssica Moreira, from the *Gelédes* blog:

The fine line that keeps the maid in the kitchen when there’s a party ... the floor that separates the unventilated room from the luxurious guest room [...] the gift that replaces a living wage, which always falls short of what every nanny, domestic servant - monthly or daily - should really receive according to the laws that govern these professions. But the “almost” is also the maintenance of the outsourcing of domestic work, the same that should be equally divided among the members of a family.

As Ferraz, Moura-Paula, Biondini et al. (2017, p. 269) point out, this simply demonstrates the antagonistic social relationships that exist between the classes. In being a worker, they teach her what her place is in the social hierarchy. Moreover, as Veblen argues, ceremonies only serve to perpetuate social distinction. When Barbara begins to be threatened by the antagonistic presence of Jessica, she demands all the respective rites and ceremonies that differentiate the leisure class from vicarious leisure. Barbara tells Val that she has changed the pool water because of a mouse, says that Jessica cannot occupy the guest room anymore because a guest will be visiting the following week, and says that Jessica can no longer circulate in certain rooms of the house. This is in addition to the distinctions in terms of consumption that are presented below.

### *Conspicuous leisure and social distinction*

One of Veblen’s great assumptions is that class division occurs through conspicuous consumption. It is the characteristics of this consumption that reflect which class the individual belongs to. There are two concepts behind this: conspicuous consumption and vicarious consumption, which are addressed in the theoretical construct.

As can be seen in the film, conspicuous consumption is the one that is performed by the owners to signal the family’s status and honor, including, for example, imported ice cream, a guest room, a driver, a gardener, having dinners, works of art and even Fabinho’s consumption of drugs. Another evident point of this differentiation of consumption arises when Val says that Jessica is going to take a college entrance exam in the same university as Fabinho. Barbara says it’s a difficult university and raises doubts about Jessica’s chances of success.

Comparing this with reality, the screenwriter deals with the phenomenon of affirmative action in public universities, which has occurred through quotas and the social policies of progressive university governments such as ProUni, Fies and Pronatec, among others. There is a class conflict that hides the meritocratic logic that Veblen addresses, such as the consumption of culture. Historically, the lower classes have been unable to consume quality education, and public universities have mostly been frequented by a social class with a large amount of purchasing power. The screenwriter has managed to address this debate by deconstructing what quality education is for those who have made an expensive investment of time and resources in education, as is the case with Fabinho. However, the one who wins this opportunity is Jessica, through her own personal effort. It is evident that this debate is treated in a shallow manner in the film, and in reality, there is a struggle involved in the democratization of public higher education, which happens through a dispute in terms of public policy.

The fact that Jessica passes the entrance exam and Fabinho does not raises a lot of questions. The film shows Barbara’s displeasure when Val’s daughter attends the same learning institution as Fabinho. Soon after the result - Jessica passes the entrance exam and Fabinho does not - Barbara proposes a student exchange trip for Fabinho. In terms of Veblenian concepts,

Barbara’s proposal signals the leisure class modifying its consumption to always differentiate itself from the other classes. Fabinho wins a trip abroad soon after not passing the entrance exam, confirming that this as an opportunity for cultural differentiation. Regardless of its form, the leisure class uses conspicuous consumption to distinguish itself.

As a result, we witness vicarious consumption on the part of the employees, which generates a differentiation between the classes, such as: the nature of the employees’ lodging (Val’s small bedroom), a more inexpensive type of ice cream for the employees, a separate set of cups for the servants, the prohibition against using the swimming pool, the house that Val rents for Jessica to live (on the outskirts of the city) and the other differentiated forms of consumption that have already been cited.

The reality of the consumption issue is so strong that, based on Veblen’s logic, one can interpret the rise of a class by means of the democratization of its consumption which originates from public policies, such as income appreciation and greater access to credit. The lower classes also have to demonstrate their elevation of status by consumption, which is a reflection of cultural production, by creating “ostentatious fashion,” which values brands and products historically consumed by the leisure class - one can note this phenomenon of “ostentation” in the cultural production dedicated to this emerging class (SALLES and CAMATTA, 2014). However, as already discussed, the leisure class then merely changes its patterns of habits and consumption to ensure that it stands out once again.

### *Heredity and noble blood*

Heredity and noble blood are also addressed in the film, but only tangentially. All the habits and customs demanded and practiced by Val are expected of Jessica. When Jessica arrives at the employers’ house and questions ceremonial practices, their discomfort begins to appear. Val requires Jessica to behave like herself, because “there are things that people are just born knowing.” At the same time, Carlos demonstrates that he is a member of the leisure class based on heredity. He is the heir of a great fortune and maintains a home built to give him prestige and honor, in which he devotes himself to non-productive pursuits.

When Veblen defines the characteristics of vicarious leisure, he talks about “knowing one’s place” within the class structure. Another fact related to heredity is the calcification of class mobility. One expects Jessica to behave just like Val; that is, to not cause social imbalances within the film’s reality. Val suffers with the breakdown of the entire vicarious leisure structure that has always been considered natural to perpetuate the class institutions defined by Veblen (1989).

### *Vicarious leisure*

Vicarious leisure groups together all of the characteristics described above. The role of the lower class, in serving the leisure class in its non-productive work in the pursuit of comfort and the emulation of prestige and honor, is an institution that persists in Brazilian society. Veblen describes vicarious leisure as the evolution from a primitive society to the beginning of a society based on conspicuous consumption. In primitive societies, productive and ordinary labor was carried out by women and slaves. When Veblen analyzes indigenous tribes, he argues that men were responsible for hunting and defending the tribe while women were responsible for the production and preparation of food. The Native Americans who were more adept at hunting and war were able to have more women as a sign of prestige and honor.

In the evolution of this institution, Veblen (1989) points to feudal and preindustrial societies, in that the greater the number of employees, the greater the honor of the lord, the house and the family. These employees are meant to be trained in rituals, ceremonial practices, and even wear clothing that distinguishes them from the lower classes. The vicarious being is different from being a productive worker, because it is close to the rites and ceremonies of the leisure class, and cannot resemble the productive class. Conspicuous consumption is permitted and encouraged by vicarious leisure, but this consumption cannot exceed the prestige of the symbols of the leisure class’s consumption.

Therefore, in addition to a relationship between capital and labor, this study also examines the consumption relationship, unlike several studies that have analyzed the film from the viewpoint of labor relations. Subjective factors can be understood to be the complex relationships of the leisure class used to maintain its historic dominance over the lower class, even when one observes the leisure class enjoying the fruits of the labor of domestic workers, as depicted by one of the stories in the documentary *Maid*s (DOMÉSTICA, 2013). Domestic service, as exposed by the Veblenian perspective, involves conspicuous consumption that differentiates classes not only in Brazil but throughout the world, and this is a topic addressed in socioeconomic questionnaires. What has become distinguishing are the characteristics of vicarious leisure, which have come to have more and more attributes that reproduce signs of distinction. Some common examples can be observed in the imaginary world of the Brazilian telenovelas, which features butlers with European accents and habits as a symbol of distinction. Or when the

image depicts the maid as “part of the family,” which has been romanticized in an affective axiology in the face of the reality of these economic relationships. That is, the institution of vicarious leisure as part of conspicuous consumption is emulated by all classes that seek social distinction. All classes, at some point, wish to have vicarious leisure.

The social debate involved in the professionalization of domestic work and the breaking down of the romanticized view of vicarious leisure in society is observed differently in *The Second Mother*. Veblen and his concepts help us understand the habits, customs and beliefs of the past that dispute space with the habits, customs and beliefs of the present. From this perspective, the role of Jessica represents the breakdown of these institutions towards a new perspective of society, which is disputed through a discourse of empowerment and social ascension.

It is interesting to note that Veblen through an interdisciplinary approach is able to analyze the institutions that make up the classes in his century old text. Veblenian concepts facilitate a current and necessary interpretation of the Brazilian phenomena reported in this film - as a parsimonious reflection of reality – which have also been observed in the intensified conflicts that took place after the elections of 2014. This dispute is everywhere and the conflicts that sparked the change in attitude proposed by Jessica in the film are something that is commonplace in a society that seeks to transform itself at the same time as it insists on maintaining the habits, customs, and traditions displayed by the Veblenian leisure class.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Based on the guiding question and the proposed objective, we have analyzed the *The Second Mother* from Kornis’s historical perspective (1992) in light of Thorstein Veblen’s theoretical constructs of vicarious leisure (and other concepts) and from the Veblenian interdisciplinary perspective presented by Silva (2008) in order to understand the socioeconomic phenomena of contemporary Brazilian reality.

In terms of this study’s contributions, we use a perspective that has still never been employed to analyze film based on work relationships in the Administration field, like the works of Ferraz, Moura-Paula, Biondini et al. (2017) and Scherdien, Bortolini and Oltramari (2018). Ferraz, Moura-Paula, Biondini et al. (2017), who deal with the question of the ideology and subjectivity of work from a critical Marxist perspective, help us understand the underlying societal issues involved in domestic work. Scherdien, Bortolini, and Oltramari (2018) have already presented an analysis of the microcosm of the hierarchical relationships between classes and the conflicts between the rich and the poor, men and women, and employers and employees within all the relevant conflicts of Brazilian society. However, neither of these works presents a vision of evolutionary institutionalism, seeking to highlight the habits, customs, and beliefs under dispute in society. As Veblen points out, domestic work is the institution of vicarious leisure which was present at the origin of the first social organizations. Another relevant point is the vision of vicarious leisure as an item of conspicuous consumption. Domestic work per se is desired as a sign of social distinction and prestige, and it is something that is even emulated by the lower classes.

