

The Art of the Possible: Making films on sex work migration and human trafficking

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Abstract:

Fiction films and documentaries increasingly bring the themes of sex work migration and human trafficking to the big screen. The films often focus on women who have experienced a range of abusive conditions within the sex industry, experiences which in the films typically are all labelled ‘trafficking’ and narrated through the capture of innocents and their rescue. Images of ‘sex slaves’ have thus entered the film scene as iconic figures of pain and suffering, and ‘traffickers’ have emerged as icons of human evil. Building upon the substantial scholarly critique of such films and representations, this article discusses the possibilities of making films about migrant sex workers (some of whom may be trafficked) that do not fall into misleading and sensationalised representations. I draw upon two films about women migrant sex workers that I have worked on as an anthropologist and filmmaker—*Trafficking* (2010)¹ and *Becky’s Journey* (2014).² The point of departure is that there are a range of other aspects that can influence the filmmaking process rather than merely a one-dimensional perspective on sex work and trafficking. While analysing the making of these two films I look at the reasons—both theoretical and practical—for certain production decisions and the ways in which films in the context of multiple challenges are often the result of *the art of the possible*.

Keywords: human trafficking, sex work, documentary films, migration, anti-trafficking, visual anthropology

Please cite this article as: S Plambech, ‘The art of the possible: Making films on sex work migration and human trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 182—199, www.antitraffickingreview.org

Introduction

Fiction films and documentaries increasingly bring sex work migration and human trafficking to the big screen. Film production on these ‘hot topics’ comes as no surprise—films reflect what is on the popular agenda more broadly. Within this growing number of films on sex work and the sex industry, there has been in particular a surge of films on the migration of (undocumented) female sex workers.³ These films often focus on women who have experienced a range of abusive conditions within the sex industry, experiences which are typically all labelled ‘trafficking’ and narrated through the capture of innocents and their rescue. Other films claim that they provide never-before-seen insights into the criminal underworld as narrated by (the often crying) women themselves performing testimonial truths. The fiction film *Lilja 4-ever*,⁴ the Academy Award winning documentary *Born into Brothels: Calcutta’s red light kids*,⁵ the fiction film *Taken* (2008),⁶ and recently, the documentary *The Price of Sex: An investigation of sex trafficking*,⁷ among numerous others have come to shape the image of sex work, human trafficking and sex work migration. Some of the films are about transnational migration, others are careless portrayals equating sex work to trafficking, but in general they all make use of victim narratives of women or/and children to convey their message. Images of ‘sex slaves’ have in these ways entered the film scene as iconic figures of pain and suffering, and ‘traffickers’ have emerged as icons of human evil.

Such films and representations of human trafficking have already been thoughtfully criticised within cultural and critical trafficking studies.⁸ These important and critical perspectives have analysed how few of these films articulate the complexities of sex work, poverty, immigration law and human desires for social mobility, but rather often constitute a site

¹ S Plambech and J Lansade (dirs.), *Trafficking*, 58 min., DR1 & DFI, Denmark, 2010.

² S Plambech (dir.), *Becky’s Journey*, 25 min., Denmark, 2014.

³ For example, see films discussed in J Arthurs, ‘Distant Suffering, Proper Distance: Cosmopolitan ethics in the film portrayal of trafficked women’, *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, vol. 8, issue 2-3, 2012, pp. 141—158; W Brown, D Jordanova and L Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images: Cinema and trafficking in the new Europe*, St Andrews Film Studies, St Andrews, 2010; R Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and prostitution in the cinema*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 2006.

⁴ L Moodysson (dir.), *Lilja 4-ever*, Sweden/Denmark, 2002.

⁵ Z Briski and R Kauffmann (dirs.), *Born into Brothels: Calcutta’s Red Light kids*, USA, 2004.

⁶ P Morel (dir.), *Taken*, 93 min., Europacorp/M6 Films, 2008.

⁷ M Chakarova (dir.), *The Price of Sex: An investigation of sex trafficking*, USA, 2011.

⁸ R Andrijašević, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, 2007, pp. 24—44; J Arthurs, 2012; C Parreñas Shimizu, ‘Screening Sexual Slavery? Southeast Asian gonzo porn and US anti-trafficking law’, *Sexualities*, vol. 13, issue 2, 2010, pp. 161—170; S P Shah, ‘Brothels and Big Screen Rescues—Producing the idea of “prostitution in India” through documentary film’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 15, issue 4, 2013, pp. 549—566.

for production of generalised and sensationalised understandings of sex work-related migration and ‘women as victims’. Svati Shah terms this group of films the ‘anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films’⁹ and argues that the films are not merely products of political or moral positions towards sex work, but also the products of the filmmaking tradition itself, which commonly builds scripts over conflicts and drama, a framework within which sex slaves and saviours work iconographically well, and where these kinds of ‘truths’ serve an easy narrative function. Shah has identified five characteristics of the ‘anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films’: the films 1) refuse to consider sex work as a livelihood option; 2) maintain an exclusive focus on women and girls; 3) have a narrative arc that begins by articulating sex work as violence and ends with scenes of rescue; 4) conflate sex work with violence and/or trafficking, and finally 5) overlook any organising efforts among sex workers or migrant communities.¹⁰ Taken together these analyses show how, in several fictional and documentary films, filmmakers reiterate an old story of ‘western saviors rescuing brown or poor white Eastern European women from their dead-end lives in brothels and Red Light Districts’.¹¹ Finally, Wendy Hesford¹² illuminated how certain representations of suffering and victimhood construct only certain bodies and populations as victims, and how these are incorporated into human rights discourses geared toward humanitarian interventions.

Yet, despite these poignant critiques from scholars analysing human trafficking, sex work migration and victimhood on film, there is a discrepancy between rightfully criticising films on the one hand, and understanding or exploring the filmmaking process on the other. While the film industry certainly produces sensationalised films on these topics, there are a range of other aspects that influence the filmmaking process than merely a perspective on sex work and trafficking that lacks nuance. Filmmakers are limited by time, resources (financial and human), access, ethical responsibilities and programme formats, to name but a few. Moreover, filmmakers want to make a film that people might actually want to watch, and there is the need to present a coherent, comprehensible document—a good story. Thus, from a filmmaker’s perspective it might seem that often, little is understood about the conditions of filmmaking by many who write about film, but have never made one. This article is about the multiple challenges of filmmaking. The point is not to pose filmmakers’ experience against the written analysis of films; rather this article discusses how to make films about transnational migrant female sex workers (some of whom may be trafficked) that do not fall into a misleading sensationalised capture/rescue plot device. While analysing the making of two films about women migrant sex workers I aim to look at the reasons—both theoretical and practical—for certain production decisions.

Since 2003 as an anthropologist I have worked among women migrants, primarily sex work migrants or/and marriage migrants, from and in Thailand and Nigeria who travel to Europe. Theoretically I primarily find kinship with critical trafficking studies and transnational feminist theory. Having these theoretical foundations as my point of departure I have become increasingly interested in the collaboration between anthropology and film and the potential of research-based films to produce counter-narratives to dominant stereotypes or representations within a range of themes, particularly countering dominant images of women migrants and sex workers. As an anthropologist and filmmaker I have been involved in, co-directed and directed five documentaries on the topics of marriage migration from Thailand to Denmark, sex work migration to Europe, and Thai women in the sex tourism industry in Thailand. Combining my work as an anthropologist and filmmaker I have had to face numerous practical, ethical and representational choices to make these documentaries. Hence, this article also reflects upon the relationship of research to film production.

In the article I draw upon two films I have worked on—*Trafficking* (2010) and *Becky’s Journey* (2014). The two films serve as case studies to discuss the practical and ethical implications of making films about these issues. It is not that the two films have solved the above-mentioned challenges, or that there are no nuanced films on these topics already.¹³ The article is an invitation into the laboratory of filmmaking, into an ongoing dialogue to explore how the two films reflect the politics of filmmaking and representations of sex work migration and human trafficking. The critiques of many existing filmic representations of sex work migration and human trafficking are crucial and well-placed, yet documentaries are, of course, not documents of objective truths, they are communication products that entail processes of performance and translation. Therefore one argument I make is that we have to understand films—the final products—as expressions of *the art of the possible*, each produced in a political and economic context. I secondly argue that we have to explore not only how sex work migration and human trafficking are represented on film but also how the films are produced, because the process of making films affects how human trafficking and sex work related migration are shown to audiences.

⁹ S P Shah, 2013.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 558.

¹¹ *Ibid.* This citation refers to ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ by Gayatri Spivak in R C Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the history of an idea*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010.

¹² W S Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human rights visions, recognitions, feminisms*, Duke University Press, 2011.

