

## **Brands, Markets and Charitable Ethics: MTV's EXIT Campaign**

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### **Abstract**

This case study of MTV's EXIT campaign to raise awareness about the trafficking of women highlights the difficulties faced by charitable organisations when using audience research to evaluate the effectiveness of their media campaigns. If they were to follow the advice to connect with audiences whose ethical and political commitments have been shaped within a media saturated, capitalist culture, they risk reinforcing the positioning of women's bodies as consumable products in a pleasure-oriented service economy and further normalisation of the practices the campaigners are seeking to prevent. To be effective in the longer term charities require an ethical approach to media campaigns that recognises their political dimension and the shift in values required. The short term emotional impact on audiences needs to be weighed against these larger ethical and political considerations to avoid the resulting films becoming too individualistic and parochial, a mirror image of their audience's 'unreconstructed' selves.

**Key Words:** Human trafficking, sexual exploitation, media charity campaigns, film, ethics, aesthetics, consumerism, empathy, authenticity, cosmopolitanism

### **Introduction**

This article examines the ethical implications of the aesthetic decisions that charities make when they commission films for their campaigns against human trafficking and the role that audience research can play in informing those decisions. There has been a large growth in the media attention given to this issue since the late 1990s. The use of short films in campaigns to raise public awareness has also increased during this period as new distribution outlets have become available with firstly DVD extras and then video downloads on the web making it much easier to find an audience outside the more restrictive advertising slots on

television. My analysis therefore extends previous critical work focused on the emotive use of photography in print-based charitable campaigns.<sup>1</sup>

The dilemma charities face is in wanting to make an impact but without falling into the trap of sensationalism which, it can be argued, feeds a prurient interest in the sex trade and women as sex slaves.<sup>2</sup> This is symptomatic of a more general lack of fit between the values and purposes of the voluntary sector and the kind of media stories that create widespread interest. Finding new ways to create public interest in their causes is necessary for charities to be able to compete successfully for funds. There is little that is considered newsworthy in the day-to-day good work done by charities, which often then resort to shock tactics in their paid advertising in order to get noticed. Amelioration of social problems is increasingly dependent on these third sector organisations as governments reduce their welfare support. The kind of campaign material they are distributing is therefore a significant element in how we make sense of these issues.

The example I will examine is MTV's EXIT campaign in Europe which was produced by the MTV Europe Foundation to raise awareness of and to help prevent human trafficking.<sup>3</sup> The Foundation aims to use the power and influence of MTV's brand and broadcasting network to educate young people about the social issues affecting their lives. Their task, therefore, was to reconcile doing 'good works' with a commercial brand image that is designed to appeal to a global youth market. In partnership with SIDA, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the campaign rolled out across Europe in 2005 using a mixture of live events and on-air documentaries, public service announcements, and short fictional films which are also available online on their website. The focus of this campaign was on the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and forced prostitution. A new campaign was launched in 2008 in South Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific which is about human trafficking in general.

I will be developing a critical discussion of the campaign films used in the European EXIT campaign and of the ways in which diverse focus groups drawn from across Europe responded to them, as revealed in the audience research reports commissioned by MTV in five European countries.<sup>4</sup> This research was designed to evaluate the success of the EXIT campaign in achieving its aims and to provide recommendations to inform future campaign strategy. In their conclusions they argue for future campaigns to connect more successfully with audiences whose ethical perspectives and aesthetic tastes have been shaped by 'shock docs' and reality TV within an individualistic, consumer culture. I was not involved in this research but was given access to a 400-page report by the campaign director, Simon Goff, when I interviewed him in 2006. In commenting on this report I will be discussing both the implications of what is revealed by the research and the ethical issues it poses for future

campaign strategies. In doing so I will be highlighting the potentially conservative consequences of commercial audience research when used to inform campaigns about problems whose solution would require wide-ranging social and political change.

### **MTV's EXIT Campaign**

The trafficking issue had risen to prominence in Western Europe during the 1990s in the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall and subsequent economic instability in Eastern Europe which brought widespread poverty to the region. Rising expectations fuelled by the transition to a capitalist economy and images of glamorous consumer lifestyles accessible on global television channels created the conditions in which the migration of workers from Eastern Europe to low-paid, poorly regulated job markets in the richer countries of Europe accelerated. The systems to enable this included the kind of activity that have come to be known as 'trafficking for forced labour' in which the desire of workers to migrate is exploited by brokers who arrange transport, papers and promised jobs at the other end but in such a way that it is hard for the people involved to escape the often miserable conditions in which they find themselves trapped. The boundary between willing migration and forced trafficking is a fuzzy one with individual journeys across Europe often including consent but resulting in a situation where escape is made difficult through the confiscation of passports, debt bondage or varying levels of physical and psychological threat either to themselves or their families back home. In the case of sex work there is also the difficulty of return to communities where the shame of being labelled as a prostitute, however unwilling the woman's participation, results in permanent exclusion.<sup>5</sup>

MTV's decision to set up a charitable foundation to campaign about this issue was taken for a mixture of commercial and humanitarian reasons. They were looking for something relevant to their core 16-24 audience following on from their Staying Alive AIDS campaign in the late 1990s. There was a genuine impetus to use their influence for good as Simon Goff, the campaign director who previously worked for Amnesty International explains: 'We have the soapbox so we shouldn't just be giving them entertainment. We have a responsibility to give information about issues that are relevant to our audience'.<sup>6</sup> The films were paid for by the Swedish government, which had been working on a number of counter-trafficking initiatives, attracted by the chance to broadcast to 150 million households across Europe as well as on MTV cable channels. But the commercial benefits also had to be assessed. Viacom, the parent company, expected to gain public relations benefits in return for the nine million Euros worth of MTV air time they donated to the Foundation. Free publicity for MTV from the editorials generated by the pan-European EXIT pop concerts were part of this return but also the more elusive reputational benefits that accrue to companies from being seen as socially responsible rather than entirely profit driven. According to Simon Goff the assumed benefits

for the counter-trafficking campaign from this branding were that if MTV is seen to care about this issue then maybe their audience will think they should care as well.

For the films to fit with the MTV brand they needed to wear their social responsibility lightly. They were shot and edited in a fast-paced, music-video style, and were framed by celebrity endorsements from supermodel Helena Christensen and a couple of rock stars known in Europe, chosen to be 'cool' but slightly older and wiser than the naive characters shown in the films. These celebrities say how proud they are to be involved in this project and make a direct plea for people to watch, take notice and take action: 'It is our decisions that can end the misery of our sisters'. 'Stand up and be counted'. 'Together we can end trafficking and exploitation in Europe'. Further information about what people can do is detailed in leaflets and on the website which includes links to other major NGOs campaigning on the same issue. MTV's aim was to raise awareness which they are well placed to do as a media company. Any follow-up action is left to these professional agencies.

### **The Films**

The films made for the campaign were *Inhuman Traffic*, a full length documentary of real life stories presented by Angelina Jolie, which was first aired in 17 countries on International Women's Day March 8<sup>th</sup> 2005. This was accompanied by a package of five very short dramatic films under the umbrella title *Parallel Lives* which used scripted scenarios that mimicked a documentary style. These films can now be found on the Foundation's website in fourteen different languages. They address different segments of the European audience with a view to raising awareness of the issue and debunking widely-held beliefs about trafficking, namely that:

- Trafficking is not a big problem for our society. Only a very naive, careless or stupid person could become a victim.
- Trafficking victims are no different to prostitutes - they choose to earn money this way because they are greedy or for sexual pleasure.
- There's not much ordinary people can do about it; it is better not to get involved because it is dangerous.

Using the slogan 'Free Your Mind' the campaign hoped to influence behaviour through the construction of hypothetical scenarios in short films designed to guide young adults in how to live their lives more safely and how to make the right choices in a consumer society. *Right Choice* and *Opportunity Knocks* both address potential victims and how to avoid falling into a trap – the first of these films shows a young woman who migrates to Germany for a job but finds she has been duped into sex work; she is juxtaposed with her friends who describe how much research they do before buying the right mobile phone. In *Opportunity Knocks* young

women are advised to look-out for each other and to help spot suspicious 'boyfriends', a warning that again is structured through comparing two women at risk but only one falls into the trap.<sup>7</sup>

The effectiveness of the aesthetic techniques used in *Parallel Lives* was tested during the campaign evaluation process by showing three of the five films to target audiences and it is these three films that I will discuss in more detail. *Paying the Price* was shown only to men; *The Global Village* was shown only to Western Europeans; while *Judgement Day* was shown to every group. Although respondents liked the brevity of the films the general response was described as 'lukewarm' partly because there was little chance to establish the kind of emotional connection to the scenarios depicted that was considered necessary for these films to influence people. Respondents suggested that 'They need to be more hard hitting, more violent to watch' as a means to establish that emotional engagement. There was also a perceived disconnect between the more 'gritty' realism that was considered appropriate to the subject matter and the aesthetic style used to fit with the MTV brand, which was regarded as inappropriately slick in its use of staged scenarios, celebrity presenters, glossy visuals and montage editing.

All of the films used incongruous juxtaposition to contrast what people believed to be happening with what is shown to actually be the case. *Paying the Price* addresses the potential customer – we meet Marco who in quasi-documentary style is interviewed in his stylish flat and thinks nothing of paying 100 Euros to have sex with a woman who he doesn't believe is exploited by this encounter. This scene is followed by one in which a distressed young woman describes how she is forced to have sex with customers. This juxtaposition made some – especially 'unreconstructed men' - pause for thought because they saw their own attitudes reflected in Marco's assertion that it's harmless fun which the girls enjoy, which is then challenged directly by the woman's perspective.<sup>8</sup> The impact was heightened by the verisimilitude of the acting and setting. But even so there were complaints that the film was too calm and lacked a sufficiently visceral portrayal of the woman's plight to be persuasive enough to counteract existing beliefs about why prostitutes engage in this work.

*The Global Village* speaks to potential activists in Western Europe who have grown up with the rhetoric of globalisation. It presents us with Sven, a young, politically aware and idealistic Swede who is already committed to ethical consumerism as a means to counteract the exploitation of workers in the third world. As we are told at the start: 'Sven lives in Sweden. He cares about the world. Sven worries about the exploitation of people in the global economy'. He is juxtaposed with Tatiana, a trapped trafficking victim of whom Sven is completely unaware even though she lives nearby. A few people found this effective in showing that trafficking can happen everywhere and we should be aware of it. But the

juxtaposition used to contrast Sven's ethical consumerism when buying coffee to his ignorance about the exploitation of women in his own country relies for its effectiveness on drawing an analogy between the trade in coffee and the trade in women. This comparison was considered to be too obscure: 'It didn't seem to be directly about going to a prostitute, that's what I don't understand', commented one respondent. People also found Sven hard to relate to – he is too politically correct – while the more cosmopolitan, liberal, educated audience, who might have felt more positive about him, couldn't believe he would be so ignorant because they are the group most well informed about this issue already.

*Judgement Day* is framed by celebrities suggesting that there is a difference between making judgements that help our friends make the right choice and those that just make us feel better about ourselves. Andrea then tells us about accepting a 'modelling' contract in Belgium, and finding herself ostracised on her return home after they find out she was actually working as a prostitute. Her story is juxtaposed with Suzanna, previously her best friend, who doesn't believe she was forced into it and doesn't want to be friends with a whore. The film ends with Andrea tearfully pleading: 'Just a little more understanding would help me a lot'. It made a strong impression on people who were shocked by this treatment and the double jeopardy faced by trafficking victims. Others thought it lacked credibility in that the victim is seen to have been too easily duped in the first place and the friend overly judgemental to be widely relevant. 'Maybe this is what they're like in Russia or whatever but I can't see people behaving like that to their friends here'.

### **Critical Evaluation**

The key recommendations for future media campaigns that came out of the commissioned audience research are summarised in this section. I will be considering why they arrived at these conclusions and explore the dilemmas they pose for the campaigners. Although my central concern in this analysis is to consider the implications of the target audience's responses to these films, in making these judgments I will be drawing on my own critical responses developed through prior research on trafficking and the ethics of its media portrayal.<sup>9</sup> In constructing ethical scenarios for educating the MTV audience the EXIT campaign has to face the question of how to make connection with people's existing values and experiences while also suggesting that these ought to change. This is a core problem in view of the impossibility noted by moral philosophers of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. If scenarios are designed to appeal to the audience's pre-existing tastes and assumptions how can they result in new ways of thinking and behaving? On the other hand, constructing scenarios that try to challenge their audience's existing sensibilities, beliefs and values may have limited appeal and impact. In addition, the problem is how to have a persuasive impact within the constraints of the short film form. The report offered a blueprint for an improved campaign using films better adapted to match the ethical perspectives and aesthetic tastes of

a generation shaped by watching reality television and living in an individualistic consumer culture. The recommendations that emerged from this were focused around three core issues, namely: Individualism, Authenticity, and Parochialism. I will argue that while their suggestions may be consistent with MTV's corporate branding they are problematic in ethical and political terms for the long term effectiveness of the counter-trafficking campaign.

### **Individualism**

Future campaigns were advised to draw a clearer dividing line between trafficked women and prostitutes in general. They suggested showing the trafficked women being kidnapped to avoid any ambiguity because if the situation does not involve physical coercion it is seen as a free choice. The faux-documentary aesthetic was found unconvincing in this respect: if the woman was being filmed why was she still imprisoned? This linked to a more general sense amongst the audience that people have to take an individual responsibility for their lives with little recognition of the relevance of wider external forces or constraints. The Western European focus groups tended to believe that we live in a meritocracy and therefore it is up to us to succeed and, if we don't, then it's our own fault. Eastern Europeans were characterised as having a weary cynicism about the corrupt state and therefore, however desperate the situation, believing it is up to you to survive as best you can. These perspectives had been formed in the period after the fall of communism in 1989 and before the economic crash of 2008, the period when these young people were growing up. The free-market hegemony of this period also stoked the consumer boom, a context in which fulfilment became increasingly defined in terms of self-realisation and sensual satisfaction through the consumption of commodities and commercial services, including sexual services.

