On the ethics of inclusion and the politics of cultural mediation. Sue Clayton *in conversation with* Roberta Lentini

by Roberta Lentini*

Sue Clayton, British filmmaker and full professor, has been producing and directing films for over thirty years. She is an expert in the field of cinematography, documentary and fiction directing and made numerous fiction and documentary films for the cinema and television. She has recorded and narrated, in recent years, life stories of unaccompanied immigrant children in the European territory. In the meantime, she has continued her film and television teaching profession at Goldsmiths, University of London, in the Department of Media and Communications, where she founded the "Screen School" which welcomes practising film-makers from different parts of the world. She is currently also a consultant and news stories producer for ITV, Channel 4 and the BBC. Her independent documentary *Hamedullah – The Road Home* (2012), tells the story of Hamedullah Hassany, a refugee minor who fled to the UK but at the age of eighteen was deported to Afghanistan, his country of origin. Before the departure director Clayton offered a video camera to Hamedullah in order that he could witness his new state of life and the precarious and absolute poverty conditions existing in the Afghan country. Distributed internationally, the film has helped reduce refugee expulsion at eighteen years of age in UK migrant policies. The London Independent Film Festival prize-winner (2012) was screened at more than 200 events requested by human rights activists and volunteers. It was also screened at the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva and it is regularly shown in the immigration courts as evidence that the forced

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removal of young people from the UK to Kabul is not safe, as the British Home Office claims it to be. Sue Clayton has begun creating an archive of interviews for young asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, published on the website *www.bigjourneys.org.* She works with a group of researchers funded by the ESRC, the UK's largest research organization on economic and social issues, including migration and asylum applications issues. After the national and international release of her last film *Calais Children: A Case to Answer* (2017) on the scandal of the 2000 lone refugee children abandoned after the closure of the Calais Jungle, Sue Clayton has been interviewed in national journalistic television networks including ITV, Channel 4, the BBC and Al-Jazeera, and she is regularly quoted by the British newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. Meanwhile she joined forces with human rights lawyers taking a challenge against the British Home Office, at the Royal Courts of Justice in London, to fight for the recognition of the rights of the 2000 children left abandoned at Calais and around France after the demolition of the migrant camp knows as the "Jungle". In 2016 she dealt with the same topic, together with Anna Gupta and Katie Willis, in a paper entitled *Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers Policy Response and Research Directions* (Springer Singapore 2016). In 2015, together with Laura Mulvey, she edited the book *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s* (IB Tauris 2017). In December 2018 she will publish the book *Unaccompanied Migrant Children: Identity Care and Justice* co-edited with Anna Gupta and Katie Willis (Policy Press, 2018). She also wrote a paper called *The Therapeutic use of Film and Theatre to liberate Young Refugees from Disempowering Identities* in *Liberation Practices: Towards Emotional Wellbeing Through Dialogue* (Routledge, 2014).

Professor Clayton has supervised or co-supervised a number of research PhD students in Film and Television Studies.

Film career

Sue Clayton's debut career dates back to 1979 with the feature film *The Song of the Shirt*, written and directed together with Jonathan Curling. The film, set in the nineteenth century, tells the story of women working in the clothing industry who aroused diverse public interest, inspiring poets and writers of the time, but also legislation that both protected and confined them. It was created together with more than 200 professionals including musicians, artists, historians, academics from various sectors, women's groups and trade unions. She has directed several documentaries, distributed by the British

television Channel 4, including *The Commodities Series*, *Turning Japanase*, *How to Survive Lifestyle* and *Theme Park Britons. The Last Crop* (1990) was an award-winning fictional adaptation of an Australian short story about a house cleaner who lets her neighbours into the apartment of rich people who are away so that the have-nots can enjoy the luxuries of the haves. The film starred Kerry Walker (*The Piano*) and Noah Taylor (*Flirting*, *The Year My Voice Broke*).

