


REORGANIZING WOMEN ON A GLOBAL SCALE: REMOTE SENSING







ROUTE» PASSENGER 21923996/MS 03SEP00
DEPARTURE FROM MOSKWA
11.00AM MAIN STATION
TULA / ORJOL / KURSK / CHARKOW /
SAPROSHJE / BHDANOW
ARRIVAL IN SEWASTOPOL/KRIM
04SEP00 11.40PM
OVERNIGHT HOTEL ODESSA



Remote Sensing (2001) is a theoretical video essay on a particular kind of gender-specific mobility that has blossomed since the onset of the post-socialist era – the global sex trade. The research for this project took me to some of the hot spots of the global sex industry which have grown up around the Mekong region, along the border of the Czech Republic and around the former US Marine base in the Philippines. Coming back with video material from these diverse locations, I realized that representing a worldwide network with diverse sites and conditions would be more difficult than representing a single site.

Human trafficking – of which the global sex trade is a primary example – is a worldwide phenomenon occurring at many sites at the same time. Women are moving, or are being moved, in multiple directions according to specific patterns.

The aim of my exploration – which inevitably involves videographic activity – was twofold: firstly, a focus on the tangible sites at which trading took place and, secondly, a focus on movements, trails and routes as well as on the itinerant bodies themselves. In many places, where prostitution is outlawed and trafficking is a criminal operation, the women who are drawn into it are captive or clandestine. At these sites, aesthetic production posed considerable challenges as I needed to find ways to render this particular web of worldwide migration visible. At times, the navigation of female bodies had to be traced through the more or less visible, more or less illegal, more or less digital, terrain of the global sex trade. For these reasons, some of the places I visualize in the video are, in fact, imaginary ones.

Intermingling fictional and factual locations significantly challenges the “documentary” aspect of my work. But, beyond a simple critique of documentary realism, this implies that such global phenomena require new conceptual means to help us grasp their immense totality. My visual research encompasses a strong intuitive component, which enables me to give form to relations that I know account for a significant part of reality, which I can sense but not necessarily document. Solidifying these relations into images is a first step in making them tangible.

In this context, realism is understood as something that needs to be produced as opposed to considering something that is always already there. By and large, I have a complicated relationship to realism, if by realism we mean the relationship between the audio-visual text and the social world. Of course, video-making involves the relentless endeavor of establishing this very connection between the text and its referent; but, when it comes to the complex processes we choose to sum up under the notion of globalization, we face a new range of problems. Firstly, these processes take place at a high level of abstraction; the further they are removed from material realities and physical embodiments, the harder it becomes to visually represent them. Processes such as electronic communication, the flow of finance capital and increased deregulation escape direct representability,

which means that realism is increasingly incapable of making relevant statements about our reality. Images of slum women do no more than document the capillaries of a fantastically complex organism. Another reason is that consumer cameras and electronic communication media have democratized representation through the circulation of an unimaginable flood of self-authored images which makes one of the major realist projects – namely that of extending media representation to excluded or marginalized subjects – mostly redundant. The project can no longer be to simply give voice to the unheard.

One way to begin eliciting what the aesthetic project could be is to get an understanding of how images are currently used to facilitate the worldwide mobility of women and what these images effect in reality. While some women enter the sex industry through recruiting agents, many become mobilized by taking the initiative themselves, posting their picture on the web with a view to activating the interest of someone far away. By doing this, they demonstrate an active and highly directed use of digital space, by channeling their desire for mobility along profitable routes, while understanding its limitations.

Indeed, since network navigation transcends the political understanding of boundaries, traveling can take many forms. What starts for many women as a virtual involvement can quickly lead to the purchase of a long distance train, or plane, ticket or to the clandestine delivery of the outrageous sum for an illegal border crossing. This demonstrates a mind-boggling shift in scale from intimate romantic writing to global migration along serialized transnational paths. The great ease of moving between spatial dimensions makes it important to get to the bottom of the problems and possibilities of technology for contemporary gender and sexuality. On the one hand, the internet has enabled an enormous global trade in women through the bridal market; on the other hand, it has allowed for women’s experimentation with new identities and desires.

Remote Sensing, the title of the video essay, refers to the visualizing technologies and other geographic information systems (GIS) that have been developed to scan, represent and interpret terrestrial topography in the most accurate fashion. Scanning, X-ray and remote sensing – to name but a few of the optical technologies that are used in geography to track and monitor migration movements – are constantly producing a new visuality that facilitates certain notions of globality and governability where the flow of people and resources, indeed the entire planet, appears ever more controllable. We could think of these technologies as being the leading mainstream method of “reading” the Earth and ascribing meaning to its geographies. The entire video essay is an effort to write counter-geographies into these remote digital and scientific planetary scripts.