The ethical justifications used by the Western European men for buying sex requires a very clear boundary to be maintained to enable them to separate any repugnance about trafficking from their experience of buying sexual services from prostitutes, whom they regarded as free agents who chose to become prostitutes. The women's decision is motivated, many assume, by greed and a desire for 'easy money', a view that I assume is derived from the men's familiarity with the figure of the empowered sex worker who appears as a recurring character in popular film and television. Alternatively, they imagine it is a way for women to enjoy more sex, a view that is supported by their familiarity with the 'always up for it' nymphomaniac found in now widely circulated pornography.<sup>10</sup> My judgement is that these men have a vested interest in maintaining a boundary between these stereotypes of prostitutes and trafficked women so there is no need for them to feel any guilt for buying sexual services. There was some evidence that, after watching the films, they would not in future assume the girl is a willing participant, but they also acknowledged that this was counteracted by the likely circumstances of a drunken night out where rational judgement is weak and behaviour guided by the peer group.

Advocating that MTV in future accentuate this boundary in order to highlight the plight of trafficking victims does, however, work against the Swedish sponsor's preferred policy of discouraging demand for sexual services in general. But it has an easier fit with the consumerist ethos of a commercial TV company, especially one which, in MTV's case, is based on music videos that frequently include highly sexualised imagery of women for pleasurable consumption. As one respondent points out 'They play Candy Shop by 50 Cent and then they show this, it's a bit strange to me' (Female Serbia). While another complains that 'MTV promotes all the Western values that lures our girls away in the first place, it's their fault - they have no right to do this'.

For Eastern Europeans, in contrast, there is a blurred boundary between trafficked women and prostitution with many expressing the view that if girls choose to go abroad to be 'dancers' then they should know better and have brought the situation on themselves. 'Tell me, if it isn't their fault why is it always the same type of girls who get into this sort of trouble?' (Female, Romania). This goes along with a frequent reaction that 'This would never happen to me'. The majority saw no clear dividing line between trafficking and other forms of migration which might involve a mixed experience born of a desire to escape poverty, ambiguous relations with people who helped facilitate their migration, and a chance that some kind of work in the sex industry will indeed be a stepping stone to a better life even if it involves some short term suffering. Research into trafficking shows it is hard to know in advance how and when this can tip into a situation from which there is no escape.<sup>11</sup> Only a minority of the more educated, liberal respondents were willing to accept that any girl might get into trouble through no fault of their own. The majority viewed women in terms of the age-old virgin/whore dichotomy, which maps onto a division between respectable stay-at-home young women and condemnation of risk-taking adventurers in danger of becoming 'fallen women'.<sup>12</sup>

The campaigners were also advised to avoid generalised didactic messages about 'exploiters' and the 'exploited' to avoid the taint of 'political correctness' because audiences found it deeply annoying. While this might be considered to be compatible with MTV's brand identity as a multinational company this contradicts the stated aim of the EXIT Foundations which is to 'end exploitation', and evades promoting recognition of one of the root causes of trafficking, namely the responsibility we might have in the rich industrial nations for creating the unequal economic conditions and tight border controls that fuels the demand for risky forms of migration. The campaign designers had tried to get this across in *The Global Village* film by presenting Tatiana's 'parallel life' framed by Sven's statements about sweatshops, thereby locating sex work within the broader frame of the global economy and by challenging Sven's



assumption that worker exploitation only exists in the third world. But it caused confusion and scepticism as well as annoyance amongst its target audience.

The ethical issues here are extremely complex and contested, with some women's groups arguing that the 'rescue industry'<sup>13</sup> that lies behind these counter-trafficking campaigns is an attempt to restrict women's right to self-determination by constructing migrant women as victims and is motivated by a moral repugnance of the sex industry. They question the statistics on trafficking and see them as skewed by a focus on women in the sex trade that arises from a prurient interest stoked by scandalised responses to sensational imagery in the media rather than by any real concern which could be better met by legalisation and regulation of working conditions. An alternative would be to present a sex worker union perspective instead, which argues the need to regulate working conditions, rather than abolish the commercial sex trade or restrict migration routes.<sup>14</sup> This would have the added advantage of promoting a more normalised sense of women who work in the sex industry rather than the sensationalist view of them as either victims or exploiters of men. Normalisation could also help to reduce the stigmatisation highlighted in *Judgement Day*, which shows the harsh condemnation of women and girls who get involved, for whatever reason, on their return home. But this remains a highly controversial approach to the problem.

