

SERIES REVIEW

Meet the Immigrants is a six-part, observational documentary BBC series, co-produced by the Open University, which looks at the lives of members of the new wave of inward migration into the UK¹

Yolanta Bikova, a Latvian explorer in Lyme Regis, has no real problem with the BBC/Open University camera that tracks her self-conscious moves. Creeping up to a manicured green she beckons the camera to look over her shoulder at the dollop of fantasia she has discovered; scones, lawn bowls and starched linens. Her arch reaction is suggestive; viewers might be meeting the immigrants, but who is the England/Britain that is doing the meeting?

Versions of this question have driven considerable media activity in recent years, and Jolanta is relatively fortunate to have landed in this retired and retiring Tory bubble. The more bilious public arena which *Meet the Immigrants* was broadcast to in April and May 2008 has been preoccupied for some time with immigration and the shape of 'post-multicultural' Britain, and shimmers with frustration at the unending immigration debate which is always happening, but never *really* happening. Desperately seeking public debate which is open, mature and frank; the constancy of this refrain underlines how 'migration debates' are never only, or sometimes even primarily, about migrants and migration. In this context, *Meet the Immigrants'* simple commitment to 'meeting the people behind the headlines' is almost revelatory.

Before discussing the series' treatment of the people and stories behind the headlines, it is useful to get a sense of the headlines recently in circulation. Migrants provide flexible labour, and this includes semiotic labour. Well-established as screens upon which disparate issues can be projected, from swan-eating to social anomie, migrants are also conduits for anxieties about control and sovereignty in a globalised economy. As Arjun Appadurai has argued in his recent book, *Fear of Small Numbers* (2006), the complexity and insecurity of global economic traffic - and concomitant public realisation of diminished state control and sovereignty - has increased the importance of the cultural field as a political resource, where to varying extents "...fantasies of purity, authenticity, borders and security can be enacted" (2006: 23). Whatever the challenges in particularising Appadurai's rich contention to specific contexts, there is little doubt that 'migration debates' in contemporary western Europe have become increasingly powerful prisms for deeper - if often elliptical - considerations of the state of the nation-state. The current rhetoric of integration, for instance, often careers from under-articulated yet powerful evocations of who is not integrated to ameliorative technocratic measures, yet this pathologising of migrants in the body politic rarely pauses to consider that perhaps the body itself is undergoing profound transformation.

¹ For information about this series go to <http://www.open2.net/immigrants/index.html>

Media debate on migration in the UK - which, despite these criticisms, is on a vastly superior plane to other western European states - grapples with very particular inflections of this dynamic. Analysis of public discourse is rarely well-served by generalities, but for the sake of context, two broad trajectories are worth noting here. The current 'migration debate' is layered on the complexities of postcolonial Britain, and intensified, as Arun Kundnani (2007) points out, by free association between immigration, security, social cohesion and national identity in the aftermath of the London Bombings in 2005. Some recent examples illustrate this slippage between discussions of migration and wider reflections on social cohesion and securitisation. The speech of the Archbishop of Canterbury, in February 2008, on the potential, partial accommodation of Sharia law in civil law was an undoubtedly contentious yet careful attempt to think through the structural implications of socio-cultural transformation. Yet such attempts are routinely mangled in the frames of crisis reportage, and his views were widely misinterpreted as an outrageous attempt to sell Britain by the pound to people who, at worst, may be enemies within.

Recent, more serious attempts to discuss migration and contemporary Britain have arguably been over-determined by attempts to position themselves as taboo-busting exponents of what ordinary people really think, most notably Channel 4's Dispatches three-part special *Immigration: the Inconvenient Truth*. The logics of production and marketing intersect with this wider sense of perpetually stunted debate, yet this is not merely market sensationalism. Recent research in Cardiff University analysed how BBC journalists felt that they had previously been "too liberal minded", and that a default openness to immigration had removed them from their audiences' concerns (Gross *et al* 2007: 51-54). Perhaps some of these dynamics account for how the BBC's 'White Season' – "Is working class Britain becoming invisible?"- managed to wrap such compelling programmes as *White Girl* and *All White in Barking* within a unifying logic shaped more by contemporary confusions than creative ambiguity regarding class, race and identity. That perhaps, is the charitable explanation. The BBC's framing insert for the series, showing a white man's face being written on in foreign languages, by dark hands, to music by Billy Bragg, needlessly reduced a range of nuanced programming to yet another performance of bravura transgression, this time through the familiar refrain – at once so manifestly false yet suggestive of precisely the wider transformations being elided – that ordinary people have become strangers in their own land.

