Representation of Black people in Charity advertisements in Germany

Reg No: 33023558

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"When representation is understood in terms of the production of definitions rather than the simple reflection of pre-existing ideas, then a number of questions can be asked of any given image. What meanings are produced and how? And in which ways does the image relate to society as a whole? The latter question does not imply a form of economic determinism in which meaning is reduced to an 'effect' of an economic 'cause', rather, it involves dismantling … complex relations." Lynda Nead, Myths of Sexuality, 1990[1]

As German city dwellers we are confronted every day with all kinds of advertisements. We are confronted with billboard advertising, walking or driving down major boulevards or taking local public transportation or trains. Since the mid nineties, aid organisations push more and more on the advertising market, so these days we have the situation that almost every other ad we encounter on billboards is exhibited to us by one of the bigger charity NGOs. While there are only about 15 charities advertising on billboards at all, the major players are *Misereor* and *Brot für die Welt* (bread for the world) related each to one of the Christian churches, *Kindernothilfe* (help for children in misery), *Welthungerhilfe* (help for a starving world) and *Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe* (help in catastrophes). All of them have a Christian charitable or a humanitarian background.

Because of a small Black clientèle in Germany, Black[2] people in advertisements are only used in an exotising or eroticising manner and not to encourage Black costumers to buy the product which are advertised. Images of Blacks in the German public sphere are rare. While on the other side, charities seem to depend on depicting Black people as more than two third of the examples of the examined material make use of them. Through the massive amount of charity ads on the market, charity organisations are basically holding the monopole on the representation of Black people in German public sphere.

Charities often get reductions on billboard space, and are usually welcomed even fom alternative or anti-capitalist voices, who see a 'good intention' behind it and an interruption of the capitalist advertisement logic of 'buy! buy! buy!'. A couple of years ago, I myself was saying: 'at least, finally is somebody bringing the topic of global inequalities in the public discussion'.

[1] Quoted in Ramamurthy 2003: 214
[2] While people displayed on the ad posters are meant to represent Africans, through talking about Black people in a more general sense I want to open up the perspective. I believe that all Black people, including Black Germans in this context, are faced with the stereotypes and the way of thought analysed in this essay. As a member of the dominant White society, I will focus, however, on the images it produces and not on their effects.

In this essay I investigate the depicted images, categorize them and relate them to the European history of thought and the history of depicting Black people in the West. I am aware that charities don't only advertise on billboards and that they are not the only ones using these images. Rather, these images are embedded in a wide range of different actors and media. Still, as the charities pursue a certain goal with them – fundraising – and as they are imposing themselves on the viewer through the medium of the billboard, I consider it legitimates to analyse them separately.

This essay forms part of a bigger work on the topic. It has to be considered as a first chapter, a starting point, but not as a complete work. While the visual analysis of the images and the elaboration of their historicity are the topics of this essay, the following-up will deal with questions of omission. What do these images not tell the viewer? Why don't they refer to colonial or neo-colonial practises? What kind of understanding of history lies behind this construction? I will also embed these questions in a theoretical framework of cultural constructivism and whiteness. A critique of the development industry as such will be inherent, but not drawn on explicitly. This essay, however, lacks purposely a deeper theoretical reflection and dedicates its space to an in depth analysis of the images.

access

I got access to the analysed material in two ways. First, I took pictures of advertisements during a stay in Berlin around New Year's 2005/06. Additionally I wrote to the various aid organisations and asked them to send me posters they used as ads in the last year. Many of the NGO's generously sent material. Not all of these posters are designed to be shown on billboards in roads or tube or train stations, but sometimes also to be hang up in churches, community centres or Fairtrade shops.

context

One encounters a majority of the ads, when one is on the move, sometimes as pedestrians, but mostly on various kinds of transportations: cars, buses, tubes, trains. As mentioned above, billboards are mostly installed in an urban context, along major traffic routes, especially roads and on tube, train and bus stations. Billboard ads seem to pass by[3], they "loom up to confront the spectator and then recede from their field of vision." (Lister & Wells 2001: 66) People who view them, didn't chose to see them, they were rather forced upon the viewer. While one decides to watch TV, buy a magazine or listen to the radio and encounters different forms of advertisement, one cannot decide not to see them while on the road. At the same time, the

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[3] In the movie „Colonial Charities", I tried to grasp that notion of ‚passing by' through the effect of pushing the images over the screen

image is experienced in a short time sequence and the viewer mostly doesn't have the opportunity to look at details or read small letter inscriptions or titles. S/he rather doesn't concentrate completely on the pictures, as s/he is coming from and going to somewhere and has probably other things in mind.

The purpose of these advertisements is to ask for donations. Charities try to make people aware of 'the situation' in the so called 'Third World' and at the same time show what they, as charitable aid workers, do against poverty, illness, etc. An important point of the ads are to first show people images of e.g. poverty, often to shock them and then try to show a solution that the viewer him/herself can actually do something against it through donating money. To get as many donations of possible charities became professionals of the advertising industry. They employ graphic designers and photographers as well as advertising psychologists in order to shoot, edit and select the 'right images', start the 'right' campaigns and place their ads in the 'right' time and space.

The images strongly contrast modern German urban life and the analysis of the different themes applied has to be seen in this light.

themes

Out of a total number of 84 advertisements I collected for this analysis, 58 displayed Black people. In all the images, three major topics were recurring again and again: poverty, illness or invalidity and flight.

Poverty:

Ad: "Our daily water give us today"

The camera looks upon two male Black figures, an adult on the left and a kid on the right. Maybe father and son. The adult is sitting on the floor while the kid is standing with his back towards the adult. In between them is a quite small puddle of very muddy water. All around them a stony, dry ground without any vegetation. The adult is barefooted and wears a dirty yellowish lose trouser and a light, simple T-Shirt. The boy is half naked and only wears a white trouser that seems to be too large for him. Adult and child, both have a canister in one hand each and a little bowl in the other. They are about to fill scoups of the muddy water from the puddle into their canisters. While the adult glances sad into the camera, the kid concentrates on his activity. The whole picture is held in greyish and brownish colours with a dark yellow of the adult's trouser as well as one of the canisters as the only predominant colour.

Very simple conditions of living, starvation as well as poor clothing are widely depicted. The cameras zoom into misery: in this example the horrible conditions of water extraction out of mud. Antiquated tools are part of the scenario. Kids are favourably used to display malnutrition and starvation. The displayed people look sad and overcharged with their lives.

Illness / Invalidity
Ad "Encourage"
We look upon six shadows of people, thrown on the brown muddy ground of a street or a square. The shadows lead up to the persons they belong to, whom we see from the behind. The picture ends on the waist of the people, so we can only see the whole bodies of the people in their shadows. We don't know anything about their age or about heir gender. We are merely able to see their black skin colour as some of the people wear short trousers. All of the six people who form a line across the picture are missing one leg. They all lean themselves on two crutches. The title invites us to "Encourage – that life continues." An orange background frames the photograph, while a white notice paper gives us details how to donate money.

Black people are repeatedly depicted as ill or needy for medical treatment. The AIDS topic is still one of the major issues addressed. Supported through charity ads, AIDS as a disease has a black face in