Satellite images are so abstract that meaning has to be produced through interpretation. Gender is one of the categories that notoriously fall through the



scientific evaluation rosters, as these technologies conceal the gendered meaning of the data they produce. As gender is not likely to be a research target for space scientists, my video gently perverts the scientific fantasy of omniscient control by generating images of female bodies being sensed, recorded and rerouted. My intention was to infuse the technological images with human specificities, with subjective interpretations and personal ambiguities, to introduce illicit economies and other circuits of survival that people have developed in the cracks of the global economy. *Remote Sensing* enters all these interesting spaces, which hold great potential for subversion.

Remotely sensed images no longer present a map of a static moment in time, but rather convey a dynamic geography of moving and changing surfaces over which a steady flow of people, signals and data can be recorded. Satellite images represent a traversable space; they are not limited to simply recording the movement of people. Satellite images are also implicated in actively producing a perspective from which it has become thinkable to reorganize women on a global scale. It is from the orbital perspective offered by these images that we can fully appreciate the gigantic dimensions of today's transnational and highly sexualized mobility.¹

This is not to say that these bodies are only passively traced by GIS; on the contrary, they are involved in an active geographical process. In the course of the global dislocation of women and the sexualization of their labor, a new geography is being mapped out through recruitment from minority populations and slum communities, transportation along trafficking routes and itineraries adopted to cross borders, abroad and off-shore, to labor in the global sex industry, where they build overseas economies and alternative circuits of survival at the margins of a pan-capitalist reality.

Remote Sensing examines the economic and sexual nature of a global technological geography as trailed by women. In developing these ideas, it was helpful to draw on Saskia Sassen's study conceptualizing trafficking-related cross-border circuits as "countergeographies of globalization." She understands them as being deeply implicated in some of the major dynamics constitutive of globalization: the formation of global markets, the intensifying of transnational and trans-local networks and the development of communication technologies that easily escape conventional surveillance practices.²

I want to zoom in on a particular place now to illuminate how these dynamics inscribe themselves

into a historically-determined visual regime. Since the Rest and Recreation Areas of US military bases from the Vietnam and Korea Wars were replaced by tourist infrastructures, Thailand and the Philippines have been epicenters of sex tourism. In the early 1980s, the Thai government launched a successful worldwide advertising campaign intended to attract a male clientele. Ads for tourist resorts depict Thai women in shiny silk dresses, adorned with flowers, softly smiling, conveying elegance, enchantment, seduction, eroticism – a 'natural resource' of Thailand. In addition to the implied ethnocentric discourse which articulates 'woman' in ethnic and sexual terms, these images also place her in the fantasy narrative of colonial conquest. A specific visual rapport is set up between a desirer and a desirable geography. In an overseas tourism that is sexually motivated, these relations are powerfully enforced through the male gaze of desire which can evaluate, compare, book and purchase. This gaze operates as a remote sensor of the male imaginary onto a sexualized and racialized geography – a situated, gendered gaze with buying power.

Behind the front images of sex tourism, there lies the unglamorous world of trafficking. Surrounded by poorer countries under socialist or dictatorial regimes, the Thai sex industry flourished and developed Fordist dimensions. The demand for prostitutes remained consistent, even after many of the more qualified women moved abroad. Since 1991, post-socialist countries like Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia have provided an influx of new sex workers so that the majority of women on the sex beaches in Pattaya and Pukhet or in the Bangkok red light district, Patpong, are no longer Thai. At the lower echelon of the Thai sex industry are girls from the poorest neighboring areas – often minors from the hill tribe states in Burma – smuggled across the border into closed brothels where they are lined up in aquarium-style glass containers for the working class customers.

I am not suggesting that we replace the seductive representations of femininity, which convey a natural joy in serving and satisfying, with grim images of incarceration and enslavement. Both representations of female sexuality – seduction and forced prostitution – are polar extremities operating within the parameters of a masculine symbolic. Instead I want to expand the discursive space of femininity and sexuality in a global context by mapping out the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, positions taken up by women in the sex trade.

Rather than using representations of captivity, immobility or deportation, my video sketches out an alternative territoriality, opting for images of women actively traversing geographies, sleeping in buses and dashing by on motorbikes. I also designed images of a virtual, digital space – images that could not be captured with my little Sony camera but which had to be invented: X-ray portraits of young women moving through deep blue landscapes, passing socialist housing projects in Bulgaria, crossing the Bosphorus

1 This video has benefited from an extensive correspondence with Lisa Parks while she was working on her publication *Cultures in Orbit, Satellites and the Televisual* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

2 "Countergeographies of Globalization: The Feminization of Survival" by Saskia Sassen. In: *Feminist post-development thought: rethinking modernity, postcolonialism and representation*, ed. Kriemild Saunders. (London: Zed Books, 2002), 89-104.

or driving through slum neighborhoods in Mexico. The electronic travel schedules running down over the image trace travel routes across the globe, from Lagos to Munich, from Moscow to Tel Aviv, from San Salvador to California and from Chiang Mai to Paris. The detailed routings – the meticulous tracking of bus rides from town to town, the timing of border crossings, visa numbers, and ship schedules – all these obsessively collected data seem to come closer to documentary reality than anything else in the video. Such images speak about migration in the age of digital imaging. Whether the female passengers are touring for their personal pleasure, growth and enrichment, whether they have been routed along a standardized, serialized migratory path or whether they are being trafficked by a criminal organization into a life in clandestinity, the repetitive sequences of these digital journeys convey the intensity and multi-directionality of gendered traffic.

