

HUMANITARIAN ALTERNATIVES

The White Knights, or the difficulty of carrying humanitarian engagement to the screen

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The White Knights
A film by Joachim Lafosse
With Vincent Lindon, Louise Bourgoïn, and Valérie Donzelli
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In the Fall of 2007, the affair known as “Zoe’s Ark” became a case study for several reasons. This unspeakable fiasco exemplified the fact that populism does not restrict itself only to politics, but that it can permeate the humanitarian action of volunteer associations. The media spoke about the film as an illustration of the extent of misunderstanding and confusion that is generated alongside the actual work being carried out by legitimate NGOs¹.

Given the substantial impact this affair generated in France and especially in several African countries, it would have been surprising had this incident not been fictionalized. It is even remarkable that it took more than eight years for it to finally happen. Writers showed little interest², but the film industry pounced on the story, understandably so from a certain point of view, because the people implicated in Zoe’s Ark were almost totally wrapped up in a matrix of emotions and compassion. And this makes up for ideal ground when writing fiction based on an individual’s real-life experience for the screen.

Certainly, looking back, this aspect has been a regular component of humanitarian action. But never has a matrix of emotions and compassion been the mainstay of operational activities of NGOs and other humanitarian practitioners coming to aid vulnerable populations. This is especially true when considering the duration, the quality, and the ethical aspects of their actions,

¹ Even if this skewed vision was subsequently revised, in part, leaders of the association and several of their team members were intermittently put on trial in the following years during the course of the legal proceedings that were held in Chad and then in France.

² Except for Pierre Micheletti in his book, *Les Orphelins*, Embrasure, 2010.

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since such a matrix is, by definition, more in line for the short term or for immediate release. We were hoping, therefore, that the first film adaptation of this unfortunate affair, told with a cinematographically conventional storyline – a beginning, a middle and an end – would have helped us come to understand, through fiction, that the humanitarian experience has nothing to do with the excesses of Zoe's Ark. And that the complexities and dilemmas it has to face do not boil down to an unsophisticated streaming of countless images and tired clichés.

Unfortunately this is not the case with “The White Knights”, a film directed by Joachim Lafosse and released in France in January 2016. For nearly two hours, we sit, floored by the oversimplification and the total lack of critical thought behind the scenes depicted and the characters being portrayed. The leading actors (Vincent Lindon, Louise Bourgoïn, and Valérie Donzelli) have nothing to do with this. They perform their utmost best to give meaning and depth to characters that are pictured in the screenplay as archetypes without any real substance or individuality.

The undue attention given to the events in Chad, the bias associated with an inside-outside dichotomy, and the inability to take into account the picture behind the scenes in “Zoe's Ark” are all equally disappointing. This last point was critical, both in terms the relationship with the French authorities and in the building of a network of so-called “foster families”. In the same vein, the film glides over the complex situation in Darfur, the problems humanitarian agencies encounter in that region, and the polarization which this long drawn-out crisis has kindled in several countries, particularly in France and the United States. Yet the violent controversy around this case that shook the humanitarian community is not unrelated to the populist approach of the instigators of the Ark. The failure in providing enough information to place the incident in context makes the dispassionate spectator watch a film based on a theme, which, in this case, seems muddled. The critical reviews have also been mixed to say the least. The film never found its audience and soon disappeared from the billboards.

This flop demonstrates the difficulty of carrying the humanitarian approach to the screen. Of course there is a delicate balance between non-critical acclaim and systematic criticism, with other attempts (including in TV series) have been up to now rarely successful. So let us accept the assumption that fiction is not perhaps the most aesthetic mode to employ to capture the complexity of the daily tasks of humanitarians or the significance of their commitment to a cause. But it is a paradox that shooting a documentary film, instead, may seem to have much greater potential, precisely because, when it is centered on one or more characters, it tends to maintain a critical distance, compare interweaving points of view, and streamline the approach that puts things into context. This avoids having it become a trivial or routine news report.

In this regard, the film (released almost simultaneously) by the Belgian director, Thierry Michel, called “The Man Who Mends Women”, makes a timely comparison. It is dedicated to Doctor Mukwege, a Congolese doctor, who, over the last twenty years of armed conflict in the Kivu region, has treated thousands of women, teenage girls, and even very young girls, all victims of horrible sexual violence. The leading character naturally taking center stage, his questions, his doubts, the risks he takes³ are all finely drawn. At the same time, the women to whom he restored integrity and dignity are given ample opportunity to speak. Their commitment, either as individuals or through the associations that they themselves have created, is positively valued.

³ At the end of 2012 he was – again – the victim of an attempted assassination. Now protected by an escort of MONUSCO peacekeepers (the UN force present on site), he no longer lives permanently in Bukavu.

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Despite being coincidentally as long as the “The White Knights” (running time 112 minutes), and despite the often unbearable episodes, the viewer does not at all feel weighted down, and comes to wish that the film would keep running to give time to take in even more the willingness and the power of the characters to communicate in their attempt to overcome the abominations they have endured. Although the film was released in a select number of theaters, spectators have applauded it and are unmistakably continuing to do so⁴.

Hopefully, if other filmmakers soon consider “rubbing elbows” with humanitarians they will be inspired by them. This will be better than resorting to simple “humanitarian bashing” that consists of looking at oneself in the mirror and saying nothing of the growing needs of people in distress, victims of conflicts or disasters.

Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

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⁴ On a different note, but still about a major humanitarian situation – the one Europe has faced since the summer of 2015 with the crisis of refugees and migrants – we must mention “Fuocoammare”, a documentary film by the Italian Gianfranco Rosi, dedicated to the inhabitants of Lampedusa and their mayor. Recipient of the Golden Bear in Berlin, the film is scheduled to be released in Europe in 2016.