

The Infinitely Complex Ropeskiipping Existence

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Borders, Ropeskiipping

The asylum system is designed as a definite manifestation of the compassionate principle according to which states grant refuge to those escaping violence, persecution, and tyranny. Refugees flee a great variety of persecutions and risks, and, as the UN Refugee Agency write, "If other countries do not let them in, and do not help them once they are in, then they may be condemning them to death – or to an intolerable life in the shadows, without sustenance and without rights."¹ The decision to grant asylum establishes a person's status as a refugee and their definite right to protection – those seeking this status are even more vulnerable than refugees. This precarious life, which Hannah Arendt termed "the infinitely complex red-tape existence", is therefore not merely a bureaucratic entanglement but a concrete exposure to danger.² Isabel Lima's *Double Dutch* represents this intricate precariousness through its ropeskiipping game; however, at the same time as it articulates a penetrating critique of the system that manages this vulnerability, it presents audiences with startlingly inclusive compassions.

The principle of asylum is fraught with complex political tensions, as it involves elaborate and difficult negotiations of statelessness, citizenship, human rights, and the permeability of the boundaries of nations. The obligations of states towards those of uncertain status who seek asylum, and the anxieties these obligations invoke – the spectre of asylum fraud, for instance, expresses the fear that asylum claims can be used as a screen for illegal access to the nation – generate tensions which in turn lead the asylum system to operate as a further border: the system that offers refuge is often experienced by those involved as an opaque network of exclusionary bureaucracy. In its critique of this exhausting ropeskiipping

¹ UN Refugee Agency, "Refugees: Flowing Across Borders", available at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c125.html> (accessed 12/03/2014).

² Hannah Arendt, "Letter to Karl Jaspers (1946)", in *The Portable Hannah Arendt* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 25.

existence, *Double Dutch* reveals the ethical barrier – the failure of compassion – at the heart of a system which is designed to make concrete a compassionate principle.

Due to the discourses of risk, embedded mistrust, and potential contagion that surround the non-Western, asylum itself is increasingly embedded in not only the debates around terrorism, public health, or (absurdly) risks to employment but also the procedures and practices of securitisation. Historian Greg Bankoff writes:

Disease, poverty, and hazard are not so much stages in the development of Western discourse about non-Western areas of the globe as strands in which one aspect of risk is emphasised more than another though all remain present at any time.³

Western encounters with non-Western regions and people are often understood in terms of a fundamentally dangerous exposure to incomprehensible otherness; as is well-known, the alterity of the unfamiliar is translated into the appearance of threat by the scaremongering discourses of far-right groups such as Britain First and mainstream media outlets such as the Daily Mail, but broader societal discourses about otherness and difference are involved in this process. Even though refugees (and those seeking to be recognised as refugees) are by definition completely vulnerable – the embodiment of the principle of political vulnerability and precariousness – they are often perceived as a risk towards the state that protects them from harm. Although they are fleeing danger, refugees are made to represent an encroachment of that danger on a safe space: entrance and protection thus function as frontiers saturated with exclusionary potential.

These tensions are the territory on which *Double Dutch* operates. It articulates this familiar critique of the border and yet, through its visual doubling, it modifies and complicates it. Placing stress on the definite effects of the system – sustained physical exhaustion, applicants giving up, the inability of children to win the game – the work examines the relationship between bureaucratic systematicity and individual participation and culpability

³ Greg Bankoff, "Regions of Risk: Western Discourses on Terrorism and the Significance of Islam", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26:6 (2003), p. 417.

by focusing upon the roles played by individuals within rigidly structured forms of relation. For instance, one of the striking effects of *Double Dutch* is to underscore the mutually exclusive nature of the experience of each participant in the game. *Double Dutch* emphasises the simultaneity of mutually irreconcilable perspectives: the rope (the boundary) is the common factor, but the players are engaged in a fundamentally different, even opposite, activity to the handlers. Each screen reveals the experience of a participant which is comprehensible at the expense of the comprehensibility of its opposite. The central problem that this highlights is that the border problematises the fundamental human connection – the recognition of one another’s vulnerability – that forms the basis of human rights and the principle of protection.

