

# Rebooting Trafficking

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## Abstract:

While popular psychology and appeals to emotion have unfortunately dominated discussions of ‘sex trafficking’, this article suggests that feminist psychoanalytic film theory and theories of affect are still useful for making sense of the appeal of sensational exposés like Lifetime Television’s *Human Trafficking* (2005). The dynamic of identification with (and impersonation of) a human trafficking ‘victim’ by the rescuing Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent (Mira Sorvino) is particularly worthy of scrutiny. Film theory about the ‘rebooting’ of film franchises (iconic brands like *Batman*) also helps explain the preponderance of similar programming—*Sex Slaves* (2005), *Selling the Girl Next Door* (2011), *Trafficked* (2016)—and the way contemporary discourses of human trafficking have effectively rebranded the myth of ‘white slavery’.

**Keywords:** white slavery, human trafficking, Lifetime Television, film theory, sex work, feminism

Please cite this article as: N de Villiers, ‘Rebooting Trafficking’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 161—181, [www.antitraffickingreview.org](http://www.antitraffickingreview.org)

*The ‘innocence’ of the victim was established through a variety of rhetorical devices: by stressing her youth/virginity; her whiteness; and her unwillingness to be a prostitute. The ‘innocence’ of the victim also served as a perfect foil for the ‘evil trafficker’; simplifying the reality of prostitution and female migration to melodramatic formula of victim and villain.*  
—Jo Doezema, ‘Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of “white slavery” in contemporary discourses of “trafficking in women”’

*Franchise film reboots ... seek to restart, rebrand and relaunch pre-sold iconographic product in order to further extend their economic and cinematic life-span.*  
—William Proctor, ‘Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the franchise reboot’

## Introduction

The terms ‘human trafficking’, ‘sex trafficking’, and ‘sex slaves’ retain immense currency and power, not only discursive dominance but also emotional power, what Sealing Cheng has called ‘the hegemony of victimhood’ (the ubiquity of the figure of the victim) and the ‘affect of abolitionists’ (strong emotional appeals by anti-prostitution campaigners).<sup>1</sup> While sex worker rights activist Maggie McNeill has predicted that the moral panic conflating prostitution with human trafficking may not last another decade of trenchant critique after its rise to prominence around the turn of the millennium,<sup>2</sup> the endurance of this mythological discourse suggests something millennial film viewers are now quite familiar with: the rebranding and ‘rebooting’ of a film franchise (for example, the *Batman* brand’s latest instalment).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, a recent video on MSN.com promoting Siddharth Kara’s new film *Trafficked* (forthcoming 2016), based on his book *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery*, left me with a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*.<sup>4</sup> This ‘new’ movie recalls

<sup>1</sup> S Cheng, ‘Labor of Love: The sex worker and the anti-trafficking advocate’, keynote address at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture, and Society conference ‘Sex and the Marketplace: What’s love got to do with it?’ Buenos Aires, Argentina, 28 August 2013.

<sup>2</sup> M McNeill, ‘Cassandra’, *The Honest Courtesan*, 2 January 2016, retrieved 4 February 2016, <https://maggiemcneill.wordpress.com/2016/01/02/cassandra/>

<sup>3</sup> W Proctor, ‘Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the franchise reboot’, *Scope: An online journal of film and television studies*, no. 22, February 2012, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2012/february-2012/proctor.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> ‘Professor’s Human Trafficking Research Inspires Film’, retrieved 4 January 2016, <http://www.msn.com/en-us/video/other/professors-human-trafficking-research-inspires-film/vi-BBo0Kr0>. Cf. L Agustín, ‘Sex Trafficking’, *Counterpunch*, 27 February 2012, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2012/02/27/sex-trafficking/>; R Weitzer, ‘New Directions in Research on Human Trafficking’, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 653, May 2014, pp. 6—24.

the big-budget, Emmy-nominated Lifetime Television mini-series *Human Trafficking* (2005), and the Emmy-winning sensational Canadian documentary *Sex Slaves* (2005; rebroadcast as *The Real Sex Traffic* by PBS Frontline), apparent adaptations of Victor Malarek's *The Natashas: Inside the new global sex trade* (2003).<sup>5</sup> The alternate subtitle of Malarek's book tells us more directly what interests readers and viewers: 'The Inside Story of Slavery, Rape, and Murder in the Global Sex Trade'.

Popular psychology and emotional appeal have too often been marshalled within prostitution abolitionist rhetoric to avoid evidence-based rational discussion—for example, invoking 'Stockholm Syndrome' to discount the voices of sex workers critical of the dominant 'pimp' narrative, or appealing to pathos in the rhetorical question 'how would you feel if your daughter was forced into prostitution?'<sup>6</sup> However, I will suggest that psychoanalytic film theory and affect theory can still help us make sense of the popular appeal of sensational documentary and fictionalised film exposés about the alleged epidemic of girls and women kidnapped and forced into the sex industry.

These cinematic representations highlight an important problem in film theory: the dynamic of identification,<sup>7</sup> specifically identification with the position of victim. I propose that the shocking exposé about 'sex trafficking' combines the dynamics of identification and 'affective mimesis' in the excessive and gendered 'body' genres identified by Linda Williams: pornography, horror, and melodrama.<sup>8</sup> By 'affective mimesis' I refer to the way the body of the spectator involuntarily mimics the emotion or sensation of the (usually female) body on screen. Moreover, I show how prurience, titillation, and transgression are still at work in lurid anti-pornography texts.<sup>9</sup> Carole S. Vance has suggested the emergence of a subgenre of films about 'sex trafficking' that she terms the 'melodrama'.<sup>10</sup>

## Human Trafficking: Thrilling and gut-wrenching

The following analysis of *Human Trafficking* alongside similar texts in the subgenre is less a 'close reading' than an examination of how the film's formula is *marketed* and *consumed*. The tagline and plot summary for *Human Trafficking* manage to highlight the series' appeal both to sensationalism—voyeuristic emotional identification with trauma<sup>11</sup> and shocking exposé—and to post-9/11 governmentality (national border crossing and border enforcement):

[Tagline:] Hundreds of thousands of young women have vanished from their everyday lives—forced by violence into a hellish existence of brutality and prostitution. They're a profitable commodity in the multi-billion-dollar industry of modern slavery. The underworld calls them human traffic...

[Plot Summary:] When a sixteen-year-old girl from the Ukraine, a single mother from Russia, an orphaned seventeen-year-old girl from Romania, and a twelve-year-old American tourist become the victims of international sex slave traffickers, a specialized team of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) struggles to expose the worldwide network that has enslaved them. ICE agent Kate Morozov knows the horror of sexual exploitation first-hand and is dedicated to dismantling the network and bringing the ring's kingpin to justice. From a torture chamber in Queens to the flesh-peddlers of Russia, the hunt is on as the fates of relentless ICE agents, the ruthless traffickers and their defenseless victims collide in a powder keg conspiracy of global proportions. (IMDb)

This fictional but ostensibly realist film also bears a striking resemblance to another Canadian-US production *Sex Slaves*, billed as 'a documentary exposé inside the global sex slave trade in women from the former Soviet Bloc' released the same year. Both appear to be based on Malarek's tabloid journalist-style book *The Natashas*, and this is proof of the convergence of acceptable narratives as much as anything (as seen in the stereotypical adjectives in the synopsis:

<sup>5</sup> C. Duguay (Dir), *Human Trafficking*, (DVD), 2005; LaCrosse, WI, Echo Bridge Home Entertainment, 2006. The mini-series premiered on Lifetime Television on 24 and 25 October 2005 and broadcast in Canada on Citytv on 2 and 3 January 2006. *Sex Slaves*, television programme, directed by R. Bienstock, 2005; Toronto, Canada: Associated Producers/Channel 4; rebroadcast as *The Real Sex Traffic*, PBS *Frontline* S24:E2, February 7, 2006. V. Malarek, *The Natashas: Inside the new global sex trade*, 2003; New York, Arcade Publishing, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> See 'Just Don't Call It Slut-Shaming: A feminist guide to silencing sex workers', *Feminist Ire*, 24 September 2012, retrieved 4 February 2016, <https://feministire.com/2012/09/24/just-dont-call-it-slut-shaming-a-feminist-guide-to-silencing-sex-workers/>

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that Sigmund Freud first developed his psychoanalytic theory of identification using the example of agoraphobic bourgeois women's repressed identification with 'prostitutes'. See J. Masson, (ed.), *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> L. Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, genre, and excess', *Film Quarterly*, vol. 44, issue 4, Summer, 1991, pp. 2–13.

<sup>9</sup> See H. Hester, *Beyond Explicit: Pornography and the displacement of sex*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> C. Vance, 'Innocence and Experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences for law and policy', *History of the Present*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2012, p. 203.

<sup>11</sup> See E. A. Kaplan and B. Wang (eds.), *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-cultural explorations*, University of Hong Kong Press, Hong Kong, 2004, p. 10.

government agents are *relentless*, traffickers are *ruthless*, and their victims are *defenceless*; but the notion that ‘human traffic’ is underworld terminology suggests initiation into a secret criminal language rather than the dominant discourse of criminology, governments, and NGOs).<sup>12</sup>

The tropes on which these texts rely have been identified by Rutvica Andrijašević in terms of highly symbolic and stereotypical constructions of femininity (eastern European women as beautiful, eroticised and fetishised victims) and masculinity (eastern European men as criminals), which equate women’s migration with forced prostitution, encouraging women to stay at home, and foster the ‘common assumptions of criminalisation of eastern European societies in the post-1989 period’, fuelling the fear of ‘Russian Mafia’s expansion westwards’.<sup>13</sup>

While it is a work of sensational fiction, *Human Trafficking* attempts to anchor its sense of realism through these timely political anxieties and by ending with a series of talking points—such as, ‘the United States is one of the largest markets for sex slavery in the entire world’—from Polaris Project, one of the largest and most influential US anti-trafficking NGOs (formed in 2002).<sup>14</sup> A review on Amazon.com from 2014 suggests that *Human Trafficking* is still being watched in classrooms as an instructional text: ‘For those with weak stomach do not watch this! I watched this as part of a class at my university. This movie was thrilling and gut wrenching’.<sup>15</sup>

I suggest that the film’s successful manipulation of these ‘thrills’ has to do with the way it aims to gratify both the voyeuristic and narcissistic drives combined in cinema. *Human Trafficking* does this by acting as a kind of mirror: in the same way that the US ICE enforcement agent (played by Mira Sorvino) is able to personally identify with the eastern European/Russian victims, so too the audience is asked to identify vicariously with the subject positions of both rescuing agent and victim. The narration’s alternating point-of-view and suspenseful, intercut parallel action suggests what feminist psychoanalytic film theory has identified as the common sadomasochism of mainstream cinematic spectatorship.<sup>16</sup>

Mira Sorvino also clearly identified with her on-screen character, as she is currently an anti-trafficking activist working as a UN Goodwill Ambassador to Combat Human Trafficking along with evangelical Christian anti-trafficking missionaries (among other well-meaning celebrities with dubious qualifications as international spokespeople against human trafficking).<sup>17</sup> The blurring of Lifetime sensational fiction and CNN-sponsored journalistic ‘reality’ has therefore extended beyond the boundaries of the individual film: Sorvino appears to repeat lines from *Human Trafficking* in a recent documentary *Freedom Project: Every day in Cambodia* about her mission to Cambodia: ‘the actress appears teary-eyed as she tells local men, “It’s not okay to sell children to pedophiles, it’s not okay.”’<sup>18</sup> This blending of genres in fact harkens back to the original cinematic combination of ‘actuality’ and melodrama within the famous early white slavery

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Davies, ‘My Name Is Not Natasha’: How Albanian women in France use trafficking to overcome social exclusion (1998–2001), Amsterdam University Press, 2009; C. Baker, ‘Moving Beyond “Slaves, Sinners, and Saviors”: An intersectional feminist analysis of US sex-trafficking discourses, law, and policy’, *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, no. 4, 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.jfsonline.org/issue4/articles/baker/>; N. Berlatsky, ‘Hollywood’s dangerous obsession with sex trafficking’, *Salon*, 10 June 2014, retrieved 4 February 2016, [http://www.salon.com/2014/06/10/hollywoods\\_dangerous\\_obsession\\_with\\_sex\\_trafficking/](http://www.salon.com/2014/06/10/hollywoods_dangerous_obsession_with_sex_trafficking/)

<sup>13</sup> R. Andrijašević, ‘Beautiful Dead Bodies: Gender, migration and representation in anti-trafficking campaigns’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 86, no. 1, 2007, p. 26, 34. Also see N. Nežvanova, ‘Trafficking Discourses and Sex Workers’ Mobilisation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia’, *Open Democracy*, 4 March 2016, retrieved 9 April 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyondslavery/sws/netochka-nezvanova/trafficking-discourses-and-sex-workers-mobilisation-in-eastern-euro>

<sup>14</sup> Polaris Project, <https://polarisproject.org/about>. For a critique of Polaris Project see North Carolina Harm Reduction Coalition/Sex Worker Activists, Allies and You, ‘Why are Sex Worker and Public Health Advocates Annoyed with Google?’, *Daily Kos*, 21 December 2011, retrieved 9 April 2016, <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/12/21/1047597/-Why-are-Sex-Worker-and-Public-Health-Advocates-Annoyed-with-Google#>

<sup>15</sup> Amazon.com review by ‘Carmen’, 12 June 2014, retrieved 4 January 2016, [http://www.amazon.com/review/R5195NORMYR26/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video](http://www.amazon.com/review/R5195NORMYR26/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video)

<sup>16</sup> See L. Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, in C. Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory*, Routledge, New York, 1988, pp. 57–68.

<sup>17</sup> See L. Agustín, ‘BBC Human Trafficking Debate now in UK: Mira Sorvino’s moral outrage’, *The Naked Anthropologist*, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.lauraagustin.com/bbc-trafficking-debate-online-in-the-uk-moral-outrage-from-mighty-aphrodite>; M. Moring, ‘Mira Sorvino: Saving sex slaves’, *Christianity Today*, 3 October 2012, retrieved 12 August 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/october-web-only/mira-sorvino-saving-sex-slaves.html>

<sup>18</sup> J. Martínez, ‘Actress Mira Sorvino premieres Cambodian sex trafficking documentary at Bayside megachurch’, *Christian Post*, 7 January 2014, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/actress-mira-sorvino-premieres-cambodian-sex-trafficking-documentary-at-bayside-megachurch-112146/>. Cf. M. Tolson, ‘Mira Sorvino, CNN child-sex series is “shameful” for Cambodians’, *Asian Correspondent*, 20 December 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://asiancorrespondent.com/117471/mira-sorvino-cnn-child-sex-series-shameful-for-cambodians/>; A. E. Moore, ‘Sex Work or Human Trafficking? Race and imperialism in CNN Report from Cambodia’, *Revire*, 13 May 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2014/05/13/race-imperialism-cnn/>

film *Traffic in Souls*.<sup>19</sup>

### 'Lifetime: Television for Women': Rebooting white slavery

Sorvino's professional but strongly emotional character in *Human Trafficking* fits a particular generic formula established by the US cable network 'Lifetime: Television for women' in their 'narrowcasting' marketing geared toward women, especially their original made-for-TV movies.<sup>20</sup> Jackie Byars and Eileen R Meehan outline the Lifetime television movie formula in 'Once in a Lifetime: Constructing "The Working Woman" through cable narrowcasting', their contribution to a special issue of the feminist media studies journal *Camera Obscura* dedicated to Lifetime. They explain how 'Lifetime's basic formula for its World Premiere Movies (made specifically for Lifetime) revolves around a strong, competent woman who overcomes adversity. ... Female protagonists generally work within the system to correct some injury, often in a professional capacity'.<sup>21</sup> They clarify that Lifetime envisions female protagonists as white, 'fully adult women with weaknesses, soft edges, and strong emotions' and that this emphasis on emotions 'inflects Lifetime's productions with a distinctly melodramatic edge, regardless of genre. Lifetime consistently focuses on the personal and familial, even when the setting is institutional. Systemic challenge is rare...'.<sup>22</sup> Eithne Johnson notes that, '[a]lthough Lifetime claims to avoid programs that depict women as victims, the network was probably well aware of the popularity of women-in-jeopardy programs'.<sup>23</sup> A similar contradiction can be seen in Lifetime's 'postfeminist' private investigator drama *Veronica Clare*, whose protagonist is 'a paradoxical character, and the series played with gender expectations raised by her unusual occupation as a lone, female sleuth'.<sup>24</sup> But Johnson argues that Lifetime's unique hybridising of gendered genres allows for the network to 'have it both ways' in terms of essentialist versus constructionist understandings of femininity. They are 'postfeminist' in the way they benefit from the second-wave feminist emphasis on how 'the personal is political' and on social agency rather than victimhood, while also eschewing any explicit declarations of feminism and investing in essentialist notions of differences in 'feminine' psychology such as the tendency to blur boundaries between self and other.<sup>25</sup>

*Human Trafficking* perfectly exemplifies this desire to have it both ways (in terms of genre and feminism): it is a show about victims that nonetheless provides a white, professional, strong female role model for middle-class viewers in the form of a resourceful investigator who emotionally identifies with the women she works to 'rescue' (through a number of brutal, armed, door-kicking ICE brothel raids). While she takes risks that might be ethically questionable, she still works within the governmental system for which the film acts as unofficial propaganda (the credits indicate it was 'produced in cooperation with the Department of Homeland Security').

I would suggest that the screenplay for *Human Trafficking* might also be seen as borrowing liberally from the gendered FBI mentor-mentee psychological drama of identification in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), which foregrounds the female FBI agent's desire for career advancement while negotiating her identification with vulnerable, lower-class female victims.<sup>26</sup> *Human Trafficking* therefore manages to combine several generic elements from melodrama, horror, and crime drama, genres historically known for their skilful manipulation of identification with sexualised victims and rescuing agents.

*Human Trafficking* exemplifies the ways in which many of the tropes of media coverage around victims of sex trafficking and rescuers resonate with earlier preoccupations and myths. Jo Doezema has traced the reemergence of the myth of 'white slavery' in the contemporary discourses of 'trafficking in women' which have gained increasing momentum worldwide, but perhaps especially among European and US feminists. Doezema argues that 'Modern concerns with prostitution and "trafficking in women" have a historical precedent in the anti-white-slavery campaigns that occurred at the turn of the century'. Doezema notes that while the non-western/western subjects, locations, and geographical directions of the traffic have switched, the rhetoric sounds almost identical: 'Then as now, the paradigmatic image is

<sup>19</sup> See L Torchin, 'Foreign Exchange', in W Brown, D Iordanova, and L Torchin, *Moving People, Moving Images: Cinema and trafficking in the new Europe*, St Andrews Film Studies, Scotland, UK, 2010, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> See E Yahr, 'From guilty pleasure to Emmy Awards: The delightfully weird history of Lifetime movies', *The Washington Post*, January 15 2015, retrieved 9 March 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/01/15/from-guilty-pleasure-to-emmy-awards-the-delightfully-weird-history-of-lifetime-movies/>

<sup>21</sup> J Byars and E Meehan, 'Once in a Lifetime: Constructing "the working woman" through cable narrowcasting', *Camera Obscura* nos. 33—34, 1994, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>23</sup> E Johnson, 'Lifetime's Feminine Psychographic Space and the "Mystery Loves Company Series"', *Camera Obscura*, nos. 33—34, 1994, p. 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45—46. Byars and Meehan conclude that Lifetime remains commercially viable by 'presenting television that provides role models for a way of life made possible by second wave feminism, but which Lifetime defines as feminine, never feminist', p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> J Demme (dir.), *The Silence of the Lambs*, 1991.

that of a young and naïve innocent lured or deceived by evil traffickers into a life of sordid horror from which escape is nearly impossible'.<sup>27</sup> This paradigmatic image is precisely the template employed by *Human Trafficking* and *Sex Slaves*, along with the multi-media Public Service Announcements (PSA) efforts of many anti-trafficking organisations (especially those with evangelical missions).

Arguably, the obsession with 'white slavery' and Orientalism still plays a prominent role, as seen in another Amazon.com review of *Human Trafficking* from 2014:

My own girls....who were young teens at the time considered themselves immortal. That nothing bad could happen to them. I would get the occasional eye rolling when I mentioned their safety so I decided to view the movie with them. The movie brings it home...with the pretty 16 year old...dreaming of a better life (Truly.... a universal dream of all teen girls to become famous...either at modeling, acting, singing...run away and make their fortune in the world with nothing ever bad happening.) However, it isn't long before this beautiful sweet 16 is in the clutches of a brutal sex trade. What is worse? She was a virgin.

An American young girl.....shopping on holiday with her mother...in a foreign country.....is kidnapped and held in a seedy, dirty dungeon of a basement with other young children.....until safe transport out of the country can be made for her. The fact that she is white, a blonde and a 12 year old virgin.....makes it clear that she will be the ultimate prize for a rich Saudi man. [ellipses in original]<sup>28</sup>

Doezema's text lays these 'white slavery' and 'sex trafficking' histories and discourses alongside one another in order to compare them in a way that is illuminating and immensely helpful as a form of demystification of a paradigm whose dominance is reflected in programmes like *Human Trafficking* and the above review.

*Human Trafficking* relies on almost identical melodramatic tropes: the innocent white trafficking victim as a foil for the 'evil trafficker' in the form of the 'kingpin' Sergei, played by the iconic villain actor Robert Carlyle, channelling his earlier performance as an international terrorist in the James Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*.<sup>29</sup> Ronald Weitzer calls this melodramatic generic representation of the trafficker a 'folk-devil stereotype'.<sup>30</sup> Commenting on *Human Trafficking* as a 'fantasy of management', Leshu Torchin notes that at the narrative level, the 'vast transnational threat is rendered singularly visible through the production of a single villain at the helm', thus tying the various threads of the women's stories together, and that the ICE agent Morozov similarly functions to bind them to a single point, with the conclusion demonstrating the efficacy of the agency in capturing Karpovich.<sup>31</sup> I would add that this sense of narrative closure (catching the 'bad guy') works to close off inquiry into the ongoing role of ICE enforcement on the lives of the women 'rescued'. A confrontational interrogation scene between Morozov and the women from the raided brothel now in custody informs us only that they will receive special visas in exchange for their cooperation with the investigation, but that they will be deported if they do not cooperate. Torchin notes that *Human Trafficking* and a similar television movie *Sex Traffic* (UK/Canada, 2004), suggest repatriation as the solution to provide 'narrative subjugation and confinement of the wandering women'.<sup>32</sup>

Clarifying the actual effects of the 'white slavery' panic on governmentality, Doezema catalogues how '[t]he original, emancipatory thrust of the abolitionist movement, dedicated as it was to decreasing state control over poor women, ironically evolved to support a "social purity" agenda that would give the state new repressive powers over women and subaltern men'. Doezema counters that despite this sensational and emotionally manipulative mythology, '[t]he majority

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<sup>27</sup> J Doezeema, 'Loose Women or Lost Women? The re-emergence of the myth of "white slavery" in contemporary discourses of "trafficking in women"', *Gender Issues*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2000, pp. 23–50, available at <http://www.walnet.org/csis/papers/doezema-loose.html>. This is further developed in J Doezeema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters*, Zed Books, London, 2010. Also see L. Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Amazon.com review of *Human Trafficking* by 'Skillet Black', 20 September 2014, retrieved 4 January 2016, [http://www.amazon.com/review/RFBVZMB92D5389/ref=cm\\_cr\\_dp\\_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video](http://www.amazon.com/review/RFBVZMB92D5389/ref=cm_cr_dp_title?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00JP5L3JI&channel=detail-glance&nodeID=2858778011&store=instant-video). I realise the risk in resting my analysis of the film's reception on an Amazon review, but I am inspired by a similarly bold move in D Halperin's *How to Be Gay* in an attempt to account for polarised responses to the camp melodrama *Mommie Dearest*. See D Halperin, *How to Be Gay*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2014, p. 175.

<sup>29</sup> M Apter (dir.) *The World Is Not Enough*, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, New York, 1999.

<sup>30</sup> R Weitzer, 2014, p. 9, 17.

<sup>31</sup> L Torchin, 2010, p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

of “trafficking victims” are aware that the jobs offered them are in the sex industry, but are lied to about the conditions they will work under’. Yet the rhetoric and tropes used in anti-trafficking campaigns still rely on the notion of the ‘innocent’, unwilling victim, and efforts to ‘protect’ these innocent women are combined with efforts ‘designed to punish “bad” women: i.e. prostitutes’.<sup>33</sup> The revival of the ‘white slavery’ myth therefore has similar effects and repressive consequences for women.

As Kamala Kempadoo and others note in *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered*, the campaign against ‘human trafficking’ has been tied to post-9/11 ‘homeland security’ (as we see in *Human Trafficking’s* collaboration with the US Department of Homeland Security) as well as conservative, anti-sex, and religious fundamentalist agendas.<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Bernstein explains this alliance in the US in terms of ‘militarized humanitarianism meets carceral feminism’, noting that despite renowned disagreements between abolitionist feminist and evangelical Christian activists around the politics of sex and gender, ‘these groups have come together to advocate for harsher penalties against traffickers, prostitutes’ customers, and nations deemed to be taking insufficient steps to stem the flow of trafficked women’. Bernstein argues that this alliance is the product of intersecting trends: ‘a rightward shift on the part of many mainstream feminists and other secular liberals away from a redistributive model of justice and toward a politics of incarceration’ coinciding with ‘a leftward sweep on the part of many younger evangelicals toward a globally oriented social justice theology’.<sup>35</sup> *Human Trafficking’s* lead actress Mira Sorvino’s fictional character and real world career illustrates this convergence, as we can see in a *Christian Post* headline ‘Actress Mira Sorvino premieres Cambodian sex trafficking documentary at Bayside megachurch’.<sup>36</sup> Carrie N Baker has also critiqued US anti-trafficking PSAs, mass media journalism, and movies like *Human Trafficking* for the way they represent innocent, virginal victims ‘as silenced or blinded, and in need of someone to speak or see for them’; here she includes an image from Facebook’s Human Trafficking newsfeed of a woman with her mouth covered by the words ‘Don’t be afraid to say it for her!’<sup>37</sup>

This ironic removal of a woman’s voice and agency in the name of rescue is precisely the problem, and *Human Trafficking* encourages this type of ventriloquism and impersonation through its manipulation of victim-identification. Alice Mihaela Bardan’s analysis of the Swedish film *Lilya 4-Ever* (2002) points out how the ‘typically earnest and tragic’ tale of a sexually exploited young migrant girl purports to ‘allow us an easy access to Lilya’s experience’ through the spectacle of her suffering, with the filmmaker attempting to put the viewer in Lilya’s position so that we can understand ‘how it feels’ and ‘what it must be like’ to be coerced into sexual relations with repulsive older men.<sup>38</sup> *Human Trafficking* features several similar scenes in brothels where we are encouraged to share in the repulsion of the girls toward fat, older men.

These cinematic scenes of degradation illustrate the lurid pornography of anti-pornography suggested above. To appropriate Freud’s insight about hysterical identification and distortion in dreams, here the subject manages to ‘suffer as it were for a whole host of others, and to play all the roles in a drama solely out of their own personal resources’.<sup>39</sup> Lifetime Television has perfected this form of sensational cinematic identification. While feminist psychoanalytic film theory has suggested many similarities between Hollywood film spectatorship and the work of dreams, I will propose that even ostensibly non-fiction television programming can offer related experiences of role-playing through victim-impersonation.

## Melodrama: *Selling the girl next door*

A good demonstration of the sensational tendency and trend in anti-trafficking discourse can be seen in a more recent ‘wake-up call’ issued by CNN reporter Amber Lyon’s *Selling the Girl Next Door* (2011), in which she argues that valuable

<sup>33</sup> J Doezema, 2010; R Weitzer, 2014, p. 16; M Wijers, ‘Purity, Victimhood and Agency: Fifteen years of the UN Trafficking Protocol’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 4, 2015, pp. 56–79, <http://www.antitraffickingreview.org>

<sup>34</sup> See K Kempadoo, ‘From Moral Panic to Global Justice: Changing perspectives on trafficking’, in *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work, and human rights*, Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London, 2011, pp. vii–xxxiv. See also chapter by R Kapur in the same volume.

<sup>35</sup> E Bernstein, ‘Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary antitrafficking campaigns’, *Signs*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45–71, quotation from abstract, p. 45. Cf. L Segal and M McIntosh (eds.), *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the pornography debate*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1992.

<sup>36</sup> J Martinez, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> C Baker, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> A Bardan, ‘“Enter Freely and of Your Own Will”: Cinematic representations of post-Socialist transnational journeys’, in M Maciniak, A Imre, and Á O’Healy (eds.), *Transnational Feminism in Film and Media*, Palgrave, New York, 2007, p. 99, 95, 101.

<sup>39</sup> I have quoted the translation in A De Mijolla, ‘Identification’, *International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Macmillan, New York, 2005, p. 787; cf. S Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), trans. J Strachey, Basic Books, New York, 2010, p. 173.

government resources have been given to ‘foreign’ victims of sex trafficking while ignoring the domestic problem of girls ‘trafficked for sex’ using Internet adult classified ads on Craigslist.org or Backpage.com.<sup>40</sup> Like *Human Trafficking*, the audience is encouraged to see the menace of human trafficking as far more widespread than they might have imagined, and like the ICE agent played by Sorvino who dresses up as a stereotypical subservient ‘Russian mail-order bride’ to position herself as a trafficking victim in order to catch the crime boss, Amber Lyon puts herself in ‘harm’s way’ by taking out an ad on Backpage.com using a photo of herself when she was under 18 and using adjectives like ‘innocent’ that she suggests indicate that she might be underage in order to disprove Backpage.com’s claim that they carefully screen out ads for underage girls.

Whether or not this media tactic of posing as underage should be seen as unethical as it constitutes entrapment (creating an unrealistic scenario to ensnare predatory would-be criminals as in *To Catch a Predator*), Lyon’s active positioning of herself as a ‘trafficking victim’ seems to weaken and hopelessly confuse the definition of trafficking victims as unwitting and unwilling. In order to seem ‘fair and balanced’, Lyon interviews Dennis Hof, the proprietor of a legal brothel in Nevada, the Moonlite BunnyRanch, the subject of two HBO documentaries *Cathouse* and *Cathouse 2* as well as a television reality series *Cathouse: The series*. Hof condemns ‘pimps’ as parasites and emphasises the safety and free agency of sex workers at his brothel (arguably, he profits directly from the anti-trafficking scare).

Just when it seems that Lyon is about to condemn ‘whorephobia’ and ‘whore stigma’ with respect to sex workers, she instead asserts that such stigma is unwarranted because ‘most sex workers began as underage sex trafficking victims’ which she ‘proves’ by interviewing three of over a dozen sex workers currently at the brothel, those who raised their hands in response to her question about who began selling sex as ‘underage’ and ‘trafficked’ (Weitzer reminds us that any minors assisted by middlemen are ‘ipso facto trafficking victims by law’<sup>41</sup>). None of the women use the term ‘trafficked’ to describe their experiences, but they do discuss exploitation by ‘pimps’ and that they entered the sex industry underage (‘I started ho-ing when I was 16’; ‘I got started in the sex industry when I was 15’; ‘I’ve been in the game since I was 13’). But Lyon’s programme is edited so as to make these few tragic stories representative of all sex work (including their current consensual and legal work at the brothel). This has the double effect of infantilising adult women who are sex workers and equating sex work with trafficking. Moreover, the programme *Selling the Girl Next Door* romanticises and eroticises innocence and virginity in ways that do not break with the appeal of these very terms used in ads on Backpage.com.

While Lyon may be aligned with a feminist ethos that refuses to blame the victim, and the victim is sometimes recast as survivor in such stories, in fact the expository mode of representation she uses (with a single anchor voice-over, despite her interactive and embedded journalism) cannot help but reinforce a victimology. Lyon retains a controlling voice and the subjects of the film are reduced to essentialised stereotypes. Despite the fact that Lyon is bodily present rather than absent in the programme, the ‘tradition of the victim’ described by Bill Nichols and Brian Winston still applies: ‘The victim would stand revealed as the central subject of documentary’.<sup>42</sup> Winston insists that documentary ‘most often displays the private inadequacies of the urban underclass, “in the bowels of the earth” in close-up’ and insists that by choosing victims, ‘documentarists abandoned the part supposedly played by those who comment publicly on society (the watchdogs of the guardians of power). Instead, in almost any documentary situation they are always the more powerful partner’.<sup>43</sup> He argues that documentary filmmakers who focus on victims ignore the ethical and moral implications of this development. In choosing to focus on victims, does Lyon comment critically on the guardians of power?

Lyon is apparently critical of the incarceration of young female ‘sex trafficking’ victims, but the programme’s agenda is still one of ‘carceral feminism’. Knowing its audience, the programme targets and excites parental concern, and is remarkably uncurious about why runaways might run away from home. While this might also be about not blaming the victim, the answer is determined by the viewership of the show: as is the standard for most mainstream television, the solution to family problems is a return to ‘The Family’.

<sup>40</sup> *Selling the Girl Next Door*, 2011, CNN and A Lyon, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/CRIME/01/20/siu.selling.girl.next.door.backpage/>. The video was uploaded by A Lyon to Vimeo: <http://vimeo.com/32746082>

<sup>41</sup> R Weitzer, p. 16–17. Cf. N Mai, ‘Between Embodied Cosmopolitanism and Sexual Humanitarianism: The fractal mobilities and subjectivities of migrants working in the sex industry’, in V Baby-Collin and L Anteby-Yemini (eds.), *Borders, Mobilities and Migrations: Perspectives from the Mediterranean in the 19-21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> B Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1992, p. 91; B Winston, ‘The Tradition of the Victim in Griersonian Documentary’, in A Rosenthal (ed.), *New Challenges for Documentary*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, pp. 269–287; p. 274.

<sup>43</sup> B Winston, p. 276.

The term ‘melodramatic’ has been suggested by Vance to describe programmes like *Selling the Girl Next Door*; she notes how many anti-sex trafficking videos employ ‘virtually identical titles, with “selling,” “innocence,” “bought,” and “sold” combining and recombining like mutant DNA’.<sup>44</sup> She argues that melodrama achieves maximum effect through the equation of parts with the whole (in Lyon’s case: select stories of underage victimisation are used to criticise the entire sex industry), severe decontextualisation (in Sorvino’s case, ignoring the complexity of migration narratives and the actual effects of raid-and-rescue operations on the lives of poor women and migrants), the juxtaposition of tangential or irrelevant examples that aim to shock (the tourist child kidnapping subplot in *Human Trafficking*), and a sustained effort to mobilise horror and excess (the visceral emotional response solicited by paradoxically pornographic anti-pornography texts).<sup>45</sup>

Gayle Rubin has noted that the rhetoric of the anti-prostitution and anti-pornography movement is less a sexology than a demonology, and she suggests that it functions primarily as a form of scapegoating, criticising the non-routine rather than ‘routine acts of oppression, exploitation, or violence’.<sup>46</sup> While Lyon’s programme does not necessarily call for legal brothels to be closed, and it appears well intentioned with regard to its criticism of the system of incarceration of ‘victims’ that is currently in place, it is clearly an abolitionist text that represents ‘pimps’ and ‘johns’ as unredeemable monsters. The programme attempts to persuade viewers and politicians to call for *Craigslist* and *Backpage.com* to be shut down in order to protect underage girls from being trafficked.

### A Message Waiting at the Receiver’s End

The powerfully emotive emphasis on child prostitution is also part of the legacy of the Victorian ‘white slavery’ discourse traced by Doezema and Vance, but updated for the internet age. Programmes like *Selling the Girl Next Door* rely on the sexual shame, fear, and ‘knowingness’ of the viewers at home who simultaneously have their worst fears and stereotypes confirmed and can be shocked and appalled by what they have ‘learnt’.

This sort of authoritative speech about marginalised sexual subjects reveals who is authorised to speak, to whom, and with what truth-effects. David Halperin suggests that phobic discourses dramatise ‘the remarkable ease with which socially authorized individuals can communicate certain “truths” about such sexually marginal subjects: ‘if the message is already waiting at the receiver’s end, it doesn’t even need to be sent; it just needs to be activated’.<sup>47</sup> The most insidious aspect of such programmes is the way that they conflate human trafficking and sex work. This has very real effects on the lives of adult women and men affected by such policy-influencing journalism (especially with respect to civil liberties and work safety).<sup>48</sup>

These programmes rely for their effect on the notion of reaching viewers who had ‘no idea’ that ‘modern-day slavery’ even existed and was so widespread. They thus place their faith in exposure of a hidden world. Mira Sorvino and a young actress in Kara’s *Trafficked* named Charlie Kanter have stated that they were shocked to learn of the (alleged) prevalence of sex trafficking within the United States, as though their eyes are now open (‘eye opening’ is another cliché in viewer reviews). And yet, there is something potentially naïve and gullible in this very positionality and faith in exposure. The problem that confronts these actors and filmmakers thus remains: How to suspend our disbelief? What cinematic techniques can make audiences feel as if our eyes are open even as we are immersed in a conventional work of fiction?

*Human Trafficking* features oddly ‘meta’ moments where the characters sceptically call attention to the clichés of the genre: Sergei (Carlyle) says the ICE investigator (played by Donald Sutherland) sounds like ‘old TV cop shows’ and Kate (Sorvino) calls attention to how hers ‘is an extremely *mediagenic* case: we have an innocent young girl, trafficked across American borders, sold as a sex slave and murdered’. One Eastern European trafficking victim calls attention to

<sup>44</sup> C Vance, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> C Vance, p. 203.

<sup>46</sup> G Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality’, in H Abelow, M Barale, and D Halperin (eds.), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York, 1993, p. 166.

<sup>47</sup> D Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a gay historiography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p. 11.

<sup>48</sup> The feminist website *The New Agenda* features a call to action inspired by the CNN programme: ‘NOW TAKE ACTION! Contact Voice Media Group, owner of Village Voice Media and ask them: Do you have a daughter? Do you know anyone who has a daughter? Is knowingly trafficking in teenage girls good business?’, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.thenewagenda.net/2011/01/22/watch-on-cnn-selling-the-girls-next-door/>. Cf. E N Brown, ‘Backpage.com sues federal government over SAVE Act,’ *Reason*, 15 December 2015, retrieved 4 February 2016, <https://reason.com/blog/2015/12/15/backpage-sues-loretta-lynch>



Kate's privilege as a 'righteous American bitch' who thinks she can simply 'walk in my shoes' (but then she does, literally donning the appropriate costume). Another questions whether Kate's confession of being sexually abused by her Russian uncle at the age of 12 can be compared to her own experience of daily sexual abuse and humiliation. But both women recant these accusations, the latter suggesting 'I guess it's not that different'.

What is at work here is an aggressive form of empathy, mirroring what President George W. Bush called 'the Army of Compassion'.<sup>49</sup> A vigilante mentality can coexist with faith in Homeland Security/ICE raid-and-rescue operations, which is embodied in the film by a woman named Ellen, an NGO activist in the Philippines with Stop Trafficking International. She confronts white male tourists on the street with her video camera and asks if the Filipino girls or boys they are with are their daughters or sons or were just 'rented for an hour', reminding them that in America 'we now have laws' against what they are doing (reflecting Bush's campaign against sex tourism, 'Operation Predator'<sup>50</sup>). Her video camera records images of these men in order to shame them publicly. She insists that this is not 'brave' but is more 'painful and scary actually—this could be your neighbor, your dentist, your accountant, heaven forbid a member of your family!'

The camera in *Human Trafficking* assumes this same panoptic gaze of surveillance, what Melissa Gira Grant calls 'The Carceral Eye'.<sup>51</sup> It works to effectively discipline not only the women and men represented in the film, but also the 'liberal' middle-class viewer aligned with both the victim and the sadistic/legalistic voyeur. In psychoanalytic film theory this alignment operation is called 'ideological suture'.<sup>52</sup> As David Christopher explains, the term suture refers broadly to 'the suspension of disbelief that cinematic techniques encourage in viewers to foster their emotional complicity with the film's ideological agenda'.<sup>53</sup> This emotional and ideological complicity is achieved primarily by manipulating the dominant point of view and thus point of identification for the viewer. 'Melomentary' is particularly effective at fostering the viewer's emotional and ideological complicity via victim-identification. The fantasy that we can know 'what it feels like' is what I have called aggressive empathy, but it only takes the form of victim-masquerade by the detective in the above examples.

## Conclusion

The many 'melomentaries' on sex trafficking analysed here have undoubtedly unleashed emotion and a sense of urgency, but Vance argues that they also narrow the frame of analysis and action, especially in the way they 'appear to address, yet defer, questions of globalization and inequality', ultimately telling simplistic stories that function to 'entertain and absolve'.<sup>54</sup> Migrants' complex experiences of vulnerability and resilience (including the experiences of minors selling sex) have been 'reductively simplified by the onset of a de-politicising representation of the world' identified by Nicola Mai within 'sexual humanitarian "protectionist" narratives' which, he argues, actively contribute to the marginalisation and stigmatisation of migrants and minors selling sex.<sup>55</sup>

Abolitionists frequently act as if their virtuous ends justify their means, namely producing melodramas about female sexual innocence as the definitive representation of 'true' victimhood. Presumably this ends-justify-the-means attitude also justifies vastly inflated and mystified statistics. But Kempadoo cautions that hyperbole, 'unsubstantiated claims, and sensationalism' may help rustle up 'indignation and moral condemnation' about exploitation, but they can often lead to greater abuse and violations, wherein '[p]oor women's sexuality is used to mobilise anti-trafficking sympathy, funds, and global attention' for increased policing and monitoring of borders, while, at the same time, 'the women's decisions and "choices" are denied legitimacy'.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>49</sup> G Bush, 'Remarks at the National Training Conference on Human Trafficking in Tampa, Florida, July 16, 2004', in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George W. Bush* 2004, Book II—July 1 to September 30, 2004, United States Government Printing Office, 2007, p. 1350.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1353.

<sup>51</sup> M Grant, *Playing the Whore: The work of sex work*, Verso, Brooklyn, New York, 2014, pp. 8—11.

<sup>52</sup> K Silverman, 'Suture [Excerpts]', in P Rosen (ed.), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A film theory reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, pp. 219—235; p. 224.

<sup>53</sup> D Christopher, 'The Allegory of Apartheid and the Concealment of Race Relations in District 9', *Online International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2013, pp. 40—46.

<sup>54</sup> C Vance, p. 203, 200.

<sup>55</sup> N Mai, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> K Kempadoo, pp. xxi—xxii.

The likelihood of harmful results, or ‘collateral damage’,<sup>57</sup> is why it is incumbent on critics and audiences to question the resurgence, rebranding, and rebooting of the myth of white slavery in contemporary anti-trafficking media campaigns. In particular, we should be wary of their reliance on emotional and visceral cinematic identification with the rescuer. The effects and consequences of these melodramatic representations on law and policy can be extrapolated from the fact that in *Human Trafficking* the spectator is urged to identify with an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent. The mise-en-scène reinforces this identification with symbols of control and institutional power through its attention to the uniforms and insignia of the ICE and Homeland Security.

Perhaps, and especially when it comes to sex work, our expectations profoundly determine what we are willing to see or hear. As Laurenn McCubbin succinctly puts it, ‘People love to see the things they think they already know about sex work reflected back at them’.<sup>58</sup> Thus, rather than seeing the existence of a ‘secret world’ revealed to us (i.e. faith in exposure; opening our eyes to something unexpected), these programmes confidently activate confirmation bias about the sex industry, sex tourism, and villains versus victims. This is also what makes for an effective ‘reboot’ of a franchise: the appearance of starting a cinematic universe again from scratch, but inevitably activating an intertextual array of iconography that feels familiar and is ‘pre-sold’ to the audience. *Human Trafficking* ends with a credit copyright ‘2005 For Sale Productions’. Perhaps it is time to end demand for this sort of programme.

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<sup>57</sup> See M Wijers, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> M Shelton, ‘Domestic Chatter with Laurenn McCubbin’, *Spolia*, 13 September 2013, retrieved 4 February 2016, <http://www.spoliamag.com/domestic-chatter-with-laurenn-mccubbin/>