### **Authenticity**

The second key recommendation from the audience research report was for the films to take a more emotional, less rationalist approach if they were to have any impact. To enhance this emotional impact the audience wanted to see the women's suffering and pain rather than people just talking about it on screen. This is explained by the researchers as a reality TV generation wanting the authenticity of the real rather than fictional reconstruction or mediated reports. 'She talks about getting beaten but they should show her getting beaten' (Female, Romania). This perspective is linked closely to the previous recommendation. The physical violence is a means to demonstrate the degree to which the victim has been coerced and is therefore a genuine victim, as well as being a means to heighten empathy with the cruelty of their predicament through a visceral engagement with how it must feel to be in that situation. This desire to fully engage with the horror of violence extended beyond the victims and rescuers to the traffickers themselves who they found 'appalling but compelling'. Future campaigns were advised to use investigatory documentaries to uncover this underworld and to include scenes of authentic violence which are shocking and visceral. The scenarios in *Parallel Lives* occupied what seemed an unsatisfactory position between fact and fiction with reconstructions failing to convince because they were both not real nor dramatic enough to compete with the more shocking scenes found in contemporaneous fictional drama in film and television such as *Sex Traffic* which they considered to have more impact.<sup>15</sup>

Although the fictional *Sex Traffic* was scripted its authenticity was heightened by the extensive research conducted in Eastern Europe on which it was based. But the key issue here was its ability to develop audience involvement. As a four hour political thriller its generic conventions promoted a high degree of fear, violence and suspense through the audience's complex engagement with multiple characters and story arcs. Neither the documentary *Inhuman Traffic* nor the short films in *Parallel Lives* were able to engage audiences at this emotional pitch. The quasi-documentary use of direct address by the celebrities and the brevity of the filmed scenarios worked to reduce the degree of audience identification with the dramatised characters. This style was designed to work with the MTV aesthetic of quick cutting music video which is not suited to depth of engagement. But it is a style that allows for the kind of visceral shock tactics that some public health campaigns have used in the past to gain visibility and impact. The researchers cite possible examples to emulate from drug overdose, drink driving and anti smoking campaigns. In this approach the problem is how to do this without contravening the restrictions on sexually violent imagery that govern what can be shown on television. It also risks heightening an ethically questionable sensationalist aesthetic commonly found in news reports on this topic, which has been argued to pander to a voyeuristic enjoyment of sexual coercion and militate against engagement with the issue on a political level.<sup>16</sup>

Authenticity was also identified as a problem in relation to the use of celebrity endorsements. Future campaigns were advised to use celebrities only if they have a credible interest in the issues – in response to what they called the '*Brass Eye* effect' that refers to the TV satire by Chris Morris which exposed the willingness of public figures to say whatever they were asked to, even when it was nonsensical. Respondents commented that they found the celebrities' contributions to the EXIT films gratuitous, stilted and patronising. Angelina Jolie was an exception whose international fame and beauty gave her a heightened appeal alongside a sense that she could be genuinely involved in campaigning on this issue given her reputation for charitable work with children in Africa. The use of celebrities is highly compatible with the MTV brand especially those in the music business. But their use raises other more general ethical and political issues. When celebrity advocacy highlights single issue campaigns in a brief spurt of publicity whose short-lived visibility gives the impression that something is being done to alleviate the problem, the longer term political effort required to really make a difference remains obscured from view. Any lasting effects are unlikely to follow from these 'feel good' celebrity interventions.<sup>17</sup> This problem points to a conflict of interest between different stakeholders in this campaign. Short term media publicity is good for fund-raising by NGOs engaged in trafficking prevention, but its simplified messages can undermine their other advocacy work with politicians to change legislation or the longer term political goal of transforming gender and global inequality.<sup>18</sup>

### **Parochialism**

The international 'feel' and pan-European approach taken by the campaign was also a problem for many in the researched audience. The report explained this as the sheer abundance of media making selectivity essential, with trafficking easily dismissed as a problem that happens elsewhere, or if closer to home, not something we can safely do anything about. Their advice for the future was to customise campaigns for local markets by using live events instead of television to disseminate detailed information about how the problem relates to the region and by giving clear advice on what can be done to help and how to go about it. There was little evidence in the people researched of a cosmopolitan sensibility embracing a global sense of connection between peoples across national borders which is the ideal to which many activists and political and cultural theorists aspire.<sup>19</sup>

