

Relational Thinking and Migrancy: Subjective Displacements and the Politics of Social Space

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Introduction

A Migrant Politics could mean a displacement of the figure of the migrant. In this displacement, a re-ordering of both social space and the discourses that fix those within it comprise politics. This is the thesis the essay explores by relating a recent articulation of politics to a reading of a film. Jacques Rancière (1999) has argued that politics is not the domain where the justness of a society is established through the calculation of the worth of each of its parts. Rather, he claims that politics happens where the orderly arrangement of social space in its constituent parts is displaced through the exposure of a wrong. This wrong is produced through the relational emergence of subjectivity which articulates a contentious equality and stakes a claim to what is common. In Marc Isaacs' *Calais: The Last Border* (2003), the demarcation of Inside and Outside that the term "border" establishes is displaced. In this displacement, the figure of the migrant emerges as a multifaceted and constantly changing relational subject-information. Through sound and image, such a figuration of migrant subjectivity is contentious, to the extent that it violates borders between those who seemingly possess "rights" as residents of Calais, and those in limbo with neither the security of residence or the rights of citizens. It is this relation between an argument about what constitutes politics and how

the film produces migrant subjectivity and dissensual social space that the essay will explore.

Politics, argues Rancière, is essentially a displacement of the location of the different groups that comprise community. Referring to Plato and Aristotle, he argues that the justness of community was based on the non-conflictual allocation of different parts (oligarchs, aristocrats, the demos) to their proper positions within a whole (Rancière 2003, 3-34). But this notion of a just community, the object of political philosophy, cannot do away a basic contradiction that is the basis of thinking community. The contradiction is triggered by the lack of agreement on what constitutes the right basis to judge the worth of each group. Instead of consensus, it is the rationality of disagreement which is the basis of politics (Rancière 1999, xii). For example, the virtue of the *aristoi* is secured from wealth accumulated through injury to the people, yet masked over by a seemingly natural property (virtue and wisdom) that they are presumed to possess. The wrong – tort – that lies at the basis of the supposedly divine (Plato) or natural, properties of groups disrupts, and divides social space from within.

This internal division based on the absence of any *arkhe*, any basis, for fixing the quality of a community and the worth of its parts is exposed through a counter-articulation of community by subjects who articulate a wrong. These subjects do not emerge fully-formed (Rancière's example is the complex articulation of the category of class in Marx) but are formed through their emergence when they articulate a wrong. The relation to the "problem" of migrants, particularly so-called illegals, is instructive here. Dominant social and political discourse in the post Cold War world reduces politics to the smooth functioning of the organs of state bureaucracy and capitalist efficiency. Servicing the market and ensuring smooth government, these imperatives of consensual democracy erase the existence of injustice that forms the basis of just society. Here the figure of the migrant, and in particular

the immigrant in all its forms, from the legal to the illegal, becomes relevant. The upsurge in racist mobilization, not simply in civil society but more importantly, in the party programmes of established political organizations demonstrates that the “uncivilized” immigrant and the illegal, in particular, emerge as that disturbance which interrupts consensual and technocratic democracy, which Ranciere terms the “police”. Under such a police regime, the migrant becomes a complex cipher whose coding by different political discourses, brings to light the vacuity of claims that society is just. I say “coding” here because within the established police discourse, the migrant gets framed as the suspect Other, especially when poor, uneducated or of a Muslim cultural background. The migrant, post Sep. 11 2001, is also coded strongly in religious terms, as if the complexity of what religion (in this case “Islam” is) is self-evident, and that too, for those with little or no knowledge of it. The fixing of the migrant, particularly the “unwanted” one, is an example of this division of the community into Inside and Outside. The wrong which is masked over in discussions of a just community can be revealed through establishing a relationality between a purported Other, outside the desired community and yet in it, and the member of the community.

It is in this context, the recoding of the migrant through the exposure of injustice becomes a politics, in Rancière’s terms. For such a recoding not only alters the terms through which migrant subjectivity is stabilized by the police regime, but could articulate the question of freedom and justice, in a manner which disrupts, and displaces the division between Us and Them which undergirds much contemporary xenophobia. Further, one form of such a recoding of the migrant could be through establishing a relationality with others, and producing a counter-discourse of community to that of the “just” community of the police regime. It is precisely this relationality that I will focus on in the reading of *Calais*. Migrant subjectivity is produced in the film, as the

emergence of a relationality between individuals which disturbs the apportionment of Self and Other, Inside and Outside, which a border puts into place. The migrant then, is neither a sociological category or a human essence, with a specific place, and a specific value attributed to it, within the sum worth of a just community. Rather, this subjectivity emerges through the articulation of a wrong that establishes a commonality through relation, with others not supposedly sharing either its position or qualities (uncivilized, backward, violent) within a discourse of the police regime.

Displacement, Migrancy

Marc Isaacs' *Calais: The Last Border*, produced in 2003, is the end-product of a desire on the film-maker's part to focus on those interred in the Sangatte refugee camp. However, by the time he finally made it to the city himself, the camp had been dissolved after much rancour between the French and British governments, with the latter in particular seeing the camp as a jumping-off point for Dover. The filming of the internment camp became a broader issue of the place of differentiated migrancy. The film focuses on a number of people, whose status is increasingly brought into question by the relations the film sets up between them. Are they inhabitants or visitors in transit? Refugees or unwanted illegals? Ijaz is a refugee from Kabul, whose desire to enter Britain is interrupted by internment in Calais. The film also focuses on Tulia, for whom Calais is not a place of transit, either for the U.K. (her 'homeland' – more on that later) or for the continent: it is indeed home and she and her husband Les are willing residents there. Steve, also an Englishman and fellow resident of Calais, has also set up home here with his young French partner and their child, and runs a bar in the city, though his hopes for financial success do not match the social comfort the couple have found relative to their experiences in narrow-minded England. For Steve, Calais is a home which has not welcomed him from England as he hoped it might. The film

pivots on these three characters. Peter, the Jamaican caught between deportation and arrival in a home that has just debarred him (two days before which Jamaicans did not need visas for the U.K.), and a bunch of 'unwanted' migrants who hang out on a bench by a roadside petrol station, together form the fourth focus of the film. The film also includes the regular British bus visitors to Calais, there to shop for cheap alcohol and cigarettes, and it is they who provide the sharpest perspective on the migrants of Calais, given their position as successful travellers, armed with the right papers, who are able to cross the border back and forth at will,

The relationship between the individuals in the film, and the relationship between word and image constructs a multi-dimensional picture of the migrant – with different histories and different reasons for migrancy or for settling down. They also establish changing inter-subjective relations between film-maker, the individual on-screen, and audience, and thus disturb any proper distinction between Us and Them, society and its others. The Other gets pluralized, where different histories are connected without being collapsed into a singular figure of migrancy. As a result, the issues they struggle with become understandable to us in the audience through a relationality of word to image set up by the film in all their plurality. The relationality which sets up a displacement between the individuals is complex. Relationality sets up a commonality without erasing difference. The particular experiences of each individual in the film disturbs an insider-outsider distinction by showing up the common experiences, needs and desires they share, without collapsing their particular subject positions onto each other. In this sense, the exposure of wrong, in each of their life experiences, displaces social space through this exposure of a commonality *with difference*. The relationality thus created is central to how their subjectivities can be understood, as not fixed, but fluid, depending on the connections created.

The process of displacement at the level of diegetic content, but also filmic practice, is evident throughout the film where just such a relationality that disturbs social space is created. An example: the film-maker, Marc Isaacs, follows Tulia, her husband Les and their son to an ophthalmologist, where the latter is being examined. Isaacs, off-camera (he remains invisible though audible throughout the film), asks her "Do you want lots of money?" The film has been following Tulia around prior to this as she tries to make a living through many schemes, including acting as a go-between for British visitors to Calais, looking for cheap and fast medical care across the border. "Oh, it's rather nice to have...the problem is when you haven't got it...when you have it you are independent", she answers, with a nervous laugh which accompanies every moment in the film when Isaacs asks her about her financial situation. When Les breaks in that they have not had a holiday in 13 years with a closing "...been a bit much", his understated emphasis is immediately responded to by an affectionate riposte from Tulia, addressed to him with a vigorous nodding of her head. "But we try to make our *life* a holiday". Talking about the sea-front apartment they share that overlooks the grey, tree-less coast, she goes on "We pretend we're on holiday...it's only the palm trees missing", again with an embarrassed yet bravado-tinged laugh. The next shot is of the grey, stormy coast, registered by the crashing waves and the wind buffeting the boom of the camera as it records the scene she is talking about. However, it is Ijaz, not Tulia, who comes into view. The spatial shift from waiting room and talk of the coast which is only a make-believe holiday space, is translated from the literal sea and holiday to the visualization of the words. But this visualization turns the meaning of the words around. For Ijaz, the sea is not an object of contemplation but a barrier he wishes he could cross – "I would like to find a little boat I could drive myself" he tells Isaacs, after the latter has been trying to make conversation about the cliffs barely visible on the other side of the water.

“Very dangerous”, murmurs the film-maker to which Ijaz replies “Yes, it is very dangerous, but what can I do? I want to go to England...maybe too much danger for my life but...” the segment ends mid-sentence.

The transfer from word to image is a translation, at the level of film-form. Yet at the level of meaning, the word is not the vehicle to an image which matches it. The sea for Tulia is a make-believe element of a game of making life a holiday, in her attempt to cheer up her silent, unhappy husband. This bravado, which recurs throughout the film, and only underlines the precariousness of her position, is matched by an open desperation on Ijaz’s part when word becomes image. The sea for him can never be a holiday, make-believe or not; rather, it is an obstacle, which he dreams he can cross with a “little boat” in his desperation to get to England, “only one place in the world I can be given a safe life, I think. Its name is England.” From the entrance to the Chunnel on land, to the shots of the sea, the departure points in Calais cut through individual segments of the film. Or rather, these shots cut and join, cutting the previous segments and joining them to the next. As visualizations of transfer points, accompanied by silence, on-screen background noise, the playful jerky sounds of an accordion playing, they often reconfigure one person’s loss as the other’s hoped for gain, and yet another’s escape. The escape, the arrival and the loss are often different: the homes they conjure up through spoken word are alternately Kabul, Calais, England, Maidstone, depending on who is doing the talking.

The connection between word and image, made in the film, sets up a relationship between Tulia and Ijaz, who never meet in real life. The viewer’s meaning-making of Tulia’s framing of the beach as holiday is framed retroactively through Ijaz’s experience of it as a barrier to home. This framing, produced through the relationality enacted by the work of sound and image, begins to break down any expected desire on the viewer’s part to sequester each individual in the

film within a border (Calais) of inside and outside. By networking the experiences of each individual on-screen, the experience off-screen for the viewer becomes one of multiple framings and inter-twined relations. The migrant, as the asylum-seeker in Sangatte, breaks down, or rather, disperses across the voices, and experiences of the different individuals. It is in this sense, that migrant subjectivity gets complicated and cannot be thought of in simplistic binarisms. The film produces a relationality between historically-specific experiences of each individual.

History comes to play an important role in developing this relationality. For, if the word “sea” sets Tulia and Ijaz into relation, it exposes their different positions within the legal and social space of Calais. However, as the film continues, the historical experience of enforced separation, war and death, bring Tulia and Ijaz together. Or rather, the film brings them both together, not in difference, but in sharing something in common, which is the loss of a mother