Ethics and Human Rights: The Face

The philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas underlies much contemporary human rights discourse and practice. At the centre of his ethical thought is the face to face encounter, which he uses as a figure for the preontological recognition of the human which underlies all ethical relation. Before there is knowledge, Levinas argues, there is love: in recognising another separate being as vulnerable, which Levinas describes as the first contact it is possible to have with another being, we are initiated into a community with that person and we recognise our responsibility to act generously, compassionately, and positively with regard to that Other. To put it simply, when we recognise one other as members of the same species, we recognise our responsibility to act well toward one another. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), for instance, Levinas calls this species of contact a “moral summons,” an appeal for compassion that cannot be resisted.⁴ Further, Simon Critchley argues that Levinas’ philosophy is particularly valuable for its material dimension, its sustained emphasis on definite activity. “Levinasian ethics is a humanism, but it is a humanism of the other human being,” he writes; this ethics recognises our groundedness in real

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969 [1961]), p. 196. See also Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, in Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London & New York: Continuum, 2006 [1988]), pp. 1-10.

circumstances and it underlines the potential that this shared material experience has for generating interpersonal compassions that lead to good action.⁵

Human rights are predicated on the notions that all human beings have dignity and that this dignity is capable of being recognised as the basis for equality and for protections against persecution. However, we most often recognise the subject who deserves human rights when their dignity is withheld from them; that is, we recognise that rights need to be upheld when someone in need – refugee, prisoner, victim – is revealed to us as vulnerable. The compassionate relations that Levinas describes are at the heart of this discourse, and they are initiated when we recognise our responsibility towards the other and undertake to ameliorate the suffering we have recognised in a fellow member of the human community. Asylum channels this philosophical principle into definite supportive activity by helping to grant displaced persons refugee status – by restoring dignity to those at the limit of precariousness.

Like any bureaucratic operation, however, asylum and human rights are affected by relations of power. One incisive critique of human rights discourse is the contention that, far from operating as a universal principle, the recognition of the human that it takes as the foundation of its compassionate interventions is subject to familiar political differentials. Levinas has been critiqued by feminists for his apparent exclusion of women from ethical subjecthood,⁶ for example, and the Eurocentrism of his approach has been critiqued for positing a universal subjectivity which cannot account for or accommodate (post)colonial subjecthoods.⁷ Human rights, likewise, has been described as founded upon a discursive system which makes discriminations on which subjects can be described as deserving of rights and protections. Alain Badiou, for instance, writes that

⁵ Simon Critchley, "Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity?", in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas, and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 67.

⁶ See for instance Tina Chanter (ed.), *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), and Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Continuum, 2005 [1984]).

⁷ For a discussion of this critique, see John E. Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only if he is a *good* other – which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us*? [...] The respect for differences applies only to those differences that are reasonably consistent with [...] the identity of a wealthy – albeit visibly declining 'West'.⁸

The decision upon who can bear human rights, he argues, functions as a site of inequality in which white middle class Europeans and Americans police the boundaries of who can be meaningfully described as human at all; this is the boundary that Lima represents as a skipping rope. If all we recognise in the face of the other is a being with the potential to become a subject as constructed by classical liberal humanism, we fail to recognise otherness, we elide difference, and we fail to accommodate the other. Relations of power, which police the borders of politically permissible humanity, frustrate the potential for compassion which forms the basis of the asylum system.

Players and Handlers

Double Dutch shows that ethical contact does not guarantee, and discussions of it should never presuppose, consequent ethical conduct. In one striking shot late in *The Player*, for instance, we realise that the player is looking directly into the face of the sequence of people turning the rope. This striking moment reveals that the Levinasian ethical connection, often understood to be an instantaneous or inevitable route to ethical conduct when the vulnerability of the Other is made plain, is never automatic. The rope turners are *not* automatically concerned, they do *not* automatically witness the irreducible alterity of the Other, and they do *not* necessarily become conscious of their responsibility for the burden of the Other. In this sense *Double Dutch* articulates the critique outlined above – that the asylum system is experienced as a trial fraught with exclusionary potential.

However, the work goes beyond this limited critique. It does not permit us to conclude that those turning the ropes are securitising automatons operating as an unquestioning screen

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2012 [2001]), p. 24. Emphasis in original.

or as simple representatives of the xenophobic fears described above. The rope handlers do not straightforwardly or robotically represent the system for which they work. They may be the agents of the asylum system but they are not ciphers – their personalities and subjecthoods inflect their work. Much theoretical work on institutional conditions and bureaucracies fails to account for the experience and subjectivity of those who work on the behalf of such institutions. The Foucauldian tradition, for instance, which describes the distribution and operation of political power through institutions, has been critiqued for its teleological tendencies and its lack of emphasis on the capacity of individuals to resist power,⁹ but it is rarely critiqued for its failure to acknowledge the agency and ambivalence of the disciplining subject. *Double Dutch*, although it may seem to offer a critique of the role of asylum in securitisation, in fact goes beyond this critique and begins to address the lacuna at its heart.

The rope handlers have individual agency, compassions, and motivations, and the viewer of *Double Dutch* can observe the extent to which these factors influence, but cannot meaningfully change, the course of the game. At the same time as the metaphor of the rope game reveals the system as punitive or exclusionary, it permits viewers to recognise that those executing its systematicity – those without whom it would not be materially possible – are not to be conflated with the system. They turn the rope, but they are not the rope: they are always already potentially sympathetic too. The players may be exhausted, but it should not be presupposed that those turning the rope are disinterested (or worse, that they take pleasure in tripping up the players). The system may have the potential to produce repellent effects, but those involved retain a human character.

For instance, one of the case workers in *The Rope Handler* attempts to help the players, adjusting her rhythm to their differing levels of aptitude for the game. What this reveals is that an ethical connection is possible between the organisation and the individuals that it processes: those who work for the machine do not uncomplicatedly represent the machine.

⁹ Stephen Toth, for instance, critiques *Discipline and Punish* (1977): “Although Foucault’s analysis enlightens, it also elides, as he conflates rhetoric with administrative practice. [...] What results is a caricature of the modern prison, a vast, gray, monolithic institution, mechanically ordered and rigidly stratified through the ever-invasive panoptic gaze of professionals and staff. In this sense, all historical contingency and nuance is absent from his account.” Stephen A. Toth, *Beyond Papillon: The French Overseas Penal Colonies 1854-1952* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. xiii.

However, what the metaphor of the double dutch game underscores is that even if these people want to help, the process is designed to forestall this form of compassionate intervention. Rules are rules: the case worker is subject to disciplinary conditions at the same time as she is the agent who aims to ameliorate them. She tries to help the players but the nature of the game prevents the possibility of her compassion having definite material effects. It is clearly unacceptable for systems, discursive or material, to dehumanise people fleeing violence and to deny them access to the political realm of the human; also unhelpful, however, is the tendency of our critique to dehumanise those who participate in the operationalisation of such systems. The tendency of critique to describe such subjects as robotic agents of a deliberately exclusionary mechanism again impoverishes our understanding of the ways that the system affects real lives in definite ways. *Double Dutch* is a valuable intervention in this critique, as it provides much-needed nuance.

Levinas' ethical reflections cannot be unproblematically read through representations, and Levinas himself restricted his remarks on art to short and allusive pieces such as "The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture" in *Entre Nous* (1988).¹⁰ Nonetheless art clearly can engage with these issues in productive and illuminating ways. Lima does not channel Levinas' thought into representation; rather, she critiques the capacity for a system to channel it into definite action. *Double Dutch* reflects upon the ethics of a system – asylum – that is based upon making ethical contact with others into a definite principle of action. It reveals the ways that the structure of the asylum system complicates ethical contact, and the ways that those implicated in the system strive for it nonetheless.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, "The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture", in Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London & New York: Continuum, 2006 [1988]), pp. 154-160.