The problem again with this advice is that seeking to fit the campaign to peoples' existing attitudes runs the risk of reinforcing people's lack of interest in global inequality rather than seeking to change it. By contrast Lillie Chouliarki's critical work in *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006) seeks to identify different approaches used in television news films about 'distant suffering' and to advocate how certain kinds of aesthetic techniques can help to promote a cosmopolitan sensibility, that is to say, to engage with suffering in ways that enable connections to be made across cultural and geographical divisions. In a short news format of two or three minutes the same problems faced by MTV's film producers have to be overcome. She argues that encouraging people to understand and care about events that have no direct connection to the personal worlds they inhabit can only be fully achieved through a combination of abstract analysis of the causes, showing the emotional impact on the victims, and mediating it through our 'proxies' such as NGOs working in the field who are shown trying to actively intervene to improve the situation. She rightly warns against the temptations of voyeuristic consumption at a distance of the visceral spectacle of suffering or easily won empathy with 'people like us', neither of which are likely to help change the political inequalities that perpetuate suffering.

The ethical challenge is how to connect to people outside our own geographical community, which recognises that 'neighbourhood is a practice rather than a locality' as Terry Eagleton argues in *Trouble with Strangers* (2009, p 319). It requires that we feel some direct responsibility for distant others while also recognising the difficulty this poses unless the problem is brought home in some way. This is the ethics that was attempted, but failed to convince, in *Parallel Lives*. To promote a cosmopolitan ethic they used a metaphor of consumerism to connect to the cultural experiences of their audience who are conceived as members of a global market. The problem with this approach is that it equates the motives for

human action with consumer choice which then excludes other ways of understanding human behaviour. For example, the analogy used in the *Right Choice* between choosing a mobile phone and deciding whether to go to Germany to work is flawed because it lacks precision. The film meant to suggest that if you take this much trouble over buying a phone then surely you should spend at least as much effort on finding out about a job before you travel. But this over-simplifies the complex reasons women have for deciding to migrate which are not reducible to consumerism. The women are workers in a service industry and it is their weak position in the job market that drives their behaviour rather than any meaningful comparison to consumers making choices. This use of consumerist analogy is also problematic in *The Global Village*. In an attempt to suggest that men should be as aware of the ethical relations they have with prostitutes as they are with the origins of their morning cup of coffee Sven tells us: 'By choosing your product as a consumer then you can help individually to make a huge difference to countries like Nicaragua etc.' Does comparing our ethical relation to Tatiana with a 'fair trade' response to sweat shop exploitation imply approval for Sven's fellow citizens buying sex with prostitutes as long as they ask to see her 'fair trade' label first? In my view this rhetoric reinforces the view of women as commodities instead of offering a critique. It also contravenes the Swedish sponsor's opposition to prostitution in any form. These examples show that if the aesthetic approach is not sufficiently skilful then the use of ethical scenarios can obscure and distort the moral issues because of the unintended meanings that can arise in the interpretation of metaphor.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Aesthetic choices are a performative ethics which, when used well, can elicit our moral attention, enhance our empathy with others and thereby improve our ability to make more finely judged moral choices in our everyday lives. Moral knowledge is not simply an intellectual grasp of propositions but is perception – taking in what is there with imagination and feeling. Nuance and fine detail of tone are everything, argues Martha Nussbaum (2004) writing about the role of literature in our moral education. This also applies to the more prosaic world of these media campaigns and is recognised in the audience's demand for greater authenticity, their dislike of overly rational approaches, their desire for emotional empathy, and their difficulty in extracting the intended moral message from ambivalent metaphoric and ironic scenarios.

Yet this case study highlights the difficulties faced by charitable organisations when using the results of any audience research they undertake on the effectiveness of their media campaigns. Audience research based on marketing principles might be unproblematic for advertisers selling commercial products and services – they only want to change consumer buying patterns not the suffering caused by global inequality. If the MTV Foundation were to follow all of the advice given on how to connect with audiences whose ethical and political

commitments have been shaped within an individualistic, media saturated, capitalist culture, they would risk reinforcing the positioning of women's bodies as consumable products in a pleasure oriented service economy - thereby accentuating the objectification on which sexual exploitation depends. They would also sensationalise the violence that victims suffer in ways that feed the already familiar voyeuristic enjoyment of images of women's sexual subjection to male power. Using violent imagery of women being kidnapped and beaten into sexual slavery could thereby risk further normalisation of the practices the campaigners are seeking to prevent.<sup>21</sup> If they are to be effective in the longer term charitable attempts to change the world for the better require an ethical approach to media campaigns that recognises their political dimension and the shift in values that these changes require.<sup>22</sup> Measuring the short term emotional impact on the target audience needs to be weighed against these larger ethical and political considerations to avoid the resulting films becoming too individualised, emotive and parochial, a mirror image of their audience's 'unreconstructed' selves.

