

Neocolonialism in J.A. Bayona's 'The Impossible'

Written by Kate Williams

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KATE WILLIAMS, JUL 27 2020

J.A Bayona's 2012 box office hit, *The Impossible*, was an undeniable success earning almost \$200 million worldwide with an estimated budget of \$45 million. The film was well received by the public and critics alike, receiving an array of accolades and nominations. Due to its global reach and popularity, it has arguably become one of the official depictions of the 2004 Tsunami which devastated large areas of South-East Asia, most severely; Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and India (Reid, 2019). Despite the film's success, it received substantial criticism for 'white-washing' and omitting the perspectives of the overwhelming number of non-Western people affected by the disaster (Cox, 2013; Gallegos, 2013). Such criticisms are significant and problematic considering the film's success and reputation for depicting the 'true' story of an event which consisted of many geo-political and socio-economic variables, the majority of which were not addressed by the film at all. The term 'true' is central to this study: whose truth was told by the film?; what was communicated in the telling of this version of the truth?; and what are the impacts of depicting one version of the truth over others?

Critical to the examination of this artefact, though lacking in previous empirical studies, is the consideration of its impact on real world Western aid interventions which played a pivotal role in the aftermath of the tsunami, receiving unprecedented international funding, and continue to have a large presence in much of the Global South today (Flint and Goyder, 2006). This study will uncover some of the discursive formations (re)produced by the film that justify the ubiquitous presence of foreign aid (Hall, 1997). Though the aid response was generally not depicted in *The Impossible*, this essay will argue that the film (re)produces some of the key discursive formations that underpin the ideologies of international aid strategies in the Global South. It is important to highlight that this is not a criticism of well-intentioned aid workers, but rather a deconstruction of the long-standing global power structures within which many intervention strategies were, and continue to be, developed.

Discursive formations and postcolonial theory

To assess the impact of the narratives, or truths, (re)produced by *The Impossible*, Foucault's constructivist theory of discursive formations will guide the analysis. According to Hall (1997), discursive formations are:

The same discourse, characteristic of the way of thinking or the state of knowledge at any one time... will appear across a range of text, and as forms of conduct, at a number of different institutional sites within society. However, whenever these discursive events 'refer to the same object, share the same style and ... support a strategy ... a common institutional, administrative or political drift and pattern', then they are said by Foucault to belong to the same discursive formation.

Following a similar methodology to a study that explored discursive formations in the German film *Combat Girls*, narrative and visual analysis of *The Impossible* will be carried out at two distinct levels, asking; 'who speaks and acts legitimately from which perspective... [and] what theories are presented and what is the purpose?' (Wiedemann, 2018).

Furthermore, scholars have argued that Western aid acts as 'a tool for neocolonialism' (Itimi, 2018); an ideational and structural continuation of colonialism 'in the absence of formal political control' (Go, 2015); and that it is responsible for the proliferation of the controversial 'white saviour' narrative. Therefore, another layer to the critical

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reading of this film will be analysed through the lens of postcolonial theory. Though the film takes place in Thailand, a country which was never colonised, Herzfeld (2002, in Jackson, 2005) describes it as a 'crypto-colonial [state]... dramatically transformed by the global projection of Western imperial and neocolonial power'. Thus, a dual lens of Foucault's discursive formations and aspects of postcolonial theory has been adopted to effectively deconstruct representations and identities produced by *The Impossible* which constitute its discursive formations (Hall and Tucker, 2004). The first part of this study discusses the different perspectives and identities represented in the film, the discursive formations, or truths, that are re(produced) as a result, and the wider implications on foreign aid strategies. The second part discusses the key concepts communicated by the film through its discursive formations and considers the purpose, or impact, of these concepts; intended or otherwise.

From whose perspective?

The Impossible follows the Bennetts, a wealthy white family arriving at a luxurious hotel in Khao Lak, Thailand, on Christmas eve 2004. The film is a disaster drama telling the story of the devastating tsunami which hit the coast where the Bennetts were spending Christmas day, despite the fact that Thailand is a Buddhist country. With the tsunami hitting within the first twenty minutes of the film, the remaining ninety minutes is a battle for survival after the family is split up; Maria, the mother, with the eldest son, Lucas, and the father, Henry, with their two younger sons, Simon and Thomas. As the title, *The Impossible*, alludes to, against the odds the Bennetts survive and reunite at the end of the film, albeit badly hurt, and fly away to safety on a private jet. Inevitably, the dominant perspective of the entire event is provided by members of the Bennett family. While this alone is not necessarily problematic, Bayona's overwhelming omission of non-Western representation functions to propagate the hegemonic discursive formation of Western superiority and makes commonsensical foreign aid strategies which too often exclude, and therefore silence, local people in the aftermath of such events (Bishop, 1998). Compounding the issue is the fact that notable roles were given to at least six other white, European characters who the family meet along the way, compared with only two non-Western characters. Furthermore, while the European extras are generally given identities and names, the Thai characters are, without exception, not. For example, twenty-five minutes into the film Maria is with her son Lucas and is badly hurt. Despite this, when she hears a child crying she endeavours to wade through water and debris to find them. Maria asks the child, who is blonde with blue eyes, what his name is, to which he hesitantly answers 'Daniel' with a European accent. Less than five minutes later, a man assumed to be Thai finds Maria, Lucas and Daniel and the scene cuts to him dragging Maria, who now cannot walk due to her injuries, to higher ground. Maria, screaming in pain, is initially in shot with a close-up of her face, while the unnamed Thai man has yet to be in the frame at all.

Though the man takes Maria to safety which undoubtedly saved her life, no one ever asks him his name. Yet only another five minutes on in the film, Maria is in a hospital surrounded by predominately white characters and almost immediately approaches a Western woman in the bed next to hers, asking 'Hello, what's your name?'. When she receives no response, she asks her son Lucas to give the woman a piece of tangerine as 'she must be starving'; an act of communication and kindness which was never extended to a non-Western character. The argument made on Bayona's behalf attributes the lack of Thai or other non-Western representation to language restrictions; however, as it is revealed, Daniel is Swedish and does not speak English, but is featured throughout the film and is provided with a substantial backstory. Considering that less than 1% of victims of the Tsunami were Western, the absence of the voices of the other 99% is quite astounding and normalises the already dominant Western presence in the aftermath of human and natural disasters across the Global South (Franks, 2006).

Pittaway et al. (2010) highlight the serious harm that can be inflicted on individuals and communities when their stories are 'stolen' and people are excluded from their own development process. While the international aid response to the tsunami was unprecedented for a natural disaster, Franks (2006) found that 40% of media coverage of the aftermath featured Western people. Of course, this is somewhat inevitable due to language barriers, but regardless it begs the question; what are the consequences of global power structures that intrinsically favour white, Western voices? The international response to the Notre-Dame fire in 2019, in which no one was seriously harmed, perhaps sheds some light on this. Raising almost \$1 billion in a matter of days, the campaign dwarfed the international response to cyclone Idai which devastated Mozambique just weeks prior (Walsh, 2019). This discrepancy cannot be attributed to a single cause, but the conclusion is clear: disasters involving Western people, voices, or

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even buildings, illicit more international empathy and attention.

Prevalent in much of Western media coverage, political discourse and artefacts of popular culture, the overwhelming representation of white privilege as the face of foreign aid (re)produces the 'truth' that countries in the Global South would perish without the oversight of Western intervention and funding. While *The Impossible* is only a dramatised version of real events, the main characters are played by two very famous actors, Naomi Watts and Ewan McGregor, and as a result the film at times resembles the many Western television adverts and appearances involving celebrities fronting aid campaigns. While many celebrity appeals are likely well-intentioned, several figures have faced criticisms for appropriating the experiences of non-Western 'others' for their personal gain or agenda (Davis, 2010). A recent notable case involved Stacey Dooley, the documentary film-maker and media personality, who came under fire from British Labour politician David Lammy for acting as another 'white saviour' when she posted an Instagram photo of her holding an unnamed black child during her time in Uganda for comic relief (Badshah, 2019). Dooley drew on the common neocolonial, neoliberal defence that any help is better than no help when she hit back at Lammy on Twitter, stating that he should 'go over there' himself, quite profoundly missing his point (Brown, 2019). The fact that Dooley was widely defended and never expressed any kind of regret reflects the power and pervasiveness of the discursive formations that produce Western entitlement.

Key concepts and their functions

Neoliberalism

Critical analysis of *The Impossible* revealed the concept of neoliberalism as a dominant theme running throughout the film. From the very beginning, the Bennetts are painted as the epitome of Western success; wealthy, attractive, hard-working and married with children. Maria reveals that she is a physician and it is implied that Henry is a successful businessman. These details are factual descriptors of the family the film is based on and were therefore likely to arise in the telling of their story. However, the film's striking absence of social critique or exploration of the socioeconomic inequalities between tourists and local people results in the uncritical, passive celebration of neoliberalism. This rose-tinted effect can also be observed in the Bennett family's character development, all of whom say and do the right thing at exactly the right time, functioning to present caricatures of the ideal neoliberal individual governed by 'rationality, autonomy, responsibility, entrepreneurship, positivity and self-confidence' (Turken et al., 2015). Lucas, for example, a child seemingly in his early teens, adopts an aid worker like role when in the hospital with his severely ill mother and runs around compiling a list of missing people, resulting in the reunion of a European man and his son. While this detail may be an accurate depiction of what Lucas actually did, the fact that non-Western characters are never portrayed in the same capacity, as organised or proactive, passively reinforces the East/West dichotomy which scholars argue underpins the global structures of inequality today (Sewpaul, 2016).

The final fifteen minutes of the film involves the family, now reunited, making their way to a private jet which has been provided through Henry's business insurance. Again, while this is an accurate depiction of real events, a key opportunity of social observation is missed and the narrative tone is instead one of celebration and relief at the Bennett's safe departure. A representative from the insurance company tells Henry, '...they've sent me to take care of your family... you have nothing to worry about now. In a few hours... your wife will receive the best treatment in all of Asia', while Henry assures his family, 'It's ok, we're going home'. The concept of being able to escape will be addressed in the next section, but in terms of neoliberalism this scene functions to reproduce the dominant neocolonial narrative that capitalism rewards deserving individuals for their hard work and, more broadly, that disasters in the Global South are best tackled with neoliberal, Western solutions. Evidence for the pervasiveness of this rhetoric is identified in scholarly work which highlights the phenomena of aid commodification, which Freeman and Schuller (2020) describe as:

Projects [which] have become commodities exchanged by donors and contractors' and conclude that 'contractor funding priorities privilege project exchange value over beneficiary needs [and]... the need for success and visibility distorts design, implementation, and evaluation.

Essentially, aid projects increasingly involve multinational Western corporations and funds raised for aid projects that

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are often earmarked for specific purposes and agendas. This would be less problematic if foreign aid and development projects were largely successful, however, overwhelming evidence indicates that they are not (Williamson, 2009). A common criticism is that neoliberal driven foreign aid and development practices often result in the exclusion of non-Western people, cultures and knowledge, resulting in a one-size fits all mentality which in many cases fails. Scholars have highlighted the dissatisfaction felt by local people in the aftermath of the tsunami; Korf et al. (2010) found that many people felt 'humiliated and reduced to being passive victims' by the aid response, while Pradanos (2018) reports that a Sri Lankan survivor described the development process as a 'second tsunami', with reconstruction prioritising infrastructures, such as 'tourism resorts and prawn farms', which were responsible for destroying and displacing communities prior to the tsunami.

Escape

Another key concept identified through critical analysis of the film is escape. Escape from death, and escape from the disaster and the country. Of course, this was expected of a disaster drama, however, it is again the film's complete omission of social and political issues that functions to reproduce problematic narratives and truths.

Firstly, the setting of the film, Khao Lak, is only ever presented to the audience in two ways; the beautiful luxury resort prior to the disaster and a deadly, desolate wasteland after. The visual exclusion of the areas in which local people live misses an opportunity to highlight, even in a very basic way, the socio-economic inequalities between tourists and local people. Consequently, the only perspectives presented are from tourists who are desperate to escape the disaster by fleeing the developing world and returning home. The concept of home is spoken about often by the Bennetts. On reuniting with his mother shortly after the wave hits, Lucas asks, 'Is it over?' and cries, 'I want to go home'. The belief that the devastation of the tsunami could be short-lived and that escape is possible is a privilege which local Thai people did not have, yet this is never recognised in the film. As a result, the audience is encouraged to see the event as a freak incident, a natural disaster which, though devastating, would soon be over. Pradanos (2018) argues that this narrative ignores the many man-made disasters which have been inflicted on the Global South through neocolonialism and environmental degradation caused by consumerism in the Global North. While the tsunami exacerbated issues such as poverty and food shortages in large areas of South-East Asia, these problems already existed. The film's omission of these details distracts audience attention away from the longer-term issues caused by systemic political and economic factors and creates the superficial impression that, provided with enough money, Thailand and other countries affected by the disaster could make a full recovery. This type of distraction, which is prevalent in hegemonic formations of Western knowledge of the global South, limits public understanding, discourages critical questioning of the origins of global inequalities, and is partly responsible for the strategic failure of many well-funded Western aid projects, such as Live 8 in 2005, which Kapoor (2016) reports:

...was largely a failure in terms of its primary aim of influencing G8 development programming and policy;... neither substantial debt cancellation nor much more western aid has actually materialized, and WTO trade negotiations to improve the terms of trade for the south...have largely failed.

Conclusion

To conclude, critical analysis using a dual lens of discursive formations and postcolonial theory revealed that *The Impossible* reproduces several discursive formations, or truths, which underpin neocolonial structures of foreign aid strategies. Overall, the film's presentation of neoliberal, neocolonial truths communicates the message that the differences between the Global North and South are inevitable and natural, and subsequently discourages audience exploration of the social, political and economic causes of the profound inequalities that exist. While the film could not have influenced the aid response to the 2004 tsunami, there have been several devastating natural disasters, predominately in the Global South, since 2012 and there will inevitably be many more. Considering the popularity of the film and its biographic tone, it is not inconceivable that the discursive formations of neoliberal hegemony and Western superiority reproduced in the film may be capable of influencing the way in which the public chooses to support and donate to aid projects. Though the film reproduces pre-existing hegemonic truths, it is this reinforcement that Weldes (2015) argues is how 'dominant [neoliberal] discourses become common sense', resulting in the anchoring of problematic power structures that rely on the universal acceptance of Western neoliberalism as the only

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viable option.

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