¹³ Examples are *Otras Vías* (Spain/Germany, 2002); *Taking the Pledge*, USA, 2006; *Normal*, Italy/UK, 2012; *Collateral Damage*, USA, 2014; *One Day*, Denmark, 2008; *Little Soldier*, Denmark, 2008; *Last Rescue in Siam*, Thailand, 2012; *Creative Trafficking*, Canada, 2012. For a more comprehensive list see *Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival Archives*, retrieved 15 July 2016, <http://www.sexworkerfest.com/videos/>

The Two Films

Shot in Copenhagen, Denmark, *Trafficking*, which I co-directed with Judith Lansade, follows the specially appointed anti-trafficking-squad of the Copenhagen police force over the course of six months. Through two policewomen, Anne and Trine, the film brings the viewer into a number of specific cases, such as a raid among Nigerian women in the red light district, the unravelling of a presumed Romanian trafficking network and the case against Mary, a suspected Nigerian madam. Despite public and political demand for police intervention to combat trafficking, the anti-trafficking squad struggles to resolve the individual cases and bring traffickers to court. The women migrants often do not denounce their purported traffickers and, at times, emerge as merely ‘extras’ in the broader field of anti-trafficking interventions. The film is set during the process in which the women are in the phase of being identified as either ‘victims of human trafficking’ or ‘undocumented migrants’. The film seeks to illuminate the paradoxes of migration control, policing and humanitarianism in a Danish context while simultaneously pointing to the broader dilemmas within global migration governance. The film shows how, compared to the options they have in Nigeria, sex workers see their work in Denmark as a way to earn a living and are, therefore, not interested in denouncing their traffickers or being sent home.

Shot in Benin City, Nigeria, *Becky's Journey*¹⁴ is about Becky, a 26-year-old Nigerian woman, who feels stuck in Nigeria after two failed attempts to go to Europe. The film is based on a series of interviews conducted in an apartment in the centre of Benin City and intercut partly with sequences of everyday life where viewers sense the feelings of limbo and immobility that permeate Becky's life, and partly with archive footage that illustrates Becky's memories of her journey and of her emotional state of mind. We see images of the desert, shot from a moving truck, images of migrants resting under a shady tree, images of the ocean, of ship wrecks, of old military barracks, of various cityscapes, of birds in the sky and of rough winds stirring up a group of palm trees. Some of these images adhere directly to Becky's story. Others are chosen for their poetic qualities in an effort to make Becky's ‘inner life’ felt by audiences. They serve as appropriations that make it possible for audiences to identify with Becky—to feel her stories, memories and emotions.

I met Becky during field work in Benin City, southern Nigeria, from where many Nigerian women leave for Europe. In some areas of Benin City there is a high risk of assault, robbery and, at times, kidnapping, and a local woman seen with a white person, such as me, might be in danger, which required me to take a range of ethical precautions. Basic anthropology ethics, and indeed wider research ethics, teach a ‘do no harm’ principle. Thus, to protect my informants (and myself), I decided, in collaboration with them, to conduct most of the interviews with them in my rented hotel-apartment in the centre of Benin City. The hotel had approximately ten armed guards, high surrounding walls, barbed wire and a small restaurant so I could stay at the compound after dark. Conducting fieldwork in such an environment raises a range of questions about what type of data can be produced and how close you can get to your informants' everyday lives. I began to think about these security problems as contributing positively to my research, rather than constraining me. For instance, I distributed disposable cameras to the women that I could not visit. Furthermore, I realised some of the benefits of this type of ‘in-house ethnography’. Over time I came to spend many hours with the women as they ‘hung out’ at my place, instead of me ‘hanging out’ at their places. In my apartment there were no family members to listen to our conversations or daily chores to take care of. Often they would come alone or together, sit on the couch, watch cable TV, eat and chat. This produced conversations which could continue for days. Becky felt safe and free to talk. *Becky's Journey* is a result of such long-term conversations where Becky stayed in my apartment almost every day for several weeks as her life history unfolded on camera.