### **Coda**

This is why MTV's partnership with their sponsors and NGOs working in the field, who are closely involved in advocacy for political change to alleviate human trafficking, is a significant additional factor in its developing campaign strategy. When in 2009 EXIT expanded its campaign into Asia and the Pacific in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), they listened to advice from the International Labour Organisation who were keen to broaden the issue to include not only forced prostitution but also other problematic areas of labour trafficking prevalent in the region – such as forced domestic servitude and children enslaved into exploitative factory work. The shift helped reduce the sensationalist emphasis on 'sex slaves' but also helped solve a political difficulty for EXIT with its sponsors, USAID. According to Simon Goff, in my second interview with him in 2009, while the focus remained on the sex industry they risked being caught up in the hostile conflict between 'ultra-feminist and Christian groups' who had 'high-jacked the issue' by mixing it with debates over the legitimacy of prostitution in general. This remains a highly sensitive topic for their sponsors who are funded through the US State Department. These political considerations were as influential as the audience research recommendations in the design of the Asian campaign.

The enhanced funding available from USAID in comparison with SIDA also opened up new possibilities for a more diverse range of films to be produced with very different purposes and audiences in mind. The films for the Asian campaign range from ones which are very similar to those made in Europe – an awareness raising twenty minute documentary called *Traffic* using the same structure as the European version, and a series of short films that further developed the ironic montage approach used in *Parallel Lives* - to a new approach using

drama in a manga-style Korean animation and a full length Indian fictional feature film which are both still in production at the time of writing.

Advice from the European audience research report to increase the emphasis on the impossibility of escape for trafficking victims and to show the violence involved was initially followed in *Traffic* by including a reconstructed rape scene. But this was then tempered by the very different cultural and political context for the film's distribution; it had to be cut substantially in response to regional censors, although blurred images remain to suggest this is happening. Similarly, the advice to avoid being didactic was offset by the use of an expository voice-over which was used to meet the need to take regional cultural differences into account in a very large and diverse area through dubbing the films into different languages using locally-known celebrities. Trying to reconcile parochial concerns within a more wide-ranging campaign also informed the decision to use a Korean animation. It is an experiment to find an affordable way to make a drama whose abstract two-dimensional world would travel across the whole region from China to Australia rather than having to film in lots of different locations.

To overcome the luke-warm reaction to the original *Parallel Lives* series the subsequent short films were focus group tested in advance and only the most effective went into production. For a better fit with the MTV brand their tone became less earnest, using stark incongruous contrasts to comic, rather than tragic, ironic effect. *Truth*, for example, contrasts an upbeat, smiling live-action scene showing a woman being interviewed for a desirable job abroad with the spoken dialogue revealing the truth of the situation that she is being conned. But the new short film that has had the most global impact relies on ironic pathos. *All I Need*, titled from its Radiohead soundtrack, offers a split-screen view of the parallel lives of a white child going to school in the west and an Asian child making shoes in a sweat shop factory. It makes a direct supply-line connection instead of the more obscure metaphorical approach of *The Global Village*. The aesthetic skill of its execution lies in the smooth, matching camera work and tightly scripted editing which create visual parallels that intensify the contrast in lifestyles. The emotional impact is heightened by the focus on children while avoiding sentimentality in its restrained use of close ups on their faces. Authenticity is enhanced by Radiohead's ethical credibility and the haunting melancholy of the music. The strap line at the end that 'Some things cost more than you think', implicates us all in the injustices of global capitalism while remaining understated. However, as posters on YouTube have been quick to point out, it tells a familiar tale where the ethics of intervention are still expressed in individualistic consumerist terms, thereby minimising its political challenge.<sup>23</sup>

### **Biographical Note**

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Rutvica Andrijasevic 'Beautiful Dead Bodies', 2007 and Heather Nunn, 'Emotional Death', 2004.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Laura Agustin, *Sex at the Margins*, 2007 and Jo Doezema, 'Loose women or lost women', 1999.

<sup>3</sup> All the films made for the campaign can be found on the MTV Foundation website for the EXIT campaign online at [www.mtvexit.org](http://www.mtvexit.org).

<sup>4</sup> The audience research was commissioned by the MTV Foundation and conducted by commercial market research companies across five countries in 2005: London and Birmingham in the UK (Murmer), Milan and Catania in Italy (Baba), Moscow, Voronezh, Liepensk in Russia (Marten Board), Belgrade, Novi Sad, Cacak, Nis in Serbia (Mercury Research), Bucharest, Timisoara and Pascani in Romania (Masmi).

