Selected issues of the contemporary world

CLASS 7 (Scenario 7)

TOPIC	Poverty – part 2	
LEARNING CONTENT - DETAILED CHARACTERISTICS	Summary of the kinds of poverty and causes of poverty presented in the class of Katarzyna Ponikowska. The poorest parts of the world/countries/counties/districts that students are aware of with a discussion. Case study: A TV film crew is shooting in the streets of Cali searching for poor people, bums, whores, street kids, in order to build a mise-en-scene of misery. An action film simulating a documentary about filmmakers who exploit poverty for commercial purposes. A scathing critic with a touch of black humour against "misery porn" and the opportunism of those filmmakers who make "socio-political" films in the Third World to make money and win prizes in Europe. Screening of the short fiction film "The Vampires of Poverty" by Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina. Definition of a mockumentary.	
KEY WORDS	poverty, exploitation, mockumentary	
SUGGESTED TOOLS	film screening, group work	
IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CLASSES	STEP 1	Summary of the kinds of poverty and causes of poverty presented in the class of Katarzyna Ponikowska in groups.
	STEP 2	Presentation of the summaries.
	STEP 3	Miro board – pointing out the poorest parts of the world/countries/counties/districts that students are aware of.
	STEP 4	Discussion in plenum.
	STEP 5	Definition of mockumentary and introduction into the film.
	STEP 6	Screening of the short fiction film "The Vampires of Poverty" by Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina.
	STEP 7	Discussion on the cases of "misery porn" in the European media.
ADDITIONAL MATERIALS	1 FILM	"The Vampires of Poverty", 1977, dir. Carlos Mayolo and Luis Ospina, 29'
	2 WORK CARD	Al Jazeera's text on misery porn in European media - pdf

Good intentions, harmful representations: Misery porn 2.0

Massimo Di Ricco

"Africa is the continent of the future. In this region of the planet, where most babies are born, thousands of children are exposed each year to difficult and traumatic situations."

That was how a photography exhibition I recently visited in a small town in the Catalan Pyrenees was introduced to audiences. The product of a collaboration between Spanish journalists and various local and international NGOs, the exhibition titled: Indestructibles: A look at the future generation of Africa, claims to be a project about the "struggling African childhood", which "presents stories of African children as active protagonists of their lives".

The exhibition includes photographs of and stories about child brides in Uganda's rural areas, Malian children whose lives are "marked by witchcraft and traditional medicine", women giving birth in difficult conditions in rural Ethiopia and children wearing Messi t-shirts while carrying rusty Kalashnikovs in the Democratic Republic of Congo among others. The photographs are full of lost faces, struggling peasants, raw pain, dark backgrounds, huts, and lots and lots of mud.

The photographers, journalists and the NGOs that promoted and financed the work undoubtedly had good intentions. They wanted to let Europeans know about the difficulties many African children face in their daily lives and how they try to overcome them. But despite these apparent good intentions, what do these carefully curated stories and photographs, from 10 different countries across the continent, communicate to the ordinary Europeans viewing them? That asphalt has not reached the continent, that access to electricity is very limited, that buildings there do not pass the first floor, that there are no thriving urban centres or fully equipped hospitals in Africa and that all Africans live in mud houses.

Indeed, seemingly good-intentioned exhibitions, such as the one mentioned above, aiming to bring the struggles of Africans to the attention of Western audiences through emotive images and stories of suffering risk doing more harm than good.

Such misguided attempts at "representation" can be harmful not only because they add weight to existing misconceptions about life on the continent, but also because they turn Africans, and especially African children, into commodities to be consumed by the European public.

Such exhibitions commodify their subjects also without paying any consideration to the issue of reciprocity. Do you ever see similar exhibitions in European town centres about the "struggling European childhood"? Countless white European children are also "exposed each year to difficult and traumatic situations", but you only hear about these situations in carefully worded or filmed news stories that respect the children's privacy – their faces are always pixelated, identities hidden.

What we see in the aforementioned exhibition and many others like it is a relatively new method of commodifying Africans and African life in the name of representation and raising awareness. And it is a direct consequence of the close relationship that has been established in recent years between

Western parachute journalists and philanthrocapitalist foundations investing in media and humanitarian organisations.

From "misery porn" to "humanism porn"

As I viewed the photographs and read the stories that are part of the Indestructibles exhibition, I couldn't help but think of Colombian filmmakers Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo's 1977 mockumentary The Vampires of Poverty – particularly the scene in which Mayolo, pretending to be a filmmaker commissioned by a German TV channel to make a documentary about "Latin American misery", asks street children bathing in a fountain in central Bogata to jump into the water for dramatic effect.

The Vampires of Poverty was a criticism of a new trend that emerged in the 1970s in Latin America: local filmmakers making sensationalist and decontextualised films about their people's "misery" and selling them to the West. It was also a condemnation of European festivals and televisions that were always in search of such films about life and suffering in the Global South. In the eyes of Mayolo and Ospina, these films transformed Latin American "misery" into a commodity that can serve as an escape valve for the very system that had instigated it in the first place. They coined the term "pornomiseria" (misery porn) to describe these films and even wrote a manifesto about the issue.

Sign up for Al Jazeera

Weekly Newsletter

The latest news from around the world.Timely. Accurate. Fair.

And, at the time, "misery porn" was the most valuable currency not only in the world of cinema-television but also charity. International humanitarian organisations were publishing images of poverty, death and starvation to raise funds from those in the West watching the world from their sofas.

In the early 1980s, the proliferation of images of children emaciated by war and famine in different African countries finally started a public debate in the West and forced international NGOs to stop utilising "misery porn" as a way to raise funds. But soon, the traditional images of poverty porn that dominated televisions, radios and newspapers through NGO advertisements and calls for action for years were replaced with more positive, but equally misguided, representations of supposedly miserable "others" living in far-away lands.

In recent years, due to traditional media organisations' growing inability to fund foreign reporting, international NGOs started to collaborate heavily with parachute journalists seeking to report on people living in far away and hard to access areas.

Philanthrocapitalist foundations expanded their influence over European media organisations by providing their journalists with funding, support and access to produce projects and reports on issues relating to development in the Global South. This led to media narratives about "others" in the West being heavily influenced by NGOs.

These collaborative efforts often avoided producing traditional poverty porn. The representations

they produced of Africans and other peoples of the Global South were undeniably humane and positive on the surface but did not do much to give agency, dignity or control to their subjects. They fell into the traps of exoticism and "humanised" Europe's others in a way that turned them once again into consumer products. Moreover, perhaps in the name of ensuring that these others are always seen as innocent and one-dimensional "victims" or "survivors" by European audiences, they completely depoliticised them and removed their stories from their wider context.

The examples of these seemingly positive and humane but completely decontextualised representations of Africans and other distant others of Europe are plenty in the media: Reports on child trafficking in African countries that elude questioning the existing structures of inequality and European colonial legacy that paved the way for these crimes; stories about refugee girls getting an education thanks to European donations that do not mention the reasons that displaced them in the first place; interviews with Latin American Indigenous women's rights activists where their anti-capitalist consciousness disappears from the narrative.

All poignant stories aimed at raising awareness, but also, producing depoliticised others – fully cleansed to be consumed with ease by European audiences looking to feel good about themselves and humanity at large. These representations appear to be promoting humanism and even cosmopolitanism, but in fact, they deliberately erase historical differences to conceal the power imbalance between those represented and those doing the representation and their audiences. This may not be "misery porn" in the traditional sense, but it is undoubtedly a form of "humanism porn".

Those who are routinely producing these representations may have good and even noble intentions. But these news reports, development projects and exhibitions risk not only turning their subjects into commodities to be consumed by European audiences but also hiding the real sources of their suffering and keeping harmful colonial dynamics intact.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.