In *Remote Sensing*, the screen is often split into autonomous parts, deflecting the central perspective of a single frame into multiple perspectives and simultaneous topographies. Take Caroline – originally from a slum neighborhood in Manila and now working at the Bunny Club in Hong Kong – who confesses, in a slightly roundabout way, how exhausted she gets from “entertaining” her customers after she finishes long hours of dancing on stage. The video image is a montage of her close-up portrait on a satellite image which looks down on slowly-rotating Pacific islands, next to a video clip of the pulsing traffic in an Asian city at sunset and overlaid with Chinese characters for the word “Observatory.” The surface is congested with signs competing for attention. As Caroline speaks, textual data on Hong Kong’s sunset, moonrise, twilight and tidal changes scroll up, suggesting the entanglement of the hardships of a sex worker with factual scientific information. Here, the potential romanticism of the sunset or moonrise over Hong Kong Bay is overwritten by astrophysical data and the survival narrative of a slum girl. Messy life enters the clean computable digital image from all sides. By the same token, I am using these very images to enhance the representation of female migration and to bring it into this age of visual language.

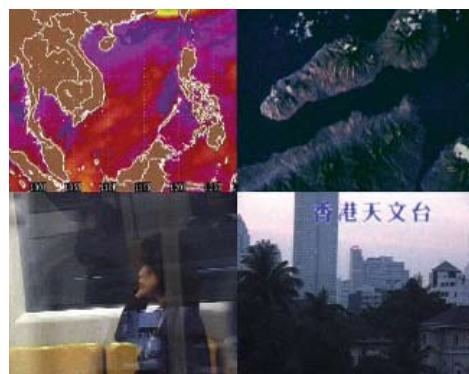
Contextualizing the mobility of women within a discourse of space technology and the most sophisticated optical industry naturally associates women with progress. Moving female bodies have increasingly become vehicles for economic growth in their home countries throughout southeast Asia and parts of Latin America, with national economies heavily dependant on the remittances of female domestic and sex workers abroad. This small detail is too often forgotten in discussions about migration for the purposes of marriage and sex work. The flow of capital in one direction is intrinsically linked to the motion of people in the other. What needs to come into focus in the imaging of migration, and particularly female migration, is the convergence between people and investments in globalizing technologies. Ultimately,

the association of migrant women with the high-tech images of mobility – as conceptualized by satellite images – signifies their trajectories more adequately than time-worn images of victimhood. The paradoxical predicament of these women shows that, although they are capitalized on, they still manage to produce innovative geographies of survival, ranging from negotiating their own terms with clientele to setting up international business networks and smuggling circuits and creating communities of solidarity.

There is also an intercultural dimension which we have to keep in mind when discussing global sex work. Sex tourism is founded on a complex emotional and sexual economy that is culturally determined and has a long history; it cannot be addressed simply in terms of exploitation. While the western concept of prostitution is that you strike a deal and go straight to business, in the southeast Asian setting of sex tourism, prostitution can be open-ended and comprise large fuzzy areas in between transactions. The woman tries to establish a rapport first, knowing that the customer might stay with her for weeks. Accompanying a client for days at a time without a clear job description softens the business side of the deal and abolishes the distinction between work and private life. Her motivation is money, but she may stage friendly concern which is often mistaken for love and affection. He becomes jealous and possessive while she is amused and surprised because, to her, it is business as usual. This tricky entanglement between the economies of female sexuality easily confuses the newcomer and throws his cognitive map into chaos.

Bandana, an NGO woman working in Bangkok, identifies a particularly interesting gray zone between the notion of “being forced” into prostitution – which is the narrow definition of trafficking – and “opting” for prostitution for lack of a better opportunity. From a human rights point of view and for political lobby work towards legislative changes, a distinction might have to be made between “free will” and being tricked into sex work against one’s will. For a cultural producer, however, it does not seem particularly useful to establish such an artificial distinction for moral reasons or for any other purpose. The cultural pressures, social obligations and economic necessities that drive women into sex work are ultimately no less imperative than the pull of organized trafficking. Far more interesting is the space of negotiation that opens up “in between,” for it is here that the complexity of life is located. What I have tried to show is how these gray zones materialize into particular space-times that are certainly presented as alternative to, but not outside, an economic logic. This is not the imaginary, romantic alternative of choosing an existence that is removed from, or external to, the perils of late capitalism, but rather the very ambivalent and conflict-ridden alternative of creating semi-legal circuits of survival in the cracks of a capitalist reality.





YUNNAN / BURMA /
AKHA HIGHLAND
LUANG NAMTHA
UPPER MEKONG REGION
304990100
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TRAFFICKING ROUTE
36499097800
1222128720
NO DEGREES
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