

Review - Kony 2012

Written by Katrine Steingrimsen

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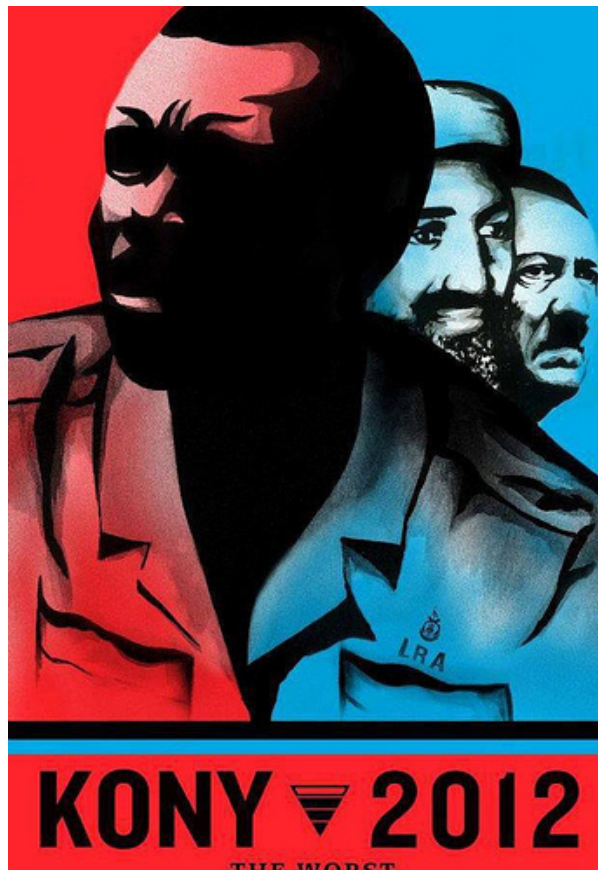
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KATRINE STEINGRIMSEN, JAN 30 2013

Kony 2012

By: Invisible Children, Inc.



"...because of the zeitgeist of the culture and the world, we need an enemy. We need to know who the worst is, and the world has already agreed. We didn't make it up" – Jason Russell (on CNN: "The Kony 2012 Phenomenon")

In March 2012, the American non-profit organisation Invisible Children published an online video, *Kony 2012*, which was to become the most circulated human rights video to this day. Within six days of the video release, it had garnered 100 million clicks and had consequently become a hot topic of discussion in the media. The film, a 30-minute long documentary campaigning for the arrest of Joseph Kony, leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), with the aim of bringing him before the International Criminal Court (ICC) where he is indicted for war crimes and crimes against humanity, has a populist appeal and aims to engage the "millenials" (the younger generation born after the 1980s) as an experiment in *making Kony famous*, before the campaign 'expired' on the 31st December 2012.

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As the campaign became an internet sensation, its role as an example of human rights advocacy deserves particular attention given that humanitarian agencies such as Invisible Children have increasingly become the “new institutions of representation” (Mandianou, 2012). Using social networking sites as means of humanitarian communication is not only influencing policy decisions, but has increasingly come to foster a “global connectivity” (ibid.). However, although widely regarded as acceptable means of advocacy, the ethical concerns of this “new visibility” and interconnectivity remains inadequately addressed (ibid.).

Colonial Stereotyping and Interpretations

The documentary is based on the personal account of Jason Russell, the co-founder of Invisible Children and director of *Kony 2012*, in Northern Uganda in 2006 and his meeting with Jacob Acaye, a victim of LRA atrocities. Consequently, Jason sets himself the task of explaining the *Kony 2012* campaign to his four-year-old son. He begins by explaining the story of their “African friend” Jacob, whom Jason helped, and the unjust suffering facing the children of Uganda. Images of child soldiers and mutilated faces are used to build sentiment to evoke pity and cause public action (Chouliaraki, 2010).

The underlying perception of the campaign is the notion that “if only people knew, they would act” (Stanley, 2001). As such, the campaign is framed with an approach of *politics of pity* with the aim of creating a “symbolic proximity to the sufferer” so as to inspire a reaction into action with the spectator (Dean, 2003). By emphasising the relation between the fortunate American youth and the unfortunate Black African Other, the aesthetics of suffering in the film is implicitly used to evoke moral sentiment (Smith, 2009). Furthermore, by taking a victim-oriented approach that focuses mainly on child soldiers, *Kony 2012* continues to assist a prevalent approach in human rights discourses and social justice documentaries that generalises the suffering of children to gain awareness (Butler, 2005; Edelman, 2004; Smith, 2009).