From an anthropological point of view of consumption, this work presents in a tangential way a view of Brazilian society in the face of conspicuous consumption. The social ascent carried out by the majority to achieve the democratization of consumption has strengthened the desire of the low classes to emulate the habits and customs of the leisure class to generate distinction and prestige. The contemporary phenomenon of ostentation, present in music, films and various cultural productions, reflects conspicuous consumption (SALLES and CAMATTA, 2014).

This film highlights these leisure class institutions which are still present in this nation’s reality. These aspects cause social discomfort for those who watch it, whether they live in Brazil or abroad, according to reported reactions. Domestic work is not about consuming a service but consuming people. Therefore, it is common to hear phrases like “I have a maid” in the same way that we say “I have a washing machine.” However, with the role of the character Jessica, these habits conflict with a new vision of society as can be seen in statements about this film.

Veblen’s vision of economic institutionalism and economic sociology presents a latent methodology for contemporary social phenomena. It is not possible to analyze several phenomena without understanding their interdisciplinary historical, political, economic and social logic. Analyzing consumption or labor relations without observing their anthropological and historical precepts undermines the perspective of social institutions and disregards an understanding of changing social habits and customs over time, a fundamental variable in the social sciences. Currents of mainstream management already note the need



to expand the possibilities of analysis in terms of social phenomena to create new perspectives, as Veblen did. Moreover, it is necessary to understand the role of Jessica and this new generation that faces a variety of social paradigms.

In general, it can be said that the results of this study are very relevant since they demonstrate that Veblenian concepts present an adherence to the current division of classes that could be used more often to understand contemporary Brazilian phenomena. The issue of vicarious leisure and domestic work is a subject of extreme economic and social relevance and has been the subject of recent social debate, as discussed in the regulation of this activity by the state. As a central point of Veblenian work, transformations in the status quo of the way consumption takes place permeate the concept of conspicuous consumption as a way to offer Brazilian economic and social classes the distinctions of status and honor.

This film, as a historical product of the society that has produced and consumed it, does not elicit consistent reactions from society. There are those who defend it and those who criticize it. However, the debate that has arisen is in harmony with the debates that are taking place in Brazilian political and social organizations. Hence, the historical method advocated by Kornis (1992) corroborates the Veblenian interdisciplinary approach to social interpretation. The film, even though it is fictional, reveals several structural facets and it is capable of interpreting and changing social positions. Examples of this are the controversies that have arisen in relation to the film, such as the statements of a maid employment association representative who argues that the film is not accurate – that in reality there would not be as many conflicts as is depicted – or the behavior of the two directors who demonstrated sexist and disrespectful behavior during an interview with the director.

In presentations and interviews across the country, Anna Muylaert has received feedback from a number of people who identify with Val and Jessica’s reality. This has led the director to publicly highlight the importance of the social policies being developed in this country. The role of Jessica in recognizing traditional class perpetuation structures (even if not consciously) is something that society should focus on. We’ve lived through these conflicts and, in a way, the theoretical construct of vicarious leisure helps us understand and shows us ways to systematically, methodologically and scientifically think about the present, with a view to modifying the future – a possibility that permeates the social sciences.

### Limitations and ideas for further research

One limitation of this study lies in the fact that it is a case study and the inherent subjectivity of the qualitative analyses. However, it opens the possibility of using Veblenian concepts in the interpretation of facts systematically from a qualitative perspective. Another limitation of this analysis is the Manichean view of meritocracy demonstrated in the film, where individual effort is overestimated in terms of the relationship between Fabinho and Jessica and the college entrance exam (SCHERDIEN, BORTOLINI and OLTRAMARI, 2018). This view makes the debate concerning social equality superficial.

Both film analysis (FERREIRA, 1976; KOORIS, 1992; LE GOFF and NORA, 1976) and the Veblenian perspective are strategies that can open up new avenues of study. Evidence of this can be found in that Brazilian cinema is currently passing through a productive, questioning phase. Several issues raised by films have influenced managerial habits that could be objects of analysis, such as how management and a manager’s vision are portrayed in national and international films.

The Veblenian methodology offers us a broad and deep view of the phenomena under analysis, such as the power relationships present in society, conspicuous consumption, the maintenance of the institutions of the leisure class, and even labor relations. In addition, there are possibilities in the field of the public management of public policies that have influenced the phenomena reported in *The Second Mother* and other studies of Veblenian habits and customs in contemporary social classes, which have been systematized from a quantitative perspective, and these may reveal other relevant applications for these concepts.

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