It is in this context that *Meet the Immigrants* set out to provide its deceptively simple introduction to the lives led not only behind but in the shadow of the headlines and taglines. A six-part observational documentary following migrants and asylum-seekers of widely divergent statuses and possibilities, its grammar, tone and approach is commonplace after at least a decade of observational documentary being integrated into the generic cocktail that is 'reality television'. Yet in its quiet insistence on tracing the political-economic contexts of people's compulsions, decisions and (im)mobilities, and in its ability to illustrate the routine absurdities and cruelties produced by restrictive border regimes in a global labour economy, it has far more in common thematically and politically with the extraordinarily fine range of British films produced about migrant lives in the past years, from *Last Resort* (2000) to *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), to *It's a Free World* (2007) and *Ghosts* (2007).

Meet the Immigrants is structured around a series of personal stories, some of which span six episodes and others which amount to no more than vignettes. The ambiguities and contrasts produced by this interlacing of narratives are part of the

programme's impact. The people featured embody, on one level, stories of survival and bare life (failed asylum-seekers), of new possibilities and legitimised mobility (EU workers), and of transnational lives and obligations (work permit holders). Yet the people featured are never reduced, and themselves not reducible, to ciphers in an instructive essay on migration. From Yolanta's disconcerting love of the camera, to the extraordinary composure of the Muzzanzi family as they strive over years to secure a visit for their daughter Mapenzi from the Democratic Republic of Congo, to Armin's series of pithy speeches to camera on the iniquities of the immigration system, *Meet the Immigrants* is peopled by participants of frequently striking individual impact.

This televisuality is important, as the series almost entirely avoids clunky polemics, and is content to let the details of people's stories force inevitable connections with the wider global political economy. This is particularly pronounced in episode one, which spends considerable time with Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers in the UK and France and with 'Jim', who worked as a translator for the occupying forces in Afghanistan. In the grand tradition of imperial military gratitude he subsequently found himself living in the temporary camps of Calais, playing nightly roulette with trucks bound for the UK. The shadow of the 'war on terror' flits more obliquely in the background of other stories, such as that of Mohamed Elshafie, a Sudanese junior doctor in Lincolnshire in episode 6, who found his application for 'highly skilled migrant' status turned down by the Home Office despite support from his hospital for further employment and advanced training. We can only ask why, Mohamed from Sudan.

As Jonathan Bignell (2005) has pointed out, predictable debates on the cultural value of 'reality television' formats tend to obscure the wider significance of reality television as a product of shifting social orientations and attitudes to the function of television. Thus despite the paucity of migrant voices in the wider 'migration debate', the series' real power is not only its informed and nuanced negotiation of how these people who migrate represent their lives. It comes instead from the tension between now familiar modes of representing 'ordinary people' and their stories, and the ways in which these migrants' stories converge and diverge from the established reality narratives of personal journeys and personal growth. In their relentless focus on the individual's project of self-hood, reality television forms – even those concerned with 'social issues' – ultimately evacuate structural constraints. *Meet the Immigrants* similarly presents a cast of people happy to communicate their desires and aspirations, yet follows them as they inevitably come up against the insurmountable constraints of their status and radically differentiated rights and possibilities.

