

What Is the Weight of the Moon?

Nabil Ahmed



This video project is an attempt to articulate the situation of more than 50,000 Bengali students recently arrived to study in the UK whose colleges have been under investigation by the UK government as being potentially bogus. The topic is of particular relevance right now, as university education is under attack by the current coalition government, with student protests being organized across the country. The story of the Bangladeshi students is

Media Fields Journal no.2 (2011)

a part of a wider struggle in the crisis of education and politics in the UK. Moreover, it seeks to investigate the precarious relationship between education and immigration where classrooms modulate as borders.

The title of the project, *What Is the Weight of the Moon?*, is taken from *The Middleman* (Jana Aranya, 1975), a film by Satyajit Ray. In the film, the main protagonist, a recent college graduate, is asked a barrage of questions at a job interview that increasingly verge on the absurd. “What is the weight of the moon?” is the final question asked by the interviewer. I decided to use the interview sequence in the film as a fictional narrative structure and appropriated this final question as the title of the film. The use of the title is strategic; it is a way of saying the work is not a strait-laced documentary about the hardship of immigrant student life in the UK or meant to show immigrant students as victims. The plan is to not show them at all, but rather to present a narrative subverting “ethnographic” interview techniques in the jump-cut edit and mix-up of three interviews, in deciding what is framed or not, and in leaving some room for reflection for the viewer. I asked the same set of questions to all the students. Although the answers were translated into English, I chose not to translate the questions themselves so the English-speaking viewer has to reconstruct or intuitively guess them. The work places a lot of responsibility on listening. Specifically by choosing to place the students outside the frame, I invite the viewer to listen to their voices as an attempt at reclaiming their status as political subjects. To be heard is a human right.



For certain migrant-student-workers living in the UK, educational institutions increasingly function as border technologies that act upon immigrant bodies. Movements of students are being increasingly controlled; a recent example is the UK immigration authorities asking universities and colleges to report foreign students who have missed more than a certain number of classes. Such measures are likely effects of the increase in illegal student immigration into the UK through potentially bogus colleges which act as rogue merchant ships navigating through complex bureaucratic territories and bringing students into the country, sometimes without their knowing whether the educational institution they are enrolled in is real or not. So when in 2009- 2010 the government categorically revoked the licenses of over 140 small, private educational institutions, many of them supposedly run by Bangladeshis or British Bangladeshis, thousands of students were placed in immigration limbo, holders of valid visas but shut out of classrooms, either unemployed or exploited for cheap labour. There are thousands of students who lost their tuition fees and have had no help from the UK or Bangladeshi governments to get them back. What was important for me to document was that, throughout the cancellations and the closures, the presence of the colleges in the city remained intact for the most part as a set of ambiguous signboards, for example the image of a sign over a garage that reads "library." Yet what the viewer sees are images of various college signboards; we are no longer sure which of these are real or not. It is this indecipherability that interests me. There are no clear-cut answers except that the college signboards are hybrid objects, part signage and part remnants of a legal contract, caricatures of the neoliberal turn of the privatization of education. The process is apparent in the marketization of colleges for business studies, where large numbers of students from developing countries come to the UK to earn an MBA, the highest standard of managerialism at colleges whose names imitate those of reputed business schools. These students, however, often end up distributing leaflets for less than minimum wage.

This project thus seeks to ask the question: How is the invisible inscribed into the political where invisibility and its inverse, visibility, become strategies in political struggle, forms of resistance and governmentality? In particular, this project focuses on the ways in which invisible populations,

that is, non-citizens, are excluded from participation in what we often consider fundamental tenets of “liberal” democratic citizenship, such as freedom of mobility and the right to work. *What Is the Weight of the Moon?* juxtaposes the visibility of the college signboards and the invisibility of the students using video as an apparatus. By placing the interviewed students outside the frame, the project invites the viewer to become an active listener using field recordings, and simultaneous translations of the interview audio in Bengali and English. In the set of edited interviews, the English version, re-enacted by the interviewer, seeks to explicate the performativity of speech and its relationship to power.

Nabil Ahmed is an artist and musician living and working in London. He has recently completed an MA in Interactive Media Critical Theory and Practice at Goldsmiths, University of London. His emerging practice involves working with people, software, video, the voice, and text to form critical responses to relevant political questions. He has performed and worked with organizations and institutions such as Victoria and Albert museum, ISEA, no.w.here, Waterside Project Space, and the Showroom among others. He is a co-founder of Call & Response, London's independent sonic arts collective. He is currently a PhD student at the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths.