



Girls on film: Affective politics and the creation of an intimate anti-trafficking public in Singapore through film screenings[☆]



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ABSTRACT

The interstices between film and politics occupy a prominent place in recent scholarship in political geography and cognate disciplines, focusing on the ways film establishes relations between viewers and characters. Such processes often utilise affective referents to create 'intimate publics'. This paper focuses on the relations human trafficking films establish between 'victims', viewers and anti-trafficking stakeholders in creating an intimate anti-trafficking public in Singapore. I argue that the third world girl is rendered a moral object of sympathy both through trafficking film *and* performances by anti-trafficking stakeholders in the cinema. However, in comparison to both film viewers and anti-trafficking stakeholders she is cast as muted and lacking agency. Intimate anti-trafficking publics can emerge through the harnessing of negative emotions that, in this case, privilege the plight- but not the agency – of the female child trafficking victim and are inculcated through film storylines and cinematic performances.

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Introduction

Excerpt from field notes [April 17 2010]

The audience is seated and the lights dimmed. The fictional film *Holly* begins with the central character, Holly, a twelve years old Vietnamese girl seen frantically running through backstreets, pursued by two shadowy male figures. They eventually catch her and she is loaded roughly onto a covered truck and driven back to the brothel from where she escaped. As the film progresses we learn that the girl, Holly, was sold by her desperately poor mother to a recruiter who moved her across the Vietnamese-Cambodian border where she was sold to a mammy [brothel owner] in the notorious child prostitution district of Svey Pek (also known as Kilometre 11, or K11), an outlying district of Phnom Penh. She is a virgin and is being kept in the brothel as a house servant until she reaches a suitable age at which her virginity may be sold to the highest bidder. A minor character later informs us that virginity sales

command a high price in Cambodia's prostitution industry and Vietnamese girls are commonly perceived to be especially sought after for their fair complexions and good looks.

Holly encounters Patrick, an American antique dealer, who attempts to rescue her after he meets her by chance and learns of her plight. The film follows the story of Patrick searching for and finding Holly after she successfully escapes the brothel in a later attempt. Not knowing what to do with his rescued charge, he eventually deposits her in a shelter for sex trafficking victims in Phnom Penh (a real shelter, in fact). The film reaches a dramatic climax with Holly running away from the shelter and Patrick being captured by the Cambodian police for assaulting the man who eventually bought Holly's virginity. As the lights go up and the credits role, I turn my head to the sea of red eyes seated behind me.

After the film two chairs are placed in front of the screen, facing the audience. Founder and President of the Cambodian-based, but Singapore headquartered non-governmental organisation (NGO), River Kids, and the Education Co-ordinator for UN Women Singapore are invited to take questions about the film. The speaker from River Kids clearly has the authority of 'on the ground knowledge' and captivates the audience with her impassioned and expert reading of the film: "No, the men from the brothel wouldn't chase after Holly – it would be so easy to replace her that they probably wouldn't be looking too hard for her at all Yes, most of the other parts of the film are pretty accurate, including the police

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corruption, the selling of girls by their parents, and the difficulty of reintegrating into society if one eventually manages to get out of the brothel". The question and answer session continues for another hour. Tea is served and the audience leave the cinema with a newfound sense of the importance of helping these poor victims. These anticipated acts of benevolent helping are undergird by an uncomplicated and unchallenged picture of the principle object of human trafficking intervention as she figuratively moves from Vietnam/Cambodia to Singapore; namely, the poor, female, third world child.

I open this paper with the above vignette because it illustrates rather precisely the relationship between film, activism and affect/emotion. In Singapore the filmic production and cinematic performance of the girl trafficking victim in the realm of human trafficking activism is the principal mobilising device of anti-trafficking solidarity and intervention. This mobilisation is very deliberately cultivated by its NGO orchestrators to create an intimate anti-trafficking public (cf. [Berlant, 2008](#)) amongst the predominantly female viewers. The paper therefore engages with scholarship on the geographies of justice and activism, especially its recent forays with emotion and affect ([Wright, 2010, 2009](#); [Bosco, 2006, 2007, Brown and Pickerill 2009](#)) and the political potential of affect more broadly ([Mackenzie & Dalby, 2003](#); [Thrift, 2004, 2009](#)). These interventions explore how affect and emotion are often invoked to realise collective political goals, including forming and sustaining social movements. In this vein, [Melissa Wright \(2010\)](#) has urged geographers to explore the links between emotion and social justice, especially the question of whether geographies of emotion and affect have a role to play in social justice movements. [Bosco \(2007: 549\)](#) similarly suggests, "there is a need to investigate how emotions relate to the way in which activists build networks that help organise, mobilise and sustain social movements in places and across space". [Wright \(2010: 818\)](#) thus asks, "How can feminist and emotional geographies tighten their connections, fuel their shared passions and generate a synergy of scholarship oriented to activism and progressive change? How can geographies of feeling broaden the path for justice that feminism endeavours to plough?"

This paper takes up [Wright's](#) injunction to explore such connections and the possibilities offered by affect in activism. But, as the opening vignette hints, these connections are often laden with as many pitfalls as possibilities for 'progressive change'. There is sometimes a paradox of (dis)empowerment to (anti-trafficking) activism where the girl victim is politicised through relations established between her and her saviours (NGOs, rescuers, and so on) in the storylines of the films and between her and the film viewers-cum-volunteers/activists. The content of anti-trafficking films and the collective viewing by the audience at the cinema thus offer a further site for the consideration of the linkages between affect and activism, specifically in relation to film. Although both affect and emotion have been discussed by geographers interested in activism, this paper engages more directly with affect, which in this context might be taken to mean the embodied responses to films and cinematic performances prior to their articulation as emotions. These affective responses create empathy amongst viewers/activists when they see each other responding in similar ways as themselves to the filmic content and experience.

There has been some academic attention to the ascendancy of the child/girl victim in anti-trafficking activism in general ([Yea, 2013](#); [Lainez, 2010](#)) and to the political potential of the 'third world child' more widely ([Lidchi, 1999](#); [Pain, 2004](#); [Ruddick, 2003](#)). However there has been virtually no concomitant attention to the role of film or the space of the cinema in mobilising this child victim

for awareness raising or activist purposes, or to the political effects of this mobilisation in terms of relations established and enacted between different stakeholders. Relatedly, some have noted the intersection between film and anti-trafficking work (for example, [Bernstein, 2007](#); [Brown, Iordanova, & Torchin, 2010](#); [Lindquist, 2010](#)), but there is yet to be any in-depth analysis of these relations. In exploring relations between film, affect and activism in another global movement, [Meredith Raimondo \(2010\)](#) has documented the filmic production of HIV/AIDS affected persons where the agency of the 'ideal' viewer is realised at the cost of the 'visual colonisation' of the HIV/AIDS sufferers. This paper therefore builds on strands of [Raimondo's](#) arguments about relations of agency, sympathy, benevolence and intervention established through film as a mobilising project within activism and awareness-raising. What are the roles of film and the cinematic space as arenas for mobilising viewers in advancing activism around human trafficking? How do these processes converge to produce an intimate anti-trafficking public? And where exactly is the child victim positioned within this intimate public vis-à-vis other anti-trafficking actors?

Popular media, especially film, has become a conduit through which politics are conducted ([Dalby, 2008](#); [Dodds, 2008](#); [Gandy, 2003](#); [Hughes, 2007](#); [Raimondo, 2010](#)). [Roseti's \(2007: 997\)](#) recent review of media geographies stresses that; "The production and circulation of ... images are part of this hegemonic 'naturalness' of particular ways of seeing, consenting to, or resisting existing social relations. It is here that the politics of images begins". Following this, I explore the ways [Holly](#) and her contemporaries in films of a similar genre become the embodiment and enactment of human trafficking subjectivity and what this means in terms of her own position within anti-trafficking work. This task supports an earlier elaboration by [Creswell and Dixon \(2002\)](#) on the relationship between film and mobility, in which, "Far from being considered a fact of real life, in film ... mobility can be thought of as an element in the play of power and meaning within social and cultural networks of signification" (p. 4). Following this, [Holly](#) and her situation of exploitation can be seen not as the authentic or principal subject/scenario of human trafficking (or even of sex trafficking), but as a "set of accepted and relevant concepts related to trafficking which have become socially legitimised as knowledge and truth within society" ([Desyllas, 2007: 58](#)). It is in the disclosure of the contingent but inveterate production of these truths and positioning of the child victim within them that the politics of film in human trafficking activism begins.

The primary site for my discussion in the paper is the transnational skin care corporation 'The Body Shop's' (TBS's) recent (2010–2013) global anti-child sex trafficking campaign, with the Singaporean anti-slavery advocacy organisation [Empancypasia's](#) similar campaign (2012–current) comprising a secondary site. Information on these campaigns was gathered during a two and a half years ethnography of trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation in Singapore and the anti-trafficking movement that developed around this (2009–2011), with two follow-up field visits in 2012. Singapore is an interesting site for discussion in this paper because I have been able to trace the evolution of the anti-trafficking movement from its inception in 2009 to the present day. In Singapore film has emerged as a key mode through which advocacy and awareness-raising about human trafficking has occurred. This differs from many other neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia where public awareness raising of human trafficking has not been pursued with such vigour or with film playing such as key role. While I draw selectively on research with women and girls in Singapore's sex and nightlife entertainment industry in this paper, I am more interested in the component of the research that examines trafficking's discursive (re)production and politicisation in Singapore; a construction that ultimately crystallised into an anti-

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