

Distant Suffering, Proper Distance: Cosmopolitan Ethics in the Film Portrayal of Trafficked Women

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Media portrayals of human trafficking in Europe proliferated in the economic boom years between 1990 and 2007 and became increasingly visible in the UK news agenda from the late 1990s as a form of ‘moral panic’.¹ It emerged alongside the ‘Fortress Europe’ political agenda² stoking fears of being swamped by ‘impoverished hordes’ which dominated press reporting of immigration and asylum. There was a countervailing pressure from international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to protect the human rights of people displaced from their country of origin. The emphasis was on the figure of the sex worker as ‘trafficked woman’, which influenced the political conditions through which these women experienced their lives.³ Statistics circulated by NGOs gave an alarming account of the scale of the problem, but could

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not be verified in view of the illicit nature of the sex industry and the problem of defining when 'trafficking' has taken place.⁴

In the UK the problem of women and girls being trafficked to work in the sex industry was taken up as a campaign issue from 2000 onwards by Amnesty International, UNICEF and Anti-Slavery International, who actively sought media publicity for their funding appeals and government lobbying. These campaigns reached a crescendo in 2007 when the 200-year anniversary of an Act of Parliament to abolish the Atlantic slave trade was commemorated by a lottery-funded programme of events that frequently drew links to trafficking as the modern equivalent of slavery. In Sweden, a feminist political agenda was more dominant; after a new law came into force in 2002 that criminalised the buying of sex, the government rolled out an educational programme to counteract the trafficking of women.⁵ Two well-funded film dramatisations, loosely based on real-life events, were drawn into these European campaigns. *Lilja 4-Ever* (Lukas Moodysson 2002) was distributed to European cinemas, while *Sex Traffic* (David Yates 2004) was first broadcast as a two-part mini-series in 2004 on Channel 4 and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

My aim is to examine the ethical and political issues raised by using film narratives to construct victims of trafficking as objects of humanitarian intervention. It contributes to a developing body of critical work, on which I will draw, about films used within anti-trafficking campaigns.⁶ A key ethical problem is how to use film to establish empathy with female victims of trafficking without losing the critical distance required for a credible social and political critique of the complex issues involved.⁷ An ethical relationship with these distant 'others' requires that we avoid voyeuristic ways of seeing these women as objects of our compassion, and instead find ways to recognise their agency and point of view rather than imposing our own, more powerful, perspective.⁸ It is an issue that the Australian filmmaker Denis O'Rourke explored to unsettling effect though the multiple perspectives of *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (O'Rourke 1992),⁹ which undercut his impulse to save the Thai prostitute he had hired, in an update of Brecht's dramatisation of the belief that: 'acts of private charity will never change a rotten system'.¹⁰ My analysis responds to a challenging question: whose interests are being served by anti-trafficking films and campaigns?¹¹

COSMOPOLITAN ETHICS

My starting point for this analysis is the model of communicative ethics suggested by the concept of ‘proper distance’ which was developed in Lilie Chouliarki’s¹² comparative analysis of television news stories about distant suffering. Her ethical purpose is how best to promote ‘cosmopolitan citizenship’, that is to say, a global perspective on our moral responsibility to the other that isn’t limited to ‘people like us’. I develop this concept of proper distance as a method of film analysis that draws in historical perspectives as well as the discursive contexts of European anti-trafficking campaigns between 2002–2007 within which the films were circulated and interpreted. I also turn to Rosi Braidotti’s¹³ concept of ‘nomadic ethics’ to offer a critical perspective on these campaigns from a post-colonial perspective that de-centres the gaze of the powerful.

Lauren Berlant¹⁴ argues that the kind of narrative emotion that affords viewers the pleasures of ‘vicarious suffering’ and ‘the self-satisfaction that we wish to do the right thing and hence are virtuous’ is ‘cruelly ineffective’ as a ‘bridge to justice’. Rather than dismissing all narratives of compassion in this way, Lilie Chouliarki’s analysis of distant suffering in television news stories argues that some are more successful than others. Her analysis draws on the concept of ‘proper distance’:

Proper distance is the critical notion that implies and involves a search for enough knowledge and understanding of the other person or the other culture to enable responsibility and care, as well as to enable the kind of action that, informed by that understanding, is in turn enabling. We need to be close but not too close, distant, but not too distant.¹⁵

Voyeuristic approaches dwell on the spectacle of suffering and encourage our immersion in the ‘immediacy’ of sensationalism, an aesthetic that seeks to impact on the senses through graphic imagery to provoke an emotional response.¹⁶ The moral righteousness of exposing wrongdoing may be entwined with unacknowledged racism that manifests in the ‘othering’ of victims and perpetrators in an ambivalent psychological process of projection and disavowal of our own desires and fears.¹⁷

While we may be emotionally moved to empathy or indignation by this proximity to the scene of suffering, Chouliarki suggests that if we are to understand the root causes of the victim’s suffering and what needs to

be done politically to address these, television news must stage the possibility for our taking action on distant suffering, such as the potential to mount protests for legislative change or to make charitable donations to fund programmes of intervention and support. A more reflexive distance is required to enable deliberative questions to be asked, such as ‘why?’ and ‘what needs to be done?’. This ‘hypermediacy’ enables the formation of a ‘cosmopolitan disposition’, she argues, by positioning spectators as philanthropists or protestors with a sense of impersonal responsibility that extends beyond the proximity of family, neighbourhood and nation, that is to say ‘people like us’, to recognise ‘distant others’ as equally deserving not only of our compassion but also of global justice. This model sets the empathetic self at the centre of a series of concentric circles that move through widening circles of familial, ethnic and community affiliations, to eventually encompass humanity as a whole. This legacy of enlightenment thinking is not only the foundation for progressive liberal politics but also influences the forms of popular media that are structured to tell ‘human stories’ about individual protagonists with whom audiences can emotionally connect.

Chouliarki’s model of cosmopolitanism highlights the need to extend our empathy and ethic of care to those distant others that fall outside the parochial boundaries of kin and nation. However, this humanist model has itself been subject to critique, especially from postcolonial and feminist critics.¹⁸ Most importantly, it has been argued that a genuine cosmopolitanism requires that we also switch perspectives to consider how *we* are seen and understood by those distant others who are the object of our compassion. This challenges the humanist conception of cosmopolitanism that places the autonomous self at the centre of human rights discourses of justice—the ‘I’ who knows and acts on that knowledge from a dominant location in which ‘distant others’ are the objects of philanthropy but who themselves are denied the capacity to know and act. This change of perspective enables voices to be heard that are critical of the terms through which trafficking has been established as an object of knowledge and humanitarian concern and who dislike the way that trafficking campaigns subject migrant women to salacious interest and disempower them as victims. Rosi Braidottis’s¹⁹ postcolonial model of cosmopolitanism makes the case for an alternative representational ethics which de-centres the gaze of the powerful and foregrounds instead the multiplicity of migrants’ embodied desires and experiences, which may not fit with humanitarian models of intervention that drive the global ‘rescue industry’.²⁰

Establishing a cosmopolitan ethics of ‘proper distance’ therefore requires us to acknowledge the limitations in understanding determined by the historical legacies of our location in the global political economy.

Taking both Chouliarki and Braidotti into account, my argument is structured to perform an expanded approach to the concept of ‘proper distance’. A focus on textual analysis in the section on *The Cultural Politics of Compassion* includes reflection on the films’ generic antecedents in order to help distance us from the political imperatives of the present moment and to recognise the mythic, ideological power of recurring narrative motifs. The next section on *The Cosmopolitan Public Sphere* takes a step away from the film texts to examine the contexts for interpretation within the campaigns in which they have been circulated. Finally, a move outside the discursive frame of ‘trafficking’ draws attention to less frequently circulated migrant perspectives and a different interpretive frame. In the Conclusion, these changing perspectives, moving from textual analysis to contextualisation and discursive critique, are argued to offer the ‘proper distance’ from which the communicative ethics of these films can, in my view, be most effectively evaluated.²¹

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF COMPASSION

My starting point is to consider the generic influences on *Lilya 4-ever* and *Sex Traffic* by attending to key features of their narrative structure, characterisation, mise-en-scène, thematic concerns, and spectator positioning. In order to evaluate their potential for developing a cosmopolitan perspective in viewers, it builds on the debates introduced earlier about the politics of compassion as a narrative emotion and whether it can do more than reinforce our sense of the victim’s powerlessness. Both films combine, in different proportions, a melodramatic immersion in spectacle, sensationalism, and the workings of fate with a realist crime narrative that has psychologically plausible characters struggling with moral dilemmas arising from contemporary social problems. This combination in various forms of ‘social melodrama’ addressing the problem of the ‘fallen woman’ has been a staple of Hollywood film, in the ‘white slavery’ films of the 1910s, for example, which showed characters making the right moral decisions in the face of wrongdoing²² but which themselves drew on earlier forms of Victorian melodrama.²³ The use of these traditional conventions of storytelling creates a strong moral purpose but raises the question of whether these entertainment genres can ever do

more than offer the emotional catharsis of voyeurism and instead help to bring about genuine social and political change.²⁴

The narrative of *Lilya 4-ever* details the inexorable process by which 16-year-old Lilya, living in one of the former communist countries, is abandoned by her mother, entrapped by East European traffickers, one of whom she initially trusts as her boyfriend and protector, taken to Sweden where she is subjected to repeated rape, then finally escapes and leaps to her death from a bridge, a scene which is presaged in the opening of the film. A final scene shows her return as an angel to be with her friend Voldodya back home, who had committed suicide after she had left.

Our empathy with Lilya's suffering depends on our ability to understand and perhaps to share her emotions. Emma Wilson's article on the film, written for a special journal edition on children, does not refer to the political issues raised by trafficking, instead narrating the film as being about a universal experience of attachment and loss in childhood. Through disallowing distance, she argues, the film evokes a tactile, bodily awareness of the child's experience, 'using hand-held camera, close ups and a viewpoint that shares Lilya's vector through the film, enabling us to experience the emotions she feels'.²⁵ In the scene where Lilya's mother leaves with her boyfriend for the US, for example, an event which precipitates Lilya's descent into destitution and sexual exploitation, we wait quietly with Lilya in a room on her own as they prepare to leave. At the last minute, the camera careers downstairs with Lilya as she rushes outside to cling to her mother: 'Wait mom.... Don't leave me, please stay with me. I won't make it!' she cries. Her distraught mother is intent on her own survival: 'If I don't go now...' she explains as she gets into the car and drives away. Lilya drops to the muddy ground on her knees, bowed down in despair, with a stray dog coming into frame to underline the image of abandonment—and future degradation. Wilson's assumption here is that we identify with Lilya, experiencing her pain as our pain.

This assumption of shared feelings, I would argue, fails to establish proper distance. Instead, we need to distinguish between *identification* with the suffering victim that positions viewer and victim in a relation of equivalence, and *empathy* with the victim's suffering that is an imaginative projection that allows us to understand how *she* might feel. This imaginative projection underlies the humanist ethic of care in which empathy is valued as a potential impetus for compassion. Compassion

itself is distinguished from temporary feelings of empathy by the injunction on us to act to alleviate that suffering, that is to say, it makes a moral demand on us. This moral demand is elicited in *Lilya 4 ever* by the fact that in the ensuing narrative there is a complete absence of compassion in the people that Lilya encounters in her immediate family and community that not only motivates Lilya's fantasy of moving to the West²⁶ but also creates an empty subject position for the viewer to fill.

What we could or should do opens up complex political issues that may defeat us from acting at all; nor do our compassionate feelings necessarily offer any help in finding the answer. By flattening out the differences between us and Lilya through invoking a universal experience we can all share—the withdrawal of motherly love and care—it evades explicitly invoking the political causes of her suffering in the wider arena of global economic and sexual relations, an arena where most of the audience for this film do not 'share the same misfortune' as Lilya, in Martha Nussbaum's phrase,²⁷ by view of their privilege and power. Indeed, Kristensen²⁸ argues that its focus on the grim poverty of a post-Soviet landscape reinforces a (neo-) colonial discourse of 'us' and 'them' for a Nordic spectator anxious about migration. Lilya's desperate circumstances arouse our desire to rescue her but offer a conservative 'return home' narrative as the only route to salvation: 'had he contemplated subverting this narrative, Moodysson might have let Lilya live a happy and prosperous life in Sweden. But that was not an option.'²⁹

The psychologically charged parochialism of this narrative world is based on a tradition of fallen women narratives that go back to the 19th century and beyond. Philanthropic discourses sought to make the problem of working-class urban prostitution visible through investigative journalism and thereby accessible to political, moral and social reform.³⁰ In these narratives: 'A woman's fall from virtue was frequently attributed to seduction and betrayal which set the scene for her representation as victim', for which total sexual innocence was required.³¹ 'The danger begins the moment a girl leaves the protection of Home and Mother'³² writes one social reformer at the turn of the 20th century when 'white slavery' narratives proliferated during a previous period of anxiety about immigration. These used multiple rhetorical devices to elicit public support for social purity campaigns by stressing the youth, virginity, and whiteness of the victims, in contrast to the ethnically marked traffickers whose violence and cruelty made escape impossible.³³ In the same way Lilya's *naïveté*, sexual innocence, and lack of responsibility for her fate

is accentuated—she loses her home because her mother leaves her, loses her sexual reputation because of a lie told by a friend, and is abducted to Sweden because of her trust in a seemingly caring boyfriend, the cruelty of the traffickers and indifference of the Swedish customers.

Another historical influence on *Lilya 4-ever* is the Christian myth of ‘the fall’ that links sexual knowledge to death. This works against the reformist impulse to save the woman and rehabilitate her into respectable society in a return home. The film’s fateful narrative structure is accentuated by the opening scene where we see her jump from a bridge, her suicide ruling out from the start that anything could be done to save her as the film retraces the events that lead to her death. The childlike fantasy of an afterlife as an angel rather than the possibility of a better life here on earth offers a perspective founded on a religious imaginary of evil, original sin and redemption. Linda Nead, commenting on the recurring trope of the suicide leap from a bridge in 19th-century narratives of the fallen woman, such as the popular *Bridge of Sighs*, argues that the death of the prostitute ensures that:

the boundaries between the pure and the fallen ...remain clear cut while at the same time the prostitute can be constituted as an object of pity and compassion’ (184)... Through death, the prostitute – the social outcast – could find salvation with Christ which comfortably removed any responsibility or guilt from respectable society.³⁴

Lilya’s reincarnation as an angel is prefigured in the religious picture she carries with her—an iconography that exalts her at the same time as the narrative abases her³⁵—as signalled by her collapse into the mud at the point of her abandonment. This creates ambivalence in our relation to her—both distanced through abjection but also brought close through the empathy reserved for those ‘like us’—the white, blond ‘innocent’ at the centre of the story. Although the majority of trafficking happens between and within countries in Africa or Asia, it rarely figures in the stories widely circulated in the global North. Presented as a parochial rather than a global issue, European audiences are psychologically implicated by the threat of this ‘evil in our midst’ that must be expelled.

Sex Traffic, a two-part, three-hour television drama told in the form of a transnational thriller is similarly melodramatic but also much more cosmopolitan in its narrative structure and themes. It centres on the story of two young Moldovan sisters who on deciding to emigrate are kidnapped

and trafficked through Europe before eventually reaching London. What is less usual though is that this narrative is intertwined with a complicated multi-strand narrative that portrays activists working on our behalf to prevent and alleviate the suffering of trafficked women while locating obstacles to any lasting solution in the exploitative power of global corporations. It has been described as cynical and ambivalent³⁶ in its portrayal of charitable interventions. I will argue, however, that it goes a long way towards meeting Chouliarki's criteria for a cosmopolitan text and, unusually for a film on this topic, offers a position from which to reflect on the limitations of this humanist perspective.

Its opening hook is highly melodramatic with a series of intensely threatening scenes in quick succession establishing the emotional tone. It starts with intrusive handheld video footage of Anya being filmed by her captors in big close up on her face, a close up that recurs throughout the drama as a signifier of what is at stake—the intimacy of the traffickers' lack of respect for her bodily integrity, but simultaneously an appeal for this woman to be recognised as an individual with a name and a face who, like Lilya, calls on our compassion. The sequence culminates in her drowning after being thrown overboard by her traffickers on being intercepted by an Italian police-boat.

The fatalism and pathos of *Lilya 4-ever* is avoided, however, because the possibility of survival is embodied in the narrative shift to Elena and Vara, two sisters who are taken to the UK by East European middle men, at first voluntarily and then forcibly, via Serbia, Bosnia, Romania, Albania and Italy. When Elena is thrown overboard, in similar circumstances to Anya, she survives because she can swim, and her agency is further reinforced by her quest to rescue her sister in the second half of the drama.³⁷ The melodramatic motifs of death by drowning, separation from home, innocence defiled, disease and degradation, the villainy of the evil traffickers as shown repeatedly in scenes of rape, beatings, cold-blooded murder and threats to family back home, culminate in a sentimental resolution in which Elena returns home in the warm glow of the setting sun to her mother and child, the absent father now replaced by her rescuer David, an NGO activist. However, I would argue that the ideological work of this 'return home' resolution is undercut by other narrative elements that augment the film's cosmopolitan credentials.

