

SEEING POLITICS: FILM, VISUAL METHOD, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PEADAR KING

Harman, Sophie (2019) *Seeing Politics: Film, Visual Method, and International Relations*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Reading this book made me cranky; it was at times infuriating. The book is part theoretical, part practical guide. My problem with this book is the mismatch, actually more gaping gulf, between the theorising and the empirical. As a theoretical exercise, it has much to recommend it. Well written, knowledgably informative. As an academic, Harman knows her stuff. Essentially, Harman argues that 'film as a method...has the capacity for co-production of research and self-representation...that film is a powerful and potentially transformative medium' (24). And, secondly, she argues, it allows the invisible, 'the subaltern' (24), to represent and speak for themselves. A proposition worth examining.

From the outset, Harman acknowledges that she has little empirical knowledge of film; 'up until 2015, I was an academic who knew nothing about film. My background is not in film production, visual politics or visual ethnography' (ix). Nonetheless, Harman decided to make a film. *Pili*, a feature length drama set in Tanzania, that not only focuses on 'the politics of the everyday lives of women living with HIV/AIDS but also made in a way that allows a particular group of women to tell their own story' (xi). Harman goes on to say that the story is based on the lives of eighty women...and then, here's the thing, the first alarm bell, 'triangulated with my existing knowledge' (xi). So, it's not good enough to make a film with and about a group of African women on their own terms, it requires triangulation (whatever that is) by a white western academic. And, all of this in the context of post-colonial, decolonial and feminist theorising.

Evidence of the realisation of film's potential for transformative and equalising capacity is absent from the empirical experience as recounted in this book. To paraphrase former House of Commons speaker John Bercow, 'the I's have it'. Pronouns are hugely problematic particularly in the Preface. This is all about Harman – 'my initial intent...it became increasingly apparent to me...I needed a visual method that would appeal to global audiences. My existing research in Africa, and my networks in Tanzania gave me access to communities affected by HIV/AIDS...to make a film set in a real town with real people'. Are there others?

As Nicholas Shaxson (2007) cautions in his superb book *Poisoned Wells: The Dirty Politics of African Oil*, those of us who tread on African soil ought to tread with care. Harman wanted to make a film in Africa. So do many others. The problem Harman has is that she doesn't have enough money to make the film. Many others share the same problem. She has a budget of £75,000 and, 'producers whom I consulted all thought £75,000 was too small to produce a feature length film' (56). They were right. But Harman ploughs on. Acknowledging that it is best to hire African filmmakers to make an African film' (56), Harman doesn't do so because 'a Tanzanian above-the-line crew would have cost three to four times the price of travel and fees of a British crew' (57). A British crew it is then. A British crew because 'in the United Kingdom, the industry is much larger and diverse, meaning that the labour market is more flexible' (57).

The flexible labour market. The precariat. But hey who cares? 'It was possible to secure talented and experienced filmmakers who were relatively young...' (58). I think this is called exploitation. If $1 + 1 = 2$, then the precariat + exploitation = the exploited precariat. But what the hell. 'Feature films are the gold standard of filmmaking portfolios and give stature within the film industry, the opportunity for young filmmakers to lead on them is rare. *Pili* provided an opportunity for young filmmakers...' (58). And not only were these young people not paid the standard rate, 'a number of the crew engaged in work beyond their standard roles and responsibilities' (58). All of which is framed thus:

“In a feminist praxis that acknowledges genealogies, difference, and positionality but does not use such acknowledgement as a panacea or justification to acknowledge the issues and do it anyway...feminist praxis towards change can be advanced, new forms of knowledge can be created and informal or taboo forms of politics can be seen” (128).

Fine. But in the making of this film who paid for the generation of such knowledge? And who gains?