The Production of Counter-narratives

Anthropological research often aims at structural levels of analysis based on observation and interviews, whereas films usually leave less room for explicit historical and cultural analysis in their effort to communicate human experience and emotions and to construct forms of knowledge.¹⁵ To create a more sensory-based filmic language, I chose to refrain from making my anthropological analysis explicit in the films—for instance in the form of a voice-over. Instead, I wanted the films to open up and question existing representations of sex work migration and trafficking, and perhaps with time even propel new readings and produce counter-narratives. Basically I wanted the films to speak for themselves, offering open endings rather than normative answers (closed endings) to the complex realities of the migrant women's lives. An example of a closed ending is one in which a migrant sex worker is portrayed as ‘rescued by the police’ and successfully deported to ‘a better life’ in Nigeria. In the final scenes of *Trafficking*, we see the policewomen Anne and Trine stack the multiple folders

¹⁴ *Becky's Journey* has been screened at numerous film festivals in the US, Mexico, Europe, Africa and Asia and won *Best Documentary Award* at the Let's All Be Free Film Festival, London 2015 and the *Award of Excellence* at the International Film Festival For Family, Public Service, Against Drug Abuse and Trafficking, Indonesia 2015. *Trafficking* was screened on Danish national TV as well as at numerous international festivals and nominated for the *Danish Doc Award* and *Politiken Audience Award*.

¹⁵ N Lutkehaus and J Cool, ‘Paradigms Lost and Found: The “crisis of representation” and visual anthropology’ in J M Gaines and M Renov (ed.), *Collecting Visible Evidence*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999, pp. 116–139.

of police files that did not lead to any prosecution of purported traffickers, illustrating the Sisyphean task of bringing the complexity of trafficking to the courtroom. In the final scenes of *Becky's Journey*, we hear Becky state that: 'I have two plans—one is to stay in Nigeria, the other is to go to Europe', pointing to ambiguities of the protagonists' desires and trajectories and open endings.

The challenge of such open-ended films, however, is that viewers might read them in multiple ways. No clear-cut message is conveyed, and therefore such films can be (mis)used politically for multiple purposes. For instance, when Becky early in the film states that she does not believe in trafficking, rather 'it is a bargain between the both parties' (between the madam and the migrant and/or the migrant's family), it could lead to questioning whether women like Becky, who knowingly violate immigration laws and are not coerced to migrate and sell sex, should have any rights at all when they arrive in Europe. Thus, presenting the complexities of women's motives for migration, and not merely presenting them as 'sex slaves', is an approach, it could be argued, that leaves greater responsibility to viewers in discussing and navigating questions of agency versus victimhood and 'forced' versus 'voluntary' dichotomies.

Ethical obligations

Films centre—first and foremost—on the people they portray. The participants in the films represent themselves; the story is about them. Ultimately, films do not claim any generalisability. However, I chose to follow Becky, Trine and Anne because they shared similarities with several other informants and institutions I encountered throughout my research within the fields of sex work migration and human trafficking. In this way, the films support João Biehl's argument that '[f]ollowing the plot of a single person can help one to identify the many networks and relations...in which regimes of normalcy and ways of being are fashioned and, thus, to capture both the densities of localities and the rawness of uniqueness'.¹⁶ These individuals (and institutions) are, of course, inscribed in, produced within, and productive of a larger context.¹⁷

The exposure of individual people in front of the camera raises ethical questions. In written research, informants and localities are usually anonymous, making it easier to reveal intimate details about people's lives without direct implications for them. Certainly, the ethical aspects of including informants in films are of great importance where the informants cannot always be anonymous; therefore, I (as filmmaker and researcher) have the responsibility to consider the ethical aspects of exposing the informants in the public domain. Filmmakers, anthropologists and broadcasters all have ethical guidelines on anonymity. Yet, in filmmaking, anonymity carries its own implications.

Blurred faces and silhouettes are widely used to anonymise participants within crimes genres in journalism and documentary films. These anonymising tools often come to serve as markers of deviance and criminality.¹⁸ Such tools have to be carefully applied in documentaries within the field of sex work migration and trafficking as not to reiterate objectifying tendencies of women in the sex industry. In *Trafficking* we tried to avoid these genre tropes and their consequences by filming the women's hands and shoes, or their hair from the back, to provide more personal images, instead of the potentially more objectifying blurred faces. We see the hand lifting the cup to drink tea, a shoe that moves, hair that is braided, while with the blurred face the viewer cannot see such subtle details. It can be asked if this strategy was in any way sufficient to give migrant sex workers more 'face' and identity, but this seemed to be the best practical solution. However, in some instances, like a photo of the madam 'Mary', and when filming in the streets, we had to blur faces for ethical reasons and limited technical alternatives.

This discussion of filming and exposure plays into larger debates on representation and migrant sex workers' agency. Because we as researchers have an immense responsibility towards our interlocutors, and because sex work migration and human trafficking are such stigmatising concepts, the responsibility is arguably even bigger. While some did not want to participate in the films, others *wanted* to tell their stories, photograph their lives (in a disposable camera project I conducted in Benin City) and be filmed. As Sonia, deported from Italy, explained: 'There is no problem, you can film me, you can use my photos...I am not a criminal.' For Sonia, leaving her out of the frame or blurring her face would reduce her participation in the representation of her own life. The ethical dilemma, which emerges here, is that the ambition of protecting the women could end up reproducing the stereotypical and objectifying images that we seek to deconstruct.