The argument follows that the consequences of this generalised representation of need and victim depiction serves a colonial discourse by using images that portray the people of Uganda or Africa as primitive and inferior, supported with the “rhetoric of benevolence” (Smith, 2009; Bonsu, 2009). The implication of this portrayal, although aimed at creating proximity, further increases a notion of remoteness by separating the spectator and the sufferer into ‘us’ and ‘them’ categories. These classifications further serve an understanding of ‘us’ as *active saviours* and ‘them’ as *passive victims* (Cottle and Nolan, 2007).

These active saviour and passive victim identities is evident in *Kony 2012* during Jason Russell’s meeting with Jacob Acaye in Gulu, Uganda. While Jacob struggles with talking about his suffering at the hands of the LRA, slowly dissolving into tears, onlookers can hear Jason’s reassuring whispers: “it’s okay... Jacob, it’s okay...” as the image cautiously turns black.

This hero imagery, where Jason is portrayed as the ‘rescuer’, seems to dominate the film as its call for international justice and advocacy on behalf of the distant ‘other’ is built on a post-colonial travel narrative that has serious ethical implications. The strategies of communication used to raise awareness are heavily influenced by the filmmakers’ narrow insight, and there is limited depiction of the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government (Finnström, 2012). By inadequately representing the conflict and offering the arrest of Kony as a treatment to the problems faced in Uganda, it falls short of explaining the complexities of the conflict.

Furthermore, it reinforces colonial stereotypes of Africans as helpless and incapable of dealing with atrocities on their own (Waldorf, 2012; Drumbl, 2012). The way the campaign aims to engage youth through humanitarian empathy or compassion may turn out to be an inadvertent form of imperialism, as the campaign supports foreign or American intervention for justice to be restored. Consequently, it serves to sustain the legacy of the “white man’s burden” which is disguised in the missionary passion that *Kony 2012* resembles (Waldorf, 2012).

Activism and Clicktivism

Although I have criticised the over simplified portrayal of suffering in the *Kony 2012* film, I am not claiming that

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awareness-raising *per se* is futile. Nor do I argue that mediated proximity to human misery is always a corrupt method of encouraging activism. *Kony 2012* has undoubtedly had a huge impact on global humanitarianism and awareness. The video was effective advocacy that engaged people and convinced them to donate and contribute to the work of Invisible Children. Indeed, the African Union consequently decided to deploy more troops to capture Kony, arguably as a result of the *Kony 2012* campaign.

However, the fact that the campaign relies heavily on appeals to celebrities and 'clicktivism' has a severe effect in relation to ethics of representation in portraying distant suffering. Claimed to be "cheap participation", clicktivism has become the term for activism "reduced to a click" (Chouliaraki, 2012:117). Firstly, as the campaign was adapted to generate clicks, it did not address deeper ethical implications with regards to embracing military means as a solution for involvement. Consequently, it encouraged people to "like", "share" and "retweet" the film without simultaneously informing the public about the issue in any great depth. Moreover, the audience-oriented approach directed at celebrities with slogans such as "make Kony famous" and "stop at nothing", juxtaposing Kony with images of Hitler and Osama bin Laden, does not educate the public on sensitivity to the matter.

Rather, it can be argued that by strongly encouraging people to buy t-shirts and bracelets to support the campaign, this furthers the use of 'commodity activism'. This form of humanitarian consumption or marketization of charitable advertisement allows for donors ("as consumers") to effectively *benefit* from the visualised suffering (Kennedy, 2009; Brough, 2012). The emphasis therefore is not placed on unjust suffering, but the respectable "humanitarian identity" of the donor (Brough, 2012). As most of the advocacy was done on social media sites, this "technologization of action" – raising awareness solely through a mouse click – has failed to raise meaningful awareness and instead turned other people's suffering into a (repulsive) form of entertainment (Chouliaraki, 2012; Madianou, 2012).

Drawing on Debrix's (2007) writing of the sublime, the visual representation of suffering in *Kony 2012* and the parallel story of Jacob, can be said to trigger emotions of sublime experiences. As watching visual imagery of suffering in *Kony 2012* encourages us to action by making one feel important and needed, it can be argued that this only aims at the fulfilment of the individual satisfaction of the donor. Images of suffering can be suitable if used to encourage action by informing and educating the public about neglected topics, based on a sensitive understanding to suffering with a moral orientation (Madianou, 2012). Yet, as in the case of *Kony 2012*, when these desires are more apparent than advocacy based on thoughtfulness and reflection, the result is an unethical advocacy. Despite the fame of *Kony 2012*, the campaign success cannot justify the exploitation of suffering; it simply joins numerous previous human rights campaigns that simply feed the media beast (Cohen, 2001; Harding, 2012). On a closing note, I will end by emphasising the following quote:

"One would readily create [videos of the] unfortunates in order to taste the sweetness of feeling sorry for them" (Madame Riccoboni qtd. in Boltanski, 1991:101)

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Katrine Steingrimsen is a final year undergraduate student in Politics and International Relations at The University of York, UK. She has a keen interest in African Studies.