Midway through the film, in conversation with Isaacs, she responds to a question by saying “the white cliffs of Dover brings back good memories, but also sad memories.” This contradiction marks an important transition in Tulia’s development in the film. She recounts being interred at age nine in a camp in Spain during the Second World War, and her escape and attempt to find the mother from whom she had been forcibly separated. She is caught again, and never finds her mother. By now, the laughter (both hers and ours) has gone. At this point, the camera suddenly cuts to seagulls wheeling over the grey beach at Calais as Ijaz stands on the sand, not speaking. Isaacs asks Ijaz what his mother looks like, and if he has a photograph of her. But he has lost her in Kabul, and her image – the only photograph he tells us he had of her – on the way to Calais. The earlier contradiction between word and image from Tulia to Ijaz is now an overlap, or a jump-cut that isn’t quite a jump in terms of content, but in space and time. Unlike the word ‘beach’ which had a visual reference,

the word 'mother' has no image for Tulia, Isaacs, Ijaz or us. Isaacs, I suspect, is pulling a painful trick on us, for Tulia's appearance, which had provoked laughter earlier on, is now received in an uncomfortable silence – a silence marked by sadness, but also by embarrassment: sadness at hearing of her past, and embarrassment at our own past attitude to her. The film, while productively establishing overlaps and constructing contradictions, also sets up a shifting relationship between those on screen, the film-maker off-screen, and the audience. This shifting relationship, through time, between viewer, subject and film-maker, is accompanied, as elaborated above, by another form of setting-into-relation of word and image: the white cliffs of Dover accruing different meanings for Tulia and Ijaz, meanings that do not coincide.

In the above two extracts we see a configuring of Calais as a space. Its borders are drawn by the same points (the beach, the tunnel, the street, the home) each of which are rendered audible, visible or both. The meaning of these points changes depending on the perspective of those who are speaking, as well as by the film-maker's intervention in threading often incommensurable images to words. Crucially, the film itself draws the lines between these points, using word and image to lead from one place to the other.

In setting up a relation, not of difference (as around the word "beach") but of commonality (around the word "mother"), the particular subject-positions, and experiences of Ijaz and Tulia intersect. The word "mother", for which no image exists either in the film (for the viewer) or for Tulia and Ijaz, in their own lives, touches on an experience, which binds them, and by implication all of us, whether on this or that side of whichever border we inhabit. If one of the functions of a just society is to guarantee the safety and life of its members, then separation and death through war shows up an injustice. This injustice – separation in an internment camp for Tulia, death by a missile attack for Ijaz – exposes the power-lines that divide a supposedly consensually-based society. It also sets up

a commonality between Tulia and Ijaz that crosses the border of legal residency (Tulia as an EU citizen) and the legal limbo of Ijaz the asylum-seeker rejected by both France and the U.K.

The relationality set up between them by the film's coordination of sound and image develops in two ways: initially, by bringing them together and exposing a difference ("the sea'), and later by underlining the commonality they share – a missing, dead mother. Two conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, if the audience desired to see in the film, a portrayal of "the migrant in Sangatte", it instead must re-orient this expectation of a certain stable figure and demographic category, by following the multiple reframings of the experiences of the individuals in the film. Subjectivity is destabilized, inter-related and made historically-specific. Secondly, by relating these individuals through their experiences, the social space between Us (good, civilized legal residents of a territory) and Them (unwanted, morally-suspect asylum-seeking migrants) gets displaced. If the injustice of war (and the consequent forced separation of mother from child) is experienced by both Tulia and Ijaz, the validity of thinking the border as an absolute line of separation between the resident and the migrant breaks down. By crossing the border, the film exposes a wrong which exposes the lie of justice and the vacuity of superior claims of civilized versus barbarians.

Conclusion

The stabilization of the figure of the migrant makes the ascription of a moral character easier within political discourse. In the present historical situation, this political discourse characterizes the migrant (except the global wealthy cosmopolite) as unwanted: morally corrupt, civilizationally backward, culturally ignorant, criminally-oriented). The need to displace the stabilization of the meaning of the term "migrant" is not primarily motivated by this political discourse (which is nevertheless objectionable). Rather, it is

the reality of the intersecting concerns and common experiences, denied by a xenophobic discourse of Us and Them, between residents and migrants, autochthonous and allochthonous populations which necessitates a displacement of the figure of the migrant. In Rancière's terms, the migrant emerges through the articulation of a wrong and the setting up of a relationality within an already-defined social space. In the process, the social space itself gets displaced, exposing the fictitious basis that claims to found a just and consensual-based community.

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