One story, that of Caitlin and Anna Dobrisan, extends across the six episodes as it tracks his move from Oradea in Romania to a private training company for UK-bound taxi drivers in Prague to his attempts to establish himself, and subsequently his family, in Plymouth. Many others, such as that of Armin, the 'failed' Kurdish asylum-seeker who angrily refuses to sign-in regularly at the local police station and severs contact, are abruptly truncated, leaving absences and unfinished stories that call attention to the gap between unthinking narrative expectation and the actual realities of this reality television. The omniscience of the camera works to highlight not only the mobility but the immobilities of these migrant lives; the BBC can visit Mapenzi and record her taking a phone call from her exiled family, and the camera is ready in the outskirts of Manila when Suzi's *Balikbayan* (box of gifts) reaches the

sons that she supports from London, but whom she cannot visit.

If *Meet the Immigrants* provides quiet, immanent commentary on the networked interdependencies which are so often profoundly disavowed in debates on the problem of migration, it offers a similarly insightful examination of the culturalist excesses of contemporary visions of integration. In some instances this makes for genre-bending absurdity; it is impossible, for example, to watch Caitlin in his taxi driver class in Prague, rote-learning the street names of Plymouth, and not think of *The Office* (on arrival in Plymouth Caitlin's taxi has a GPS navigator). Shot through the stories encountered is a constant disjuncture between the linguistic fluency, social knowledge and often local embeddedness of those featured, and the systemic inequalities which are frequently the only meaningful measure of their apparent dis-integratedness. Monica Liminovitch, a badly needed and over-stretched careworker in Bournemouth, is mystified at her summary dismissal, only to find out that she was not informed that her agency contract automatically derogated her from the working time directive.

In a crucial focus on the festering limbo of many in the asylum process episode six observes the shocking physical and mental decline of Famara Cessay, from entrepreneurial local citizen (he makes jewelry and sells and barter it in the shelter he eats, socialises and volunteers in) to somebody who in the final frames cannot find the energy to make himself understood. It is also possible, of course, that he simply ceased to believe, if he ever did, that cooperating with the programme could make some kind of difference to him. *Meet the Immigrants* features people who are extraordinarily comfortable and eloquent on camera, particularly when it comes to reflexivity around their status as migrants and the possible consequences of their mediated performance. The terms of the migration debate are readily appropriated to their narratives of self; people constantly assert their state of integration and the kinds of contribution they make to the UK.

It is in the personal evocations of places, routines and connections that the ideological fallacy of cultural disintegratedness is most thoroughly exposed. Episode two introduces Wahid Sayed, who lived for six years in Birmingham after his application for asylum in 2000. Worried about possible deportation he went to France to attempt to re-enter illegally. In Paris, walking on the banks of the Seine (accompanied by the now compulsory mood music for Paris, Yann Tiersen's soundtrack for the ethnically airbrushed *Amelie*) Wahid is seemingly unmoved by the eternal city, preferring instead to remember his time as a flâneur in Birmingham. Thrilling at the recollection, and looking at his makeshift dwelling on the riverbank, he wishes "I was in England right now". Writing in *Open Democracy* in 2004, Paul Gilroy offered the "highland shortcake model of multiculturalism" as a riposte to official discourse incapable, in its asociological fixation with 'parallel societies', of recognising the convivial multiculturalism of many UK cities:

Just how easily the supposedly unbridgeable gulf between civilisations can be spanned came over very strongly in the tales that the homecoming British detainees told of their Caribbean detention in Guantanamo. Jamal al-Harith, born 37 years ago in Manchester to a family with Jamaican origins, was held in the Guantanamo camp for two years before his release in March 2004. He recounted his post-colonial life story in the *Daily Mirror* and offered a welcome rebuke to mechanistic conceptions of cultural difference. This critique lost nothing by being implicit. In between a shocking account of the stupidity, horror and hopelessness of his long ordeal, he

explained how much that shortbread that mattered: “We were all obsessed with Scottish Highland Shortbread. We wanted some so much”. It is there, in that hunger, lodged in those battered and humiliated bodies that the problem of assimilation specified in the 1960s, should be laid to rest forever.

Meet the Immigrants is a valuable reference point for discussions of migration, but as a contribution to the contemporary migration debate, it offers an updated model. It is there, as Wahid, in his strong Brummie accent, announces “I am a citizen of Birmingham”, that the neo-assimilationist problem of integration being specified now could be laid to rest also.

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