<sup>5</sup> On women's experiences of trafficking in Europe see, for example, Jeroen Doomernik, 'The Globalisation, Migration and Trafficking Nexus: European Outcomes', 2006, and Laura Augustin, *Sex at the Margins*, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Recorded interview with the author at MTV in London, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> *Traffic in Souls*, the first Hollywood feature film addressing this social problem in 1915 used a very similar strategy of comparing two sisters one who is fooled into being captured by traffickers, the other who is more sensible and whose good judgment is used to help free her sister. See Janet Staiger's analysis of this film's regulatory narrative structure in her chapter on 'The White Slave', in *Bad Women*, 1995, pp. 116-146.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase 'unreconstructed' was used by the researchers to describe in shorthand those western European men who were selected to take part in the focus groups for this film screening on the basis of their tolerant attitudes to the sex industry and as potential customers. These men were also more likely to be categorised in the lower socio-economic bands of C and D and to be less educated than the men who had held feminist influenced critical perspectives on the sex industry.

<sup>9</sup> See my previously published work on this issue in 'Sex Workers Incorporated', in Joanna Hollows and Rachel Moseley (eds.), *Feminism in Popular Culture*. Berg: Oxford and New York, 2006, pp.119-139.

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<sup>10</sup> See my research on the sex industry in popular media culture in *Television and Sexuality*, 2004. Also see other studies of the 'pornification' of mainstream culture in Feona Attwood (ed.), *Mainstreaming Sex*, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> See ethnographic evidence for this in Laura Agustin, *Sex at the Margins*, 2007 and Van Den Ankar and Doornik, *Trafficking and Women's Rights*, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the parallels in Linda Nead's research on the representations of the fallen woman in the Victorian period in her *Myths of Sexuality*, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> A phrase used by Laura Agustin, 2007, to argue its benefit to the professionals who work in it rather than the people it targets as 'victims to be rescued'.

<sup>14</sup> A special issue of *Feminist Review* in 2001 includes contributions from sex worker unions putting forward this viewpoint.

<sup>15</sup> *Sex Traffic* was produced by Kudos Films for Channel 4 where it was broadcast in 2004 but was subsequently distributed globally on television and on DVD. Several NGO counter-trafficking campaigns used its impact to help in their fund raising and political advocacy.

<sup>16</sup> For television news see 'Documenting the Sex Industry' in Jane Arthurs 2004, and for the press a study on the reporting of child trafficking for the NGO Terres des Hommes by Zsofia Farkes, 2009.

<sup>17</sup> A recent example is the *Make Poverty History* campaign led by celebrity philanthropists Bono and Bob Geldorf which attempted to create global solidarity in support of this ambitious aim. Kate Nash's assessment of its failure to have a long term impact in 'Global Citizenship as show business', 2008, is because: 'the feeling for the suffering of distant people, which the campaign undoubtedly did achieve, degenerated from a collective understanding of 'our' moral obligation to do something to alleviate that suffering into narcissistic sentimentalism'.

<sup>18</sup> This problem was identified by Amnesty International's Tracy Ulltveit-Moe in a paper at *The Media and Children's Rights* conference at the Institute of Education in April 2009.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Chretien Van den Ankar 2006, Rosie Braidotti 2006, Lilie Chouliaraki 2006, Terry Eagleton 2009, Kate Nash 2008.

<sup>20</sup> For discussion of the philosophical issues that arise in the use of ethical scenarios see Onora O'Neill, 'The power of example', *Philosophy*, 61, 1986, pp. 5-29.

<sup>21</sup> That we live in a culture already saturated by film and television imagery of women being raped is demonstrated by Sarah Projanski in her *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*, where she argues that this works to normalise sexual violence against women.

<sup>22</sup> Terry Eagleton (2009: 316-326) argues that it is this division between the ethical and the political that should be challenged because it enables ethics to become over-individualised. For instance, whereas the promotion of individualistic consumer values by commercial companies is regarded as apolitical, anything that challenges this ideological norm is often labelled as political and subject to broadcasting restrictions even whereas the majority opinion

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might consider it an ethical, human rights issue. It is also worth noting that he also argues that we do not have to relate to distant others with full imaginative and emotional intensity in order to lobby for better policies to protect their well being (p. 318) thereby supporting the role for rational arguments in pursuing social justice against the current emphasis on empathic connection. Sara Ahmed's book on *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* also explores this debate in some detail.

<sup>23</sup> Posted responses to MTV's *All I Need* can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdrcalO5BDs>.