

Dignity and Hope versus Humiliation and Despair

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GHOST WORKERS and the Territorial Imagination: Globalization, Irregular Migrant Labour and Cinematic Practice: A Case Study

My contribution to this workshop has partly been inspired by something which Hannah Arendt says in *The Human Condition* (1958):

Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead to an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling ...

It will be argued that a number of recent cinematic texts which deal with 'undocumented' migrants, people smuggling, and 'flexible' labour practices, might also be used as resources for a narrative understanding of the 'new' global capitalism and the migration of peoples across the world. Two recent films (one produced in the UK and one produced in Bangladesh) will form the basis of the analysis.

Together, these films form part of a new story. The movement of people across borders (the underside of the movement of capital, goods and information) has contributed to the scale of spatial and socio-economic inequality. As globalization in its current form extends its power and domination, yet at the same time nation-states create 'zones of exemption' which reduce the undocumented to conditions of abjection, and what Agamben calls the *homo sacer*, beyond representation, what part can cinematic narrative play in producing versions of the 'global' which are dialogical, inherently ethical, and resistant to appropriation?

The films, in their very different ways, tell the stories of the 'illegal' or the irregular. But each of the figures in these texts is also a carrier of stories, their own interleaved with others; stories which unfold and add layers in the context of the narrative process, to a point where they become 'documented', identifiable, subjects of value, rather than subject to market price. All are commodified, their bodies traded or raided, but the very fact of their being *storied* is an act of witness itself. The films are, in all senses, about finding a language other than that which already forms the basis of existing representations: *the always already narrated*.

It might seem perverse to present an analysis of two films which feature humiliation, despair, exploitation and death and then attempt to place that analysis in the context of dignity and hope, but my argument will be that the films offer cultural resources upon which it might be possible to build policies, strategies and attitudes which create migrant-friendly local, national and international communities, articulate the potential value of a 'cosmopolitan identity', and establish the belief that 'everyone who is here is from here' and that 'nobody is illegal'. Above all, we need to break the tyranny of the 'territorial imagination' and endeavour to think beyond the nation.