Sex Traffic is a self-consciously humanist drama which makes visible the work of transnational charitable activists seeking to reduce the flow of trafficking and to give shelter to women and children caught up in

the trade. The central story is interwoven with several other narratives showing a range of agents working in the field: feminist activists in the Worldwide Federation Against Forced Migration (WFAFM) who run safe houses in Italy; liberal human rights workers at the London offices of Speak for Freedom; the US-based Kernwell Corporation who supply privatised peacekeeping services—their slogan ‘To guard, to guide, to protect’ whose charitable cause for the year is the WFAFM. Indeed, Lola and Andre, who run the WFAFM, are the ethical and geographical centre of the drama. For them, helping these women is a vocation. Their shelter in Italy is located at the boundary of the impoverished countries of Eastern Europe, merely a boat ride across the Adriatic from Albania, Serbia and Bosnia, where all the main characters meet and become aware of the full scale of the problem. The film meets Chouliarki’s humanist model of communicative ethics by making visible activist NGOs in the field which, she argues, helps to develop a cosmopolitan disposition in spectators to take action to alleviate and prevent ‘distant suffering’ beyond the boundaries of kin and nation.

Although *Sex Traffic*’s complex narrative structure offers multiple points of identification, it is Daniel (played by well-known actor John Simm), occupying the white male perspective at the centre of Western liberal humanitarianism, who acts as the primary conduit for the viewer’s humanitarian engagement. His character’s journey enacts on our behalf a transformation from an ineffective if concerned ‘ordinary’ citizen going about his daily life in London as a disaffected NGO bureaucrat in the opening scenes, to acting as a bulwark against the de-humanising brutality of the market in human beings through his own personal interventions. The turning point hangs on the suicide of a Kurdish asylum seeker after Daniel fails to follow up his case. This galvanises him to find out what had happened to Anya—overriding fears of his own safety, he travels to Bosnia to investigate before being deported for overstepping his official role.

This heroic ‘lone operator outside the system’ is a staple protagonist of the political thriller genre found in British high budget ‘quality’ television series, the genre with which *Sex Traffic* is most closely aligned. It is a narrative means by which top-level corruption and incompetence can be exposed in established institutions in situations of high jeopardy where state forms of security cannot be relied upon.³⁸ In *Sex Traffic*, our faith in the power of policing to control the trade is undermined very early on when in the opening hook Anya is thrown overboard—the

police fail to save her while the traffickers evade capture with most of their cargo intact. However, instead of Daniel occupying this heroic role in a conventionally ‘macho’ style, his character is softened, indeed feminised, by his acts of tenderness and a personalised ethic of care. His sexual diffidence with women, which had been established at the start as a product of low esteem, is also transformed into a virtue by making his home in London a ‘safe house’. Before joining Elena’s quest to find her sister he feeds her, comforts her and gives her his own bed while he sleeps on the sofa—protecting her from the violence and sexual coercion she has met elsewhere. This makes him an (overly) comfortable point of identification for Western audiences, especially for men, who through Daniel are able to disassociate themselves from being implicated in the male violence displayed elsewhere in the narrative. It also problematically reproduces the agency of the white male protagonist as the means through which problems are solved and the narrative brought to its resolution, a film convention that is open to postcolonial and feminist critique.

Yet despite the centrality of this humanist perspective, I want to argue that *Sex Traffic* is more ethically complex than the analysis so far would suggest and explores some of the problems with Chouliarki’s humanist model of cosmopolitanism. This is because we are encouraged to occupy an analytic relation to these narrative events through the range of perspectives we encounter on the causes and possible solutions to trafficking in this multi-strand television thriller. It is a genre that allows for ambivalence and self-reflexive ideological critique.³⁹ We are not encouraged to identify too closely with the lone hero or to be so emotionally immersed in the melodrama of suffering that we lose our critical distance. In *Sex Traffic*, this critical distance enables us to question the activities of the international NGOs that Chouliarki recommends as our proxy for humanitarian intervention on distant suffering, and also to question the liberal belief in the power of individual agency on which popular film and television conventions rely.

This critical distance is enabled by narrative themes that make visible the existence of ‘a market in human rights’⁴⁰ as one element in the ‘value chain’ of the global economy of trafficking. What I mean by this is that, paradoxically, charitable organisations can’t function outside globalised markets and media systems whose effects they are also seeking to counteract. This requires them to manage the ensuing risks to their ethical reputation on which their credibility to donors and beneficiaries

relies.⁴¹ This paradox is explored in *Sex Traffic* through the Kernwell Corporation, a private security firm that also funds a charitable foundation run by the CEO's wife, Madeline, from their headquarters in Boston, which supports the WFAFM shelter in Italy. Through this narrative strand, the film is able to critically explore the use of 'charity' as symbolic capital in managing the public reputation of transnational corporations.

Madeline's journey from innocence to experience as the drama unfolds acts as a secondary point of identification for the viewer that leads in the opposite direction to Daniel's growing belief in his power to make a difference. Her initial idealism, a product of the charitable ethos expected of bourgeois wives in corporate America, is marked as naïve in contrast to the world-weary experience of the NGO workers in the field at the WFAFM or Daniel's sense of impotence in the opening scenes. The limited effectiveness of Daniel's personal quest to save Elena and Vara is also underlined in the final scenes of the drama when we see a new young girl being entrapped while the local policeman looks on in dismay as the cycle begins again.

Madeline's initial idealism unravels when she discovers that Kernwell's support for WFAFM is a form of corporate PR. The cynicism of their motives is revealed in their attempts to cover up their own officers' involvement in trafficking, a theme which refers directly to real events in Bosnia.⁴² When Elena first meets Daniel in Bosnia she whispers, 'Officers—they are the worst', just before the bar is raided by police. Managing the resulting scandal to limit the damage, Kernwell highlights the work they fund at the Italian shelter which: 'helps hundreds of women a year get back home', and assure journalists that: 'Most of our guys stay on the right side of the law'. When the scandal gets out of control, they simply move onto another charitable cause. The profit motive is marked as the cause of cynical exploitation and as brutal in its effects in this respectable corporate version as the physical assertion of power on which the traffickers rely.

I have argued in this section that while *Lilya 4-ever* works to heighten the emotional impact on us of the suffering victim, using a 19th-century religious moral sensibility and melodramatic aesthetic of innocent victims and evil villains to do so, it fails to meet the criteria for a cosmopolitan text by obscuring our understanding of how we might act to change the political conditions that enable this suffering to happen. While *Sex Traffic* also mobilises melodramatic narrative conventions to elicit our

emotional engagement, it is able through its use of multi-strand narrative and the reflexive conventions of the 'quality' television political thriller to investigate corporate corruption and to critique humanist models of charitable intervention. It highlights the limitations of its own foregrounding of individualised acts of compassion by making it clear that these cannot change the structural inequalities and exploitative ethics of the global market that fuel the trade.

THE COSMOPOLITAN PUBLIC SPHERE

The ability of compassionate texts to move us to action does not depend simply on their aesthetic characteristics but also, crucially, on what political and interpretive networks they enter into and the actions which flow from these agents of change. 'It's very often not the film itself but the perception of it and the discussion it creates that ends up making a difference', argues the activist film-maker Roger Graef.⁴³ Feminist film-makers have long been aware of the importance of distribution and exhibition contexts for the way in which politically challenging films are received and the importance of shaping post-viewing discussion to create a context for new ideas to take root.⁴⁴ Although NGOs in the UK are prohibited from overt 'political' activity, this can't, in reality, be avoided; the ethical demand to act in response to the needs of the other *has* to be enacted via the delineation of particular forms of political identification and belonging, and these are open to contestation and change.⁴⁵ A cosmopolitan politics is more likely to be achieved, however imperfectly, through NGOs as the transnational institutions of civil society, rather than through the international politics of nation states, argues Chouliarki: 'Amnesty International enacts cosmopolitanism in a dual sense: as a moral sentiment but also as a political project'.⁴⁶ Trafficking is an issue that has attracted widespread concern from across the political spectrum through diverse institutions offering conflicting analyses of the problem and differing strategies of intervention: from UN-affiliated NGO human rights activists and national governments within the EU, to more localised religious or women's groups campaigning against violence that each carve out a different constituency for their campaigns. It is important, therefore, to look at the campaigning contexts in which *Lilya 4-ever* and *Sex Traffic* have been circulated in order to glimpse how these may have shaped the interpretive discourses through which these films were framed.⁴⁷

For instance, if we look at the UK context, we find immigration anxiety being stoked by the media and successive governments wary of doing anything that might signal a ‘weakening’ of their control over immigration—a discourse that culminated in the successful 2016 ‘Brexit’ campaign slogan that withdrawal from the EU would enable the UK to ‘take back control’ of its borders. The difficulty of distinguishing between consensual and coerced migrants, an ambiguity made worse by media labelling practices, delayed the government signing of the European Convention against Trafficking in Human Beings,⁴⁸ which is designed to offer greater levels of support and protection to victims. Three NGO anti-trafficking campaigns—Anti-Slavery International’s *Stop Human Traffic* (launched in 2000), UNICEF’s *End Child Exploitation* (launched in 2003), and Amnesty International’s *Stop Violence Against Women* (launched in 2004)—worked together from 2005 to lobby the government to sign the Convention. A special screening of *Sex Traffic* was arranged in the UK Parliament, which was subsequently praised by the UNICEF President for being: ‘a catalyst for public and political debate... I have seen a change in political stance on the issue’.⁴⁹ They each carried *Lilya 4 ever* and *Sex Traffic* links on their websites, while UNICEF and Amnesty also inserted their own short campaign films on the *Lilya 4 ever* DVD. The signing came at the start of 2007 when additional political pressure was exerted from the framing of trafficking as a modern form of slavery in the lottery-funded events that marked the bicentennial of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. ‘In a symbolic move, the then Home Secretary John Reid signed the document at the desk used by the abolitionist William Wilberforce in his battle against slavery more than 200 years ago’.⁵⁰ It came into force in 2009. In the immediate aftermath, Anti-Slavery International—whose primary purpose is the elimination of forced labour—was the only one of these three NGOs that continued to publically campaign on this issue, although the others are members of the UK’s Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group set up to check on the government’s compliance with the European Convention. Their first report highlighted the limited influence of these anti-trafficking campaigns on the national political agenda, in that the newly elected Tory/Liberal Democrat Coalition’s political priorities were little different from those of the previous Labour government. The report was critical of the government’s failure to offer meaningful protection to victims because of a continuing emphasis on immigration controls exacerbated by a lack of trained officials able to identify migrants who may have been trafficked.⁵¹

Sex Traffic's critical perspective did not deter NGOs from using it in their anti-trafficking campaigns. A UNICEF media officer confirmed that no one within the organisation had ever mentioned the film's critical perspective on NGOs as a problem.⁵² Its critical success in the UK greatly enhanced the visibility of the issue; the film won eight British Academy Television Awards⁵³ and remained free to download from C4 eight years later.⁵⁴ Published reviews after its C4 broadcast suggest that the Kernwell narrative strand was regarded in a more negative light in the politically right-wing newspapers, being experienced as lacking credibility,⁵⁵ a confusing side issue,⁵⁶ flat in comparison to the main plot,⁵⁷ and drawing attention away from the emotional core of the drama, which in accordance with the dominant framing of the issue, is located in our empathy for the suffering of the two trafficked women and Daniel's efforts to save them. As Sara Ahmed has pointed out, the more that signs circulate, the more affective they become.⁵⁸ Research has also shown just how influential prior expectations can be when viewing films dealing with sexual themes. Viewers respond emotionally and cognitively on the basis of how they categorise its genre and make sense of the film in those terms.⁵⁹ The historical weight of conventional narratives of compassion about 'fallen women' worked to shape audience engagement and marginalise other, less familiar, textual discourses.

The emphasis in both films on violent coercion to elicit our compassion helped to make the moral demand that further protection was needed for trafficked women. The focus on sex work over other exploitative industries fitted with the news values of tabloid scandals, which helped create media visibility and public support which strengthened their influence on the government. The recurring emphasis in these campaigns on innocent young girls as victims intensified the prurience provoked by images of their defilement.⁶⁰ Arguably, it was in the interests of these NGOs to amplify sensationalist ways of presenting the issue in order to enhance their own visibility in a crowded media market and to ignore the other narrative discourses in *Sex Traffic* that lay outside its melodramatic core.⁶¹ Anti-Slavery International's campaign was considered the most successful in its history and substantially enhanced their activist network.⁶² UNICEF extended their campaign because it had attracted unprecedented media attention and was exceptionally successful in helping meet their funding targets.⁶³

In Sweden, *Lilya 4-ever* was taken up by the government itself as a means to achieve its policy objectives for gender equality, which

included an aim to reduce the harmful effects of the sex industry. New laws, effective from 2002, criminalised men who buy sex. Then, in 2003, the minister for gender equality instigated an educational programme in which the film was shown during school hours to all pupils over 15 years old, preceded by a lecture about sex trafficking from the campaigning group End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) and with follow-up teacher-led discussions. This was accompanied by articles by the minister in all the major newspapers debating the problem of sex trafficking.⁶⁴ The film was also exported to Russia and Eastern Europe as a means to reach opinion formers and policy makers in countries where victims are sourced. Although Moodysson's aim was: 'to make a film that would awaken Europe into following Sweden's lead in dealing with the exploitation of women',⁶⁵ it primarily addressed a Nordic audience who shared Sweden's values and economic affluence. Two-thirds of the film's 600,000 cinema audience were Scandinavian, with the film's fantasy 'return narrative' serving to reinforce the boundary which positioned post-Soviet Russia as the 'other' outside this affiliation.⁶⁶

Within Sweden, the feminist objectives of the school viewing programme met with obstacles because both the film and discursive context set up a situation in which existing stereotypes of male and female sexuality were reinforced instead of being challenged. Sparrman's research, based on twenty-eight classroom discussions, analysed how the film's meaning was constructed through the social practices of gender as individuals positioned themselves in relation to the film's portrayal of sexuality, the gender equality discourses within which it had been framed, and their own and each other's subjectivities.⁶⁷ Looking in particular at how men and male sexuality were discussed, Sparrman found that the emphasis was on men as a sexual threat. In particular, the camera positioning from Lilya's point of view during the rape scenes in Sweden distanced the pupils from the men in the film. It reinforced the girls' sense of vulnerability and their sense of disgust at male sexuality as bestial and uncontrolled while the boys found ways to distance themselves through laughter at how pathetic these old men looked as they huffed and puffed their way through the scene. The problem of trafficking, Sparrman argues, was reduced to a pathological male sexuality within a context where no solution was offered by the film or the teachers leading the discussion. 'This turned the political

goals of showing the film—to promote equality and reduce the sex trade—on its head, as traditional and stereotypical gender positions are in fact reproduced through the interaction centred on the film’.⁶⁸ The undifferentiated portrayal of men as the problem served to reinforce gender divisions and gave no scope for pupils to explore their own sexual and gender identities. This view is backed up by Barajas whose study on this same educational programme found that watching the film reinforced existing discourses on prostitution, with some pupils actively resisting gender ‘indoctrination’ by the government by playfully embracing sexual labels of ‘whore’ and ‘pimp’ in their jokey interactions.⁶⁹

In the light of this evidence that the campaigns in the UK and Sweden were relatively ineffective, some scepticism towards the approach taken by anti-trafficking activists needs to be considered. It has been suggested that the focus on women being trafficked into the sex industry acts as a smoke screen which diverts attention from the real issues that need to be addressed in the global labour market and is irrelevant to the forces that drive people to engage in ‘survival sex’.⁷⁰ Questions have also been raised about whose interests are best served by the proliferation of reports and intervention programmes which keep thousands of well-paid NGO professionals in employment but whose impact on the people involved are hard to evaluate and may have negative rather than positive effects.⁷¹

If we switch perspectives, as Braidotti’s nomadic ethics suggests we should,⁷² and listen to those distant others who are the objects of our compassion, there is evidence to suggest that many of the migrant women selling sex don’t want to be rescued (and then deported) but what they do want is safer working conditions. Complex strategies of survival encompass an indecipherable mixture of desires and constraints for migrant women looking for a better life that may, at some point, include making money from selling sex. Basing her conclusions on extensive ethnographic research, Laura Agustín argues that the conviction among campaigners that nothing could be worse than selling sex is not shared by most of the migrant people involved, for whom the alternative is either equally hard physical jobs in bad conditions that don’t pay as well, or no job at all. Moreover, the trafficking discourse draws a moralistic distinction between innocent victims who are coerced into sex work, and culpable others who choose to migrate to make money in this way, when in reality there is no such neat division but multiple life stories that

are full of ambiguous, risky journeys of hope, hardship and survival.⁷³ We might also want to question the ethics of a discourse that works to stigmatise people who are already on the margins of society and subject to draconian immigration regimes while simultaneously deflecting attention from any sustained attempt to acknowledge and address the global and gender inequalities in economic life chances that underpin these movements of people.

A proper distance, therefore, requires that critical perspectives are brought to bear on the ideological foundations of trafficking as a discourse, which is invisible if we stay within its own frame. Trafficking narratives idealise home as a space of safe and satisfying sexual relations tied into patriarchal ideas about women's roles as wives and mothers even though the home is often the location for violent abuse against women, as Amnesty International's campaign to combat violence against women acknowledges.⁷⁴ Alternative conceptualisations of migrant women's lives that draw on open-ended, poststructuralist concepts of identity as a continuous process of 'becoming'⁷⁵ recognise mobility across spatial and social boundaries as a crucial index of access to power. While travel for the impoverished woman is discouraged because of the risks, her elite cosmopolitan counterpart in urban metropolitan centres who populate the postfeminist imaginary of the global mediascape strides freely around in sexualised fashions. This figure connotes a welcome sexual allure, whereas migrant woman connote a sexuality marked by suffering and degradation. Locating the trafficking discourse in relation to this routine sexualisation of women's bodies, we begin to see the contradictions created by its co-presence with the growing acceptance of commercial sex in urban consumer cultures. The 'empowered sex worker' is a key figure in the array of erotic entertainments now available for our guiltless consumption. However, the idea that sex work could be a choice that women make to improve their economic circumstances applies only to those marked by class or ethnic privilege. They are portrayed as having the ethical capacity to make decisions for themselves. Ethnic others, by contrast, are shown to be devoid of meaningful agency whether through coercion or abject poverty.⁷⁶

The narrative of *Lilya 4-ever* strips Lilya of agency, despite the centrality of her point of view in every scene of the film. Any choices she does make simply help bring about her own destruction thus contributing to the fatalism of the narrative trajectory. In *Sex Traffic*, the figure of Vara could potentially have crossed over to being an 'empowered' sex worker when she rejects her sister's offer to take her back home. 'This is

my home...Come and see my flat—it's lovely' she says to Elena now that she has the kind of life in London she imagined when she dreamed of leaving Moldova. 'I am one of them—I work like them. Look I made it'. The scene makes clear that she is now subject to our moral condemnation and no longer the object of our empathy. Elena tells a story about Vara as a child when she ate a whole birthday cake and was sick all night, which situates her desire to live in London as a personality fault—a tendency to greed. Vara's rejection of Elena's maternal care: 'I don't need you to look after me anymore—you should go now', is immediately followed by a voyeuristic shot as Elena watches her through a crack in the door, mirroring an earlier scene when she spied on their traffickers, offering us an obscured view of Vara being hit by her trafficker boyfriend and then succumbing to his sexual seduction. Vara's previously acceptable infantilised dependence during their journey, visualised through Elena feeding her packets of sugar from the factory they worked in back home, is not refigured as adult autonomy as Vara insists, but through a scene of sexual exchange that signals her perverse dependence on her boyfriend from which the voyeuristic aesthetic distances us. The drama has no position from which to show that some women might choose to remain in the sex trade to enable a better life because this cannot be accommodated within a trafficking discourse that has come to dominate public debate.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

This chapter has argued that in order to critically examine our ethical relation to the mediated figure of the 'trafficked woman' in the two films under discussion, we must consider not only their aesthetic strategies but also the humanitarian and political campaigns to which they have been linked. Despite their fictional status, research on their circulation has demonstrated the ability of these compassionate narratives to move us beyond private emotion to generate support for the public actions taken by NGOs to act on 'distant suffering'. Nevertheless, further reflexive deliberation on the political questions of 'why' and 'what needs to be done' has brought perspectives into view that are critical of these campaigns and the cultural myths they reinforce, pointing instead to the wider issues facing migrant labour that are obscured by this discourse. A representational ethics of 'proper distance' requires us to acknowledge the limitations in understanding that our location in time and space determines.

By doing so, it becomes clear that we should let go of ‘trafficked women’ as a label and of charitable models of intervention which are structured in relation to idealised images of innocence and home as an anchor for a unitary and fixed identity. Constructing distant others as the objects of philanthropy denies their capacity as subjects who have agency. An open and reflexive subjectivity is the necessary condition for a truly cosmopolitan ethics to emerge in which we de-centre our own privilege and power and pay attention to emergent forms of representation that express migrant’s embodied, shifting desires and experiences in all their complexity so that we are open to being transformed by this encounter.⁷⁸ Only then might we be able to answer the questions ‘why?’ and ‘what needs to be done?’ in ways that could promote global justice.

NOTES

1. Kamala Kempadoo, ed., *Sex Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered, New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights* (London and Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005).
2. Rosi Braidotti in *Transposition: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 72, critiques the ‘Fortress Europe’ mentality as an attempt to constitute an ethnically pure and self-defining Europe that omits colonialism as the ‘structuring other’ that defines European identity. It is an ideological relation rather than simply a physical border that restricts immigration.
3. Alison Jobe, ‘Sexual Trafficking Stories: Stories, Realities, and Myths’, a paper given at *Representations of Prostitution, Sex Work and Sex Trafficking between the 19th and 21st Centuries*, Exeter: University of Exeter, 9–10 September, 2010. Her PhD study of 23 UK cases from 2001 to 2005 of women seeking asylum on the grounds of trafficking found that films were used as direct evidence at hearings by judges making decisions on their case. For asylum seekers’ stories to be believed they had to conform to the narrative conventions established in these films.
4. Ilse Van Liempt, ‘Trafficking in Human Beings: Conceptual Dilemmas’ and Gillian Wylie, ‘Doing the Impossible? Collecting Data on the Extent of Trafficking’, in *Trafficking and Women’s Rights*, edited by Christien Van den Anker & Jeroen Doomernik (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 27–42, 70–88.
5. Lars Kristensen, ‘Divergent Accounts of Equivalent Narratives: Russian-Swedish Interdevochka Meets Swedish-Russian *Lilya 4-ever*’, *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 4:2 (2007). <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>. Accessed 24 July 2012.

6. See, for example: David Clarke, 'Going West: Migration and the Post-Communist World in Recent European Film', *Cultural Politics*, 1:3 (2005), 279–294; Anna Sparrman, 'Film as a political and educational device: talk about men, male sexuality and gender among Swedish youth', *Visual Studies*, 21:2 (2006), 167–182; Kristensen, *Divergent Accounts of Equivalent Narratives*; Jane Arthurs, 'Brands, Markets and Charitable Ethics: MTVs *Exit* Campaign', *Participations* 6:2 (2012). <http://www.participations.org/Volume%206/Issue%202/special/arthurs.htm>; Jane Arthurs, 'Deliciously Consumable: The Uses and Abuses of Irony in Sex-Trafficking Campaign Films,' in *The Handbook of Gender, Sex, and Media*, edited by Karen Ross (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); William Brown, Dina Iordanova, & Leshu Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images: Cinema and Trafficking in the New Europe* (St Andrews: St Andrews Film Studies, 2010); Katarina Eriksson Barajas, 'The Pimp and the Whore: 'Doing Gender' in Film Talk in a School Setting', *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 54:6 (2010), 581–596.
7. Tony Rayns, '*Lilya 4-ever*', *Sight and Sound*, London: BFI, 13:5 (2002), 56–58.
8. Jo Doezema, 'Ouch! Western feminists' wounded attachment to the Third World prostitute', *Feminist Review*, 67:1(2001), 16–29.
9. O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok* is an update of Bertolt Brecht's theatrical drama *The Good Woman of Sechuan* (London: Penguin Modern Classic, 2007[1943]).
10. Linda Williams, 'The Ethics of Intervention: Denis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok*', in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, edited by Jane Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 186.
11. Brown, Iordanova and Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images*, pp. 42–48, 90.
12. Lilie Chouliarki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006).
13. Braidotti, *Transposition*.
14. Lauren Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 71.
15. Roger Silverstone, 'Regulation, Media Literacy and Media Civics', *Media, Culture and Society*, 26:3 (2004), p. 444.
16. Chouliarki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, p. 149.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
18. See for example: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979) and Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson, Cary & Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 271–316; Braidotti, *Transposition*.
19. Braidotti, *Transposition*.

20. Laura Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2007).
21. Dina Iordanova calls on social scientists and policy makers to take more account of the insights that film can bring to their understanding of trafficking, in 'Making Trafficking Visible, Adjusting the Narrative', in Brown, Iordanova and Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images*, p. 115. My aim is the reverse in wanting to use research on social and policy contexts to enhance our critical response to films about trafficking.
22. Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
23. Linda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Victorian Women in Britain* (London: Blackwell, 1988).
24. A question also posed by William Brown, in Brown, Iordanova and Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images*, p. 46.
25. Emma Wilson, 'Children, emotion and viewing in contemporary European film', *Screen*, 46:3 (2005), 329–340 (334).
26. As suggested by Clarke, *Going West*.
27. Martha Nussbaum, 'Compassion: The Basic Human Emotion', *Social Philosophy and Politics*, 13:1(1996), 27–58.
28. Kristensen, *Divergent Accounts of Equivalent Narratives*.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
30. Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
32. Cited in Staiger, *Bad Women*, p. 123.
33. See for example: Staiger, *Bad Women*; Jo Doezema, 'Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of 'white slavery' in contemporary discourses of 'trafficking in women'', *Gender Issues*, 18:1 (2000), 23–50; Iordanova, *Making Trafficking Visible, Adjusting the Narrative*, 94–101.
34. Nead, *Myths of Sexuality*, p. 130.
35. Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1987), p. 110.
36. Brown, Iordanova and Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images*, p. 178.
37. *Sex Traffic* shares many features with a 'white slavery' film, *Traffic in Souls* (USA 1913) about two sisters, one of whom rescues the other. See Staiger, *Bad Women*, pp. 116–146.
38. John Caughie, *Edge of Darkness* (London: BFI, 2007).
39. *Ibid.*
40. Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001 [2006 2nd Edition]).

41. Simon Cottle and David Nolan, 'Global Humanitarianism and the Changing Aid-Media Field: "Everyone was Dying for Footage"', *Journalism Studies*, 8: 6 (2007), 862–878.
42. Iordanova, *Making Trafficking Visible, Adjusting the Narrative*, p. 99.
43. Roger Graef, 'TV That Changed the World', *Broadcast*, 22 July (2005), p. 16.
44. Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
45. Joanna Zylinska, *The Ethics of Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 97.
46. Chouliarki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, p. 195.
47. Leshu Torchin, 'Traffic Jam: Film, Activism and Human Trafficking', in Brown, Iordanova and Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images*.
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60. See further examples of this argument: Doezeema, *Loose Women or Lost Women?* Van den Ankar, *Trafficking in Women*; Peter Preston, 'Righteous Opposition', *The Guardian* (2007). <http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk>. Accessed 4 January 2008; Rutvica Andrijasevic, 'Beautiful dead bodies: gender, migration, and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns', *Feminist Review*, 83 (2007), pp. 1–22.
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65. Kristensen, *Divergent Accounts of Equivalent Narratives*, p. 9.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
67. Sparrman, *Film as a political and educational device*, p. 169.
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72. Braidotti, *Transposition*.
73. O'Connell and Anderson, *The Trouble with 'Trafficking*; Agustin, *Sex at the Margins*.
74. Lara Fergus, 'Activating Women's Human Rights: Sidesteps and Leaps Forward at Amnesty International', in *Activating Human Rights* edited by Elisabeth Porter & Baden Offord (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006).
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