A key ethical problem then is how to include the perspectives of the migrant women in representations of their lives, without compromising ethical concerns? How do we avoid reproducing voyeuristic ways of looking at migrant sex workers

¹⁶ J G Biehl, *Vita: Life in a zone of social abandonment*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, p. 478.

¹⁷ C Giordano, 'Practices of Translation and the Making of Migrant Subjectivities in Contemporary Italy', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 35, issue 4, 2008, pp. 588—606.

¹⁸ J K Haaken and M O'Neill, 'Moving images: Psychoanalytically informed visual methods in documenting the lives of women migrants and asylum seekers', *Journal of Health Psychology*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2014, pp. 79—89.

and understand their points of view if they are only represented as blurred faces? As Wendy Chapkis¹⁹ argues, '[m]ost victims of migrant or sex worker abuse can speak for themselves when allowed to do so'. The question is how we take this agency perspective seriously when it comes to the women's decision about being part of a film? The ethical problem is that just as there should be a focus on anonymity, there are also ethical implications of *not* allowing the voices and faces of the women to appear in the name of protecting them. Ethical concerns should not contribute to reproductions of sex work migrants as either crying objects of compassion *or* as blurred objectified faces. The challenge then is to recognise and include agency while paying attention to the ethical implications of doing so.

The solution I saw was to be pragmatic and creative in the process of filmmaking. Becky did not have any objections to being filmed, neither while I interviewed her in my apartment nor while she was doing everyday chores in her house. Some of her friends did not want to be filmed, so we agreed to keep them out of the camera's focus or only film their hands. Furthermore, I found it crucial to trust the women's own judgment of what could be told and could not. The women in this study were—throughout the research—very well aware of what they wanted to disclose and what they wanted to leave out of our conversations. Thus, as the films were anchored in anthropology and not investigative journalism, my approach was simply to let the women decide what they wanted to tell, and not push them to give details they did not want to discuss.

The Practice of Filmmaking

Filmmaking is not merely about theoretical questions of representation but often much more about everyday challenges in order to proceed and make the film at all. Depending on the context, it is at times necessary not only to simplify the broader analytical perspectives in order to make the film comprehensible to larger audiences, but also to accommodate ethical, practical and political concerns. Such 'practicalities' at times influence the representations of the subject matter. In *Trafficking*, for instance, the funder and broadcaster, Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR1), insisted on explanatory labels carrying the terms 'illegal migrant' instead of 'undocumented migrant' and 'prostitute' rather than 'sex worker'. DR1 did not trust their viewers to understand the meanings of these preferred terms and decided to name the migrants 'illegal' and the sex workers 'prostitutes'. This posed a dilemma for me and played into the broader challenge of narrowing down anthropological knowledge and analytical context to communicate to a broader audience without lengthy contextualisation and explanation. Furthermore, making films about migration often involves some introduction to immigration law in order to understand the legal status of the migrant characters, because this status (or lack thereof) might be the central motivator for the character's actions. This is why *Trafficking* has a scene in which the policewomen Anne and Trine explain the legal framework of human trafficking. This challenge poignantly illustrated the difference between written research and visual representation to larger audiences.

Following the police unit in Copenhagen formed part of my focus on migration control as a domain of investigation. The idea was to explore how the 'immigration apparatus'²⁰ revealed itself ethnographically primarily in the red light district. This recognises that migration control and border control are not only located at the geographical European nation-state borders, but they also encompass broader spaces where migration control, because of the Schengen Agreement, can take place in demarcated spaces such as airports and red light districts. For migrants, this multiplication of borders means they can be confronted with 'border control' at any time in a variety of places.²¹ In the effort to explore the workings of one of the institutions—the police—which is by far the most present and anxiety-inducing institution in the lives of undocumented migrant sex workers—as well as exploring the mindset of the people working there (in this case, specifically within the anti-trafficking unit)—I chose to focus on the perspective of the police.

By and large, *Trafficking* is filmed from the perspective of the police; we see the red light district through their gaze (as a workspace for the police) and not from the women's point of view. In this way *Trafficking* risks creating an uncritical identification with the police officers and their point of view, and might lead audiences to see the film as sympathetic to the rationalities of the police. Therefore one concern in following a police squad and their raids in the red light district was that *Trafficking* could echo numerous anti-trafficking films produced as 'tales of rescue',²² where journalists (often from media outlets and with hidden cameras) raid brothels with local policemen to 'rescue' the women. The intention in *Trafficking* was to show what happens after these rescue missions and interventions. Therefore, the film focuses on the many confrontational and paradoxical scenes where the 'rescued' women are more or less forced to talk to the police. Ambiguities emerge during these interrogations, and scenes show the discrepancies between the perspectives of the migrants and those of the police.

¹⁹ W Chapkis, 'Soft Glove, Punishing Fist: The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000' in E Bernstein and L Schaffner (eds.), *Regulating Sex—The politics of intimacy and identity*, Routledge, New York & London, 2003, pp. 51—66.

²⁰ G Feldman, *The Migration Apparatus: Security, labor, and policymaking in the European Union*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2012.

²¹ S Hess, 'How Gendered is the European Migration Regime? A feminist analysis of the anti-trafficking apparatus', *Ethnologia Europea*, vol. 42, issue 2, 2012, pp. 51—68.

²² R Galusca, 'Slave Hunters, Brothel Busters, and Feminist Interventions: Investigative journalists as anti-sex-trafficking humanitarians', *Feminist Formations*, vol. 24, issue 2, 2012, pp. 1—24.

By contrast, the challenge of making *Becky's Journey* had more to do with access. Initially, I intended to film larger groups of deportees in their everyday life in Benin City outside of institutional realms. Yet, because the field of undocumented migration and trafficking is so clandestine and beset with safety concerns, I realised that filming Becky in my apartment as she told me her story was the best option.

The difficulties of filming the women's lives in Benin City outside the confined spaces of anti-trafficking institutions highlight another aspect of representation: namely, the fact that broadcasters and film crews often opt for being embedded with anti-trafficking institutions or/and local security guards or the police to get their stories. The problem with this is twofold. First, there is the problem of institutions which might have a vested interest in supporting stories of suffering that fit the perspective of funders or 'success stories' to prove that their actions work. Just as 'hit and run' operations by journalists and filmmakers, these types of stories often make it to the screen easily, because of their well-structured narrative dramas, easily identifiable conflicts and visible 'perpetrators' and 'victims'. Secondly, one must question what kind of social reality and access to the migrant women is possible, when for instance, as is seen in one of the most screened journalistic documentaries on human trafficking in Benin City produced by the TV channel Al Jazeera, the journalist is embedded with local security forces and arrives in the villages with policemen, not to rescue victims but to protect the journalist, while she interviewed a group of women.²³ All the above considerations and decisions in the process of filming illustrate the dilemmas involved when balancing representations, ethics and research with the everyday challenges of filming and the politics of filmmaking.

The Use of Film in Anti-Trafficking Interventions

On 28 January 2014 I was invited to attend the premiere of the film *Life after Trafficking* at the Danish Film Institute's cinema in Copenhagen. The main Danish actors in the anti-trafficking community (primarily abolitionists but also a few non-abolitionists) were there, including NGO staff, government officials, IOM and researchers like myself.

The opening sequence of the film is shot from a car driving through one of the inner highways in what appears to be a large European city. We see dark-skinned women in shiny lingerie standing along a tree-lined avenue. The music is melancholic. One hour later the film's closing shot is of the film's protagonist Joy, who previously sold sex on European streets and in Denmark, but was returned to Nigeria and now sits behind a sewing machine, laughing with her three children. She also has an apprentice in her small newly painted tailor shop in Benin City.

Between the opening scene of lingerie and the end scene of sewing machines we follow Joy, who was deported from Denmark in 2006. Joy appears as an entrepreneurial woman, painting her shop, with ideas for business expansions and thinking how to name her business. In the film, we meet her in her everyday struggles and successes with three small children, trying to run a small business in Benin City among armed robbers, her mother's financial expectations, and overwhelming everyday problems in contemporary Nigeria. Though no one at the premiere claimed that reintegration of former and now returned migrant sex workers is easy, the film depicted a so-called success story of an entrepreneurial woman, who, against all odds, manages to improve her life upon return. As we see the film perfectly followed point three in Svati Shah's critique of the 'anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films'. *Life after Trafficking* has a narrative arc that begins by articulating sex work as violence and ends with scenes of rescue and sewing machines back in Nigeria.

In the discussion following the film, a Danish social worker, who works with Nigerian women being returned from Denmark, acknowledged the filmmakers: 'Thank you so much for this film. What I see in the film is a woman, Joy, who gets her dignity back in Nigeria. When that happens we (as social workers and IOM) have done a good job...we offer them [the Nigerian returned victims of trafficking] a helping hand.' As the Q&A after the film came to an end, a member of the audience asked the social workers and IOM employees sitting on the panel: 'I am wondering if anyone works against you in your return and reintegration efforts [to Nigeria]?' The same social worker replied immediately: 'Definitely, the women are the ones resisting the most. They do not see return as an alternative.'

While it is easy to dismiss the film and the replies from the social workers as simplistic and reductive analyses of the complexities of migration, the event rather illustrated how the films and representations of human trafficking are situated at the juxtaposition of migration control and humanitarian desires to rescue women from sex work and trafficking. In anti-immigrant climates—such as the current situation in Denmark—asylum advocates and anti-trafficking institutions believe that the best way to draw attention to their work is to represent the migrant's situation through the lens of gender-based discrimination and violence, and discourses on 'trafficking violence' in the migrant's home country. This is understandable,

²³ Al Jazeera 'The Nigerian Connection: An investigation into the plight of African women caught in a web of organised crime, prostitution and trafficking', 2013.

from their point of view, as Denmark has granted asylum to Nigerian women only in very few cases, and their cases had been, with the assistance of NGOs, prominently displayed in national media. Therefore, Nigeria is constructed as an unsafe 'home' for the women to return to. Yet, as this event illustrates, because so few are granted asylum and therefore are forced to go back to Nigeria for re-integration, anti-trafficking social workers have to simultaneously construct 'home' and Benin City as a place of safety and opportunity, due to the Danish official policy of trying to increase the number of migrants accepting return.²⁴ Thus in a Danish context, Nigeria as 'home' and 'home country' comes to be constructed in opposing ways—simultaneously as safe and unsafe. Such competing notions of 'home' and 'safety' ultimately reveal the often clashing ambitions of migration control and anti-trafficking interventions.

From the surface, the advantages of representing human trafficking and sex work migration through simplistic suffering via images are bountiful: images generate publicity; images help people relate to a cause; images mobilise funds, etc.²⁵ All such advantages are well placed in anti-migration political climates and humanitarian environments that have experienced dramatic governmental budget cuts, making humanitarian movements increasingly dependent on private foundations and philanthropists for their campaigns and interventions. As such, simplistic images of human trafficking also have to be understood in the context of broader processes of the commercialisation of humanitarianism. Yet, while it might seem as well-intended and somewhat understandable that images are used to raise awareness and funding, this strategy of using films and crying victims of trafficking might prompt a backlash. Though not pointing specifically at trafficking films, Judith Butler²⁶ cautions more broadly against human rights campaigns that over-invest in testimonial truths (such as the trafficking testimonies often at play in 'the anti-prostitution subgenre of documentary films'). The problem with such images of suffering is not merely that they present the women as victims; the problem is, as Susan Sontag argues in her famous essay, *Regarding the Pain of Others*,²⁷ that viewing the suffering of the 'other' does not continue to produce compassion, neither does it change anything structurally. Sontag argues that the image alone cannot educate us to act, and she opposes the naïveté and innocence of those who continue to be shocked again and again by the images of atrocity (Sontag here as invoked in Judith Butler 2007).²⁸ According to such arguments, the image of suffering 'sex slaves' on display in media, films and abolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns does not necessarily change the structures that produce trafficking; neither does it produce more compassion. Rather, reproducing these kinds of decontextualised images and sensational portrayals—as arguably happened with the Holocaust, the Vietnam War and hunger in Africa—produces compassion fatigue.²⁹ That is, over time we get so used to viewing images of suffering that our compassion numbs.

The dilemma is finding a balance between not forgetting or muting the suffering of others, while not reproducing or enlisting individual or sensationalistic stories as the basis for establishing an ethical or political response to suffering.³⁰ This balancing act tries to accommodate voices that are critical of the terms through which trafficking has been established as an object of knowledge and humanitarian concern, and which question the way in which trafficking campaigns subject migrant women to salacious interest and disempower them by portraying them only as victims.³¹

Thus, to critically examine the ethical implications of the mediated filmic image of the 'trafficking victim', we must consider not only the filmmakers' aesthetic strategies but also how the mediated figure actually influences the humanitarian and political campaigns utilising these images.³² While it might be considered ethically appropriate to reproduce images of suffering in some anti-trafficking campaigns in order to raise funds for anti-trafficking interventions, such interventions simultaneously appear unethical if the utilised images end up producing compassion fatigue.

Capturing the (ethnographic) complexity of this 'truth'—whether in writing, film or other representations—is key to a production of representations that does not result in compassion fatigue and that can serve as counter-narrative to stereotypical representations of women and men who migrate to sell sex. The point here is not to pose ethnographic findings about sex work migration against filmic ones, nor against human rights campaigns; neither is it to argue that images of suffering should not be on display. Rather, the point is—as Shah argues—that sex work, and sex work-related migration cannot be reduced to unitary or fixed ideas about suffering, slavery or prostitution-as-violence. We have to continue exploring how it is possible to represent abuse, exploitation, or other violations without relying on films that, as Shah points out, have a narrative arc that begins solely by articulating sex work as violence and ends with scenes of rescue or films that continuously conflate sex work with violence and/or trafficking. Simultaneously, we also have to consider the consequences of not showing simplified images of suffering within the field of human trafficking. What are the consequences of showing

²⁴ Danish Government, *Action Plan to combat human trafficking 2011-2014*, Copenhagen, 2011.

²⁵ B B Golob, 'Restricted Representation: The role of ethics and esthetics in framing images of suffering', *Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2013, pp. 511—522.

²⁶ J Butler, 'Torture and the Ethics of Photography', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 25, issue 6, 2007, pp. 951—966.

²⁷ S Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Penguin Books, London, 2004

²⁸ J Butler, 2007.

²⁹ D Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason—A moral history of the present*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012; S D Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war, and death*, Routledge, New York, 1999.

³⁰ W S Hesford, 2011.

³¹ R Andrijasevic, 2007; J Arthurs, 2012.

³² *Ibid.*

Becky's Journey, and listening to how she knowingly planned to enter the sex industry, for the funding of anti-trafficking campaigns? What are the consequences of screening the film in anti-immigrant political climates? Can funds be raised and interventions morally legitimised in the face of Becky's more complex narrative?

Conclusion

Films on sex work migration and human trafficking could show how policies impact on, and have real consequences in migrants' lives. Instead we often see continuously reproduced simplistic images and narratives of human trafficking. To circumvent this situation and produce counter-narratives an argument of this article is that films on these issues should attend to more 'open-ended' narratives igniting continuous scrutiny of the political economy that sustains sex work migration and human trafficking. First and foremost, I suggest trying to identify how stories worth telling do not always depend upon simplistic stories and/or images of suffering; rather, the stories worth telling often lie in the complexity and not in readily available sensational simplicity. Utilising this approach, I see multiple benefits in combining ethnographic longitudinal research with filmmaking within the field of sex work migration and human trafficking.

Scholarly critiques of films on sex work migration and human trafficking are often well-placed. Simultaneously, however, scholars working within this field also have to let go of *a priori* prejudices towards films and the tools of filmmaking. Films cannot represent all facets of any research, nor the entire complexity of sex work migration—at times it is necessary to simplify the complexity of the field to tell a story at all. One argument is therefore that since films are produced in the context of multiple challenges they are often the result of *the art of the possible*. No films are free of blind spots nor can they fully represent a group or a theme. Sometimes it is only possible to push the analysis or the images a little bit and then hope that over time multiple well-narrated films with complex messages reach broader audiences. To understand these processes scholarly and critical analyses have to explore not only how sex work migration and human trafficking are represented in film but also how the films were produced.

Films often carry a potential for (political) impact as they usually reach much wider audiences than academic papers. As such they also provide a space for voices within the sex worker rights movements and in migrant communities that might otherwise be muted. In order to fulfil this task, it is necessary for the filmmaker(s) to collaborate with the participants as well as become translators, mediators and interlocutors between localised and global contexts. Yet, while films have the potential to reform existing representations of human rights issues, there are no quick-fix solutions. Complex films on these issues often require a slow meditative approach to the documentary apparatus; it takes time and effort to get to know the subjects inside out, and above all to be able to observe them as thoughtfully as possible.³³ Within the field of sex work migration and human trafficking, documenting the complexities that exist entails venturing into a slow moving, collaborative, creative and reflective space.

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³³ I. Richardson, *I am Not Looking for Narratives. I am Looking for Life - Finding anthropology in contemporary documentary practice*, Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen, 2013.

³⁴ J Metz (dir.), *Armadillo*, 100 min., Fridthjof Film, 2010.