She has written screenplays and directed films such as *Heart Songs* (1992) and *The Disappearance of Finbar* (1997) starring Jonathan Rhys Meyers (*Match Point*, *Bend Like Beckham*) which was a hit on the Festival circuit, sold internationally and screened in 15 countries, winning several festival awards in Ireland, Sweden and Spain. Her films have been distributed globally by TV and have won international awards such as: UK BAFTA, Madrid Film Festival, Tokyo Film Festival, Midnight Sun Film Festival, New York Film Festival, Philadelphia World Film Festival, Seattle Film Festival, Palm Springs Film Festival. In 1993 she also directed the archival film, for *Channel 4*, *Dracula-The Undiscovered Country*. In 2005 she dedicated herself to the folklore of Southern Italy publishing a DVD entitled *Music and Dance of Southern Italy*. She also directed the music video *A million miles*, together with her band *The Oars*, which shows the involvement of adolescent asylum seekers in the writing and production of a song, with reflections on the way in which their voice is heard and perceived in the United Kingdom. She wrote the screenplay of the film *Nowhere to Hide* (2012), which tells the story of a young asylum seeker struggling to survive in the UK. In 2013, she was consultant producer on *Deported to Afghanistan*, another BBC documentary on the lives of young asylum seekers and their deportation to Afghanistan.

Lentini: Gino Strada, surgeon and co-founder of *EMERGENCY*, in his 2017 Sunhak Peace Prize speech, which he gives every year to mention people and organizations who have contributed to disseminating peace and human development, claimed as follows:

> Many of the conflicts that are currently ravaging countries reducing populations to misery and hunger are often undeclared or deliberately silenced. The massacres are increasing, to the point that it is hard to remember them all. For most of us, they seem so far and alien from our daily life. 'It is so easy to listen to the news without realizing that after every bomb, after every shell there are people struggling to survive […].

On the occasion of the same speech, he also claimed that:

> Even though migrants arriving in Europe represent a small portion of the migrant population scattered across the globe, the so-called 'migration crisis' has shed light on the hypocrisy of the European approach to human rights. On the one hand, we firmly promote the principles of peace, democracy and fundamental rights, while, on the other, we are building a fortress made of walls and cultural barriers, denying access and basic help to thousands of people fleeing war and poverty.

In the EMERGENCY webpage, one can read that the media can contribute to spreading the EMERGENCY activity and its campaign of solidarity. Focusing on the role of the media as the principal tool of knowledge dissemination, what is your opinion in relation to the media and the modalities by means of which they disseminate information about migration? Do you believe that the creative cultural industries are contributing to changing the perception of migration around the world? Do you feel you are part of this project?

Clayton: That's a crucial question. I have researched how the UK media generally presents migration issues. Our print press, owned by a small number of oligarchs, are in the main, notoriously hostile to humanitarian issues. A recent pan-European study (Berry, Garcia-Blanco and Moore, 2016) found that:

> The most striking finding in our research is how polarised and aggressive British press reporting was compared to the other countries. In most countries, newspapers, whether left or right, tended to report using the same sources, featured the same themes and provided similar explanations and solutions to the crisis. But in Britain the situation was very different. While the Guardian and – to a lesser extent the Daily Mirror – featured a range of humanitarian themes and sources sympathetic to the plight of refugees, the right-wing press consistently endorsed a hardline anti-refugee and migrant, 'Fortress Europe' approach.

They cite a low ratio of articles featuring humanitarian themes against a high ratio emphasising the threat that refugees pose to Britain's welfare and benefits system (*Daily Telegraph* 15.8%, *Daily Mail* 41.9%, Sun 26.2%, against an EU average of 8.9%).

As a film-maker for television, and a consultant for ITV News and Channel 4 News, I have often heard the TV audience defined in production meetings in press terms – *Daily Mail* readership shorthanded as the "Heartland" or "Middle Ground' – and stories dismissed in Commissioning as "too Guardian". So press editorials

and circulation figures are directly used to justify TV commissioning/ editorial positions and concern over audience size.

Television's reliance on press readership to estimate public opinion is thus very worrying, and used to justify views that "most people" are against refugees – without acknowledging that despite, or maybe because of, mainstream press coverage, the British public still wildly overestimate the numbers of asylum seekers in the UK and are confused about who asylum seekers are. A Refugee Council survey (2012) showed that 44% of the population believe over 100,000 people were granted refugee status in 2009, when the figure was actually closer to 4000.

So, while television broadcasters might screen the odd 'human interest' refugee drama or documentary, their main News and Current Affairs coverage is driven by this false notion of public opinion, based on private newspaper owners' so-called 'populist' views. This makes it essential that those of us working in cinema and non-broadcast media, work hard to redress this unbalance, and represent the wave of support for refugees which we identify in social media and through volunteer movements.

Lentini: British deportation is a political procedure according to which many asylum seekers in the UK alone as children are obliged to leave the country of arrival (i.e. the UK) at the age of eighteen. This implies that the deported immigrant will be plunged back into the margin. The concepts of margin and marginality that are employed in this context include all the terrifying unhuman forms of life that migrant people experience in life as a matter of fact against which they can do nothing. In your London Independent Film Festival award-winning film, *Hamedullah: The Road Home* (2012), you provided a refugee boy with a camera in order to record the conditions of life in Afghanistan when he was obliged to leave the UK and was deported back to his country of origin. The film attempted to change UK policy on the forced removal of child refugees at the age of eighteen. Hamedullah is back to Afghanistan after he spent several years in the UK. Are you still in touch with him? How has his life changed after "the road home"? Is he living in the margin? What about this politics of deportation? Is it common in the rest of Europe?

Clayton: I had really insightful correspondence with Hamedullah when he was deported back to Afghanistan – both what he wrote to me, and what he recorded that I used in the film. Hamedullah was a

Hazara and had spent his early years in the far north of the country near Mazar-e-Sharif. Under current UK immigration practice, many child refugees who have spent years in the UK are deported when they reach 18, back to countries they may scarcely remember, where they may have no living family. When Hamedullah was deported at 18 he first arrived to Kabul – a city he did not know, and not one that is supportive of his ethnic group. He wrote: "Everyone is strange to me, and I to them" (2012). He found some distant relatives in Kabul, but they rejected him because they said he must have been a criminal to have been deported back. Even when he was able to make his way to the Mazar area, he continued to feel displaced and unsure of his identity. In terms of work, he'd had enough education in the UK to want to become professionally qualified, or at least gain an office job or skilled role of some kind. But he didn't have the qualifications or family connections to make this happen. And as a rather metrosexual-looking westernised boy, he was not trusted by the closed communities of farm labourers or urban manual workers. So he stayed alone, reclusive, living in squatted rooms, on the margins of his own culture, seeing it as it were from the outside. He had no place. In his emails and video diaries he repeatedly uses phrases around 'having no place' and also says "I don't know what to be, or how to be" (*ibidem*). Thus Hamedullah was not only faced with social issues such as housing, job, and finding a community. He also faced a profound sense of loss and lack, a kind of double mourning – first for the childhood and family he lost; and second, for the young teenage self that he fought so hard to construct in the UK where he had come to feel he belonged, where he became literate and educated, and where he had learnt to dream of a future for himself. Who is he now? This is hard to say. I don't think he will ever be able to 'put himself together', to make himself one unified whole, and incorporate the contradictions of his experiences, his fractured sense of self. He tells me "I am a refugee in my own country".

As well as the UK, several other countries, including Austria, Norway and Sweden, also conduct these kinds of deportations. There were sustained protests in the UK against the monthly deportation charter flights and they have been temporarily stopped since April 2015, as it was argued by lawyers and others that many of those on the flights still had cases in progress to stay in the UK, but there was unseemly haste on the part of the UK Home Office to fill the planes, so compromising the claims of those they sought to remove.

Lentini: Activists and volunteers, artists, filmmakers, painters, citizens, and the growing number of people working and supporting the migration crisis, have enormously increased. European activists and volunteers for humanitarian causes are obstructed by law enforcement and, according to them, the consultation with local authorities is inadequate. In your opinion, is it about obstructionism, simply indifference or something else we do not know? What is your perspective on activism and collaboration with regard to the migration crisis today?

Clayton: I am very interested in the recent mobilization of what I'd call 'activist-volunteers' – people who not only provide humanitarian aid, but also work in solidarity with refugee cohorts to secure longer-term shifts in public attitudes and governmental policies towards them. It's very relevant to how I think a more collaborative and affective politics works for this decade, this generation, and my next project is a co-authored book called *The New Internationalists: Activist Volunteers in the European Refugee Crisis 2015-2019* (Goldsmiths Press, 2019). Its premise is that the activist-volunteer movement around the refugee crisis is arguably the largest civil mobilisation in Europe since the voluntary relief organisations that formed during the Second World War. From a UK perspective, there are more recent antecedents in Greenpeace, Greenham Common and Stop the City initiatives, but this new movement is considerably more wide-ranging and complex, with hundreds of groups and informal networks operating through social media and live interaction all over Europe. Individuals and groups have not only provided everything from tents, clothes, food and sleeping bags to power sources, mobile phones and credit; but have also helped build shelters, create information sites, legal support networks and means of political advocacy, as well as interventions via health, education, the arts and therapy.

This mobilisation has engaged overwhelming numbers who (contrary to suggestions of public hostility peddled by the mainstream press) have expressed empathy and solidarity with refugees. Some, attached to groups like No Borders and Stand Up to Racism, began from an ideological perspective, while many more made the leap from modest local collecting of items, to delivering with the convoys, to a more full-scale commitment which has gone on to influence their broader politics and world view.

While this initiative and its loose, improvisational organisation seemed to hugely appeal to youth typically in their teens and twenties, it

has also mobilised many older people who brought their own skills and histories to the debate, and countless specific cohorts (notable in the UK are the Jewish community, who actively recall the *Kindertransports* of the 1930s).

For the most part only too aware of their own nations' colonial legacies, and complicity in many of the wars and crises that create refugee populations, the volunteers have actively fought to avoid being cast as first-world benefactors or 'saviours', and have sought instead to work collaboratively with refugee communities. In Greece and Calais in particular, this stance has brought them into conflict with state authorities and the army and police, compromising their own citizen rights. This is where we need to consider the wider picture: the alarming rise of nationalisms in Europe; the closure of intra-European borders; the pernicious narratives that criminalise those without papers; and a restriction of the very notion of citizenship, where governments' 'hostile environment' policies create an assault not only on refugees, but also on those who offer them support and humanitarian aid.

Lentini: A few days before the dismantling of the Jungle, together with volunteers, activists and lawyers, you collected a list of names to start evaluating the legal cases of the children. You describe how a small number of minors, less than 200, were accepted for the United Kingdom, but you then show in the film how the rest – another 1750, with the exact same vulnerabilities and legal claims to UK support as those 200 – were taken back from the police checkpoint to emergency housing inside containers. There was no place for everyone and so, after the demolition, hundreds of children were dispersed, some were injured, others died while they were looking for a way to get to England without official support. Against a backdrop of dangers and risks, during your journey at the Jungle migrant camp, what have you found most significant in terms of ethics of inclusion and/or exclusion?

Clayton: My experience of working and filming in the Jungle was life-changing for me. It greatly affected my politics and my world-view. It was also a very emotionally-charged experience, as I think it is for everyone who works closely with refugees. Particularly as women, we can be made to feet that there is something weak or overly subjective about emotional and empathetic responses – as if, along centuries-old Descartian lines, emotions somehow confound and undermine rational thought and considered action. I think the politics of the

future is affective. People are stirred by empathy and compassion and should not be cowed by the rhetoric of the far-right – themselves expert at playing on emotions such as hate, jealousy and insecurity – into thinking that passionate humanitarianism is somehow a weakness or a flaw. More than anything, associating with refugees makes us see the world from outside the European bubble, and causes us to re-evaluate not just our own 'politics' in the traditional sense, but also our capacity to extend solidarity to others – to the 'other', as it is presented to us in the rhetoric of today's Europe. To empathise in this case is to identify with an entirely other world-view, and then triangulate back to one's new, and inevitably shocked and humbled, self.

So to further respond to your question, it may help to describe a little that journey I took, which I'm sure resonates with those of thousands of activist-volunteers across Europe.

When I first visited the Calais Jungle refugee camp in October 2016, I was deeply shocked – here were hundreds, even thousands of lone children and young people, living in a chaotic and dangerous camp. They were in dirty ripped tents and lean-tos, subject to violence, predators and nightly attacks from armed police. Who were they? And how could they go on surviving this crazy, transitory life? I was first reporting this issue as a consultant for ITV and Channel 4 News. But I was so shocked by what I saw, that I cancelled everything else in my life, booked into a cheap B and B in Calais, and began crowdfunding to film what was going on. Within three days I had enough funding to get a crew there. (What I did not know then, was that the UK government would go on refusing their legal liability, and so began 11 months of filming the situation develop, with the film *Calais Children: A Case to Answer* ultimately being submitted to the High Court as evidence in our legal action against the UK Home Office.)

We became very involved with the young people. Yemane from Eritrea missed his mum. Jamal, a tiny kid, was making reckless attempts at night to get onto the road to UK and had seen other kids badly injured. Sara worried that it wasn't safe for her and other girls… It's impossible to forget their stories and their faces, and I never knew if I'd even find them to talk to them the next day, let alone resolve their longer-term issues.

An emotional and ethical turning-point for me was when I visited the cemetery of Calais-Nord one grey rainy day, and saw the rows of unmarked refugee graves -graves just with numbers on them. This includes graves of young people who died trying to get on trucks and lorries just to get somewhere safe, who in almost all cases had a legal

case for UK protection. But who had been there to listen? To act? Or even to record their names? This is when I realised how arrogant it is of us in the West to talk about 'rights', as if our simply conferring words of law onto others, has the desired effect: as if a destitute child from another continent would have any clue that they have such abstract rights, varied state by state, or know what they might mean, or have the resources to prosecute them in law. Thus when we discovered that the Jungle children may all along have had the legal right to be safe in the UK, my emotions were torn between relief for this possibility for them, and incandescent rage that they were thus suffering needlessly, and may still yet become the next nameless victims of the UK/Calais border regime.

Often documentaries are dangerous to film, and this one certainly was. The CRS (French riot police) attacked the Jungle most nights with tear-gas and by charging in and using their weapons. A camp of 10,000 threatened people is not safe for anyone, whether refugees or for us as crew. In addition the French operate in a judicial framework where volunteers can be convicted of 'crimes of solidarity' (*Délit de solidarité*) for even offering food of shelter to refugees, or opposing the criminal treatment of them. Both in the Jungle and after we left it to track where the young people were sent next, at virtually every location we filmed we faced open hostility and often aggression from the CRS, the French police, the Port Authority, the UK Home Office, the French Interior Ministry and local officials. We also risked arrest and high-penalty prison charges of people-trafficking, any time we had young people with us in a vehicle, as for instance when we took them to meetings, interviews or to visit their friends in hospital. This constant subjection to physical danger and fear of criminal action against us, served to underline what a 'hostile environment' feels like – and of course we know this is only a fraction of what a refugee experiences every day.

The UK government now openly admits to working to create an environment hostile to refugees. But both they and the French government fail to understand the extent to which such a programme impinges on those with citizenship, and to the pervading values of the host country. As a French Catholic aid worker in the Calais film says "Calais has become like a prison. And many of the people who live here don't like that, they don't want it". And in the UK, teachers, doctors, landlords and others are being told by the government that they must co-operate with the state to identify and report those who may not have papers- so turning huge swathes of the UK public into generally reluctant border officials.

Lentini: International interest in the challenge in favour of the Calais children is shown by the number of public events spread around Europe, as well as by the growing number of intercultural mediators as translators and interpreters in refugee camps and reception centres. You are a film director, writer, professor and now also a committed activist who helps minor asylum seekers and refugees in Europe. Despite your thirty-year career as director and producer of films, what is it that has encouraged you to shed light on documentary films on and for refugee children? Ideological and political issues must have driven your choices, which have reinforced your strength at the point of risking your life for such a humanitarian cause.

Clayton: I became interested in this work in 2002 when a friend's 12-year-old child came back from school one day, and told how a boy had arrived at his school saying he'd walked past it very day, trying to get up the courage to knock at the door. The boy finally did – and asked for an education. When the school had asked where were his parents, he said he had none, and had come on his own from Afghanistan, and was now sleeping on the streets. That was the first time I'd heard of unaccompanied child asylum-seekers – to me, and to my friend's son, he may as well have said he'd come on his own from the moon. I was fascinated at first by how a child or young person might build a sense of self, of identity, when so removed from their family, friends and everything else that was familiar to them. I was also struck by the bravery of such a young person. I contacted the school and though them and other groups (the theatre group Project Phakama, the Tavistock and Portman therapy unit for young asylum-seekers) became involved in helping other young people like these learn to use cameras and make short films – as with generally limited English, expressing themselves audio-visually was one important way they could communicate on arrival.

However on working with these young people, I discovered how fragile was their legal status. As discussed above, I found they can be deported at 18 – and even if this does not happen, they face years of fear and uncertainty waiting for that knock at the door, as their status post-18 takes years to resolve, and when it is, often only provides a short temporary period of leave to remain. This precarity contributes to many young people in Europe remaining (as Hamedullah does back in Afghanistan) in a kind of crisis where they cannot reconcile their histories and identities. They cannot integrate, nor fully belong, and some may then become prey to those seeking to exploit them or recruit them to extremist ideologies. Either way, they find it that much harder

to fulfil their potential and become productive and valuable members of society.

Almost all my prior fiction and documentary work in my career has been about notions of home, and belonging, and about journeys and situations that test these concepts. In the world of refugees I see an extreme version of what we all face- the struggle to integrate our experiences and our histories and our many selves, into the lived political reality of our time and place. For refugees, and for an increasing number of us 'citizens', these struggles have in recent years become more acute, and the task of reconciling the contradictions within ourselves around global politics and citizenship and belonging, becomes ever greater. In this sense, refugees have everything to teach us.

Lentini: I had the privilege to translate *Calais Children-A Case to Answer* into Italian and I have really appreciated the tireless mission of activists, volunteers, human right lawyers, and somehow, I have thought I took part in this wide humanitarian project that has made the effort to protect unaccompanied minors. I have heard "ZS"s voice, I am now familiar with his story and the several stories that have been narrated in the documentary. These children have seen and experienced awful things and the Italian audience reacted to the screening with a deafening silence. The lack of a final applause witnessed feelings of discomfort that pervade citizens everywhere in the world. What about the British audience's reaction (considering the different communities your documentary has been addressed to – i.e. the general public, academics, lawyers and magistrates)?

Clayton: I must say how grateful I am to you Roberta, and to all the colleagues in Palermo, and in France, Spain and Germany who have given their skills and talent to render the film and the documents around it, into all these other languages. Interpreting especially across English renditions of Arabic, Farsi, Tigre, Tigrinya, Pashto and French, is especially challenging and I really do thank you and your mentor Alessandra Rizzo for what you did.

As for the reception of the film, the 135 screenings dated (May 2018) have been held in cinemas, festivals, bars, schools, universities, conferences, churches, synagogues, trades union meetings, and back in Calais to the refugees and volunteers – and so its reception varies a great deal. However, many times it has had the reaction you describe – silence. I understand the silence as shock that such a state-approved abuse of children can happen, and in 'civilised' northern Europe. This is why I'm glad I made the film the way I did, with its tone of grief and righteous anger.

I had hoped that one of the UK broadcasters would screen the film as I have made many documentaries for them in the past – but while they will show extracts on the ITV and Channel 4 News, they have said they regard its tone as "too polemical" to be aired as a full documentary. Happily, the French company ARTE have acquired world rights in the film and expect other national broadcasters to screen it. But for now in the UK, I continue showing the film to live audiences, usually with myself present to discuss the issues. This has led to extraordinarily powerful connections with the anti-racist movements, with Jewish community in which many child refugees were brought to the UK by the *Kindertransports* in the last war, and with the Justice for Grenfell campaign (having lost 71 of their community to the Grenfell Tower fire, the Justice campaign recognise Calaia the same pattern of government hostility and neglect). The politics of affect may well require this kind of commitment – not just to make films that change policy through the law, but that also engage in a very real and empathic way with their audiences in a dialectical process of discovery and recognition of common ground. This is the work that I have committed to do.

Calais Children: A Case to Answer (62 min, UK, 2017) directed and produced by Sue Clayton for Easwest Pictures. For more information, for educational purposes, and to contribute to the ingoing campaign (www.calais.gebnet.co.uk). Trailer: https://vimeo.com/230595898. Information on the High Court challenge initiated by the film: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/28/teenage-refugees-high-court-challenge-could-give-hope-to-thousands.

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FIGURE 1
"Calais children", Calais, 2016

FIGURE 2
"Calais children", Calais, 2016

FIGURE 3
"Calais children", Calais, 2016