And it was not just the crew. All the key requirements to make a film were negotiable, Harman tells us. Some deliverables were given for free, and actors reduced their fee. And not just the crew. The cast, Harman sought to represent, had to bargain their way to get what they thought was fair recompense. ‘I proposed the pay rate of TSh5,000 (\$2.5) to the women plus one meal per day...more than the poverty threshold but not so much that it would be a perverse incentive for them to keep going thus keeping the ethics committee happy’ (89). Well, perish the thought that the ethics committee might be unhappy. Unreasonably, it seems, they asked for more, \$2.50 a day more. Some women had to find childcare. Ah, but the basis of such request was, according to Harmon, ‘slightly dubious because I knew that the majority of children were looked after by extended family members for small amounts’ (89). And then, get this, the extras. ‘Extras would not be paid but would have access to water’ (89). In fairness, and for the sake of completeness, Harmon does go on to say that if they worked for over an hour, they would be paid \$2.50 plus lunch and water.

These were African actors in a white western enterprise. Now, where have we seen that before? God-all-mighty. If this were any other industry...If we are talking about sweatshops in Bangladesh? Zero-hour contract workers in Birmingham? Filipino care workers in Bath? And it’s not that universities are immune to such practices. Perhaps, even in Queen Mary University of London where Harman teaches. Perhaps you too, Sophie might have once been that person, been that precariat? The book, Harmon tells us, shows the hidden elements of work and expense involved in a project of this kind and provides a guide for those seeking to use film. Well, maybe not.

Here's a thought Sophie. Have a read of Amalia Illgner's (who couldn't wait to join the magazine, *Monocle*'s, multilingual staff, who – almost without exception – donned statement spectacles and box-fresh trainers teamed with rolled-up jeans) *Guardian* article 'Why I'm suing over my dream internship' (27 March 2018). It makes for disturbing reading. No more than your book does. 'For every nine-hour shift, *Monocle* interns are paid £30', according to Illgner. 'Around the same hourly rate as an illegally exploited UK garment factory worker' (Ibid). What was the hourly rate to work on *Phili*? On her first day, Illgner was given *Monocle*'s intern handbook, an 18-page document that every intern – roughly 30 each year – is given when they start. It covered everything from what to wear ('Important people are often touring our offices and it is necessary for everyone to look put-together and professional'), to where to eat (never at your desk), to where to hang your coat (in the cupboard), Tyler Brûlé (the globe-trotting millionaire), believes 'in a tidy ship. No jackets on the backs of chairs' (Nicoll, 2012). The kind of exploitation that academics and others are quite rightly outraged by.

For all the young people who worked on the *Pili* film, no benefit accrues from the publication of this book. No rewards accrue to them from citations of this book. No promotion – benefits that you, Sophie, are likely to experience. I have no idea if the making of that film brought opportunity to these young people's doors. Perhaps. Perhaps, too, another producer had an idea for a film that she / he could not really afford to make but offered them yet another opportunity to further their career, at a cut-price rate of course.

It's pretty simple. People deserve to be paid. Properly. If you don't have the money to make a film, don't make it. Don't dress it up as something other than it is. And don't pretend that you are doing it for the benefit of others. Otherwise it is exploitative. And all the talk about feminist, post-colonial, decolonial theorising does not disguise that reality.

Reading this book made me cranky. Maybe cranky doesn't come near.

References

Illgner, A (2018) 'Why I'm suing over my dream internship', *The Guardian*, 27 March, available: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/27/why-im-suing-over-my-dream-internship> (accessed 29 November 2019).

Nicoll, R (2012) 'Tyler Brûlé: the man who sold the world', *The Observer*, 17 March, available: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/mar/17/tyler-brule-wallpaper-monocle-magazine> (accessed 7 April 2020).

Shaxson, N (2007) *Poisoned Wells: The Dirty Politics of African Oil*, New York: St Martin's Griffin.

Peadar King is a documentary filmmaker and writer. His latest book *War, Suffering and the Struggle for Human Rights* (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2020) has just been published. With thanks to my colleague Mick Cassidy for drawing my attention to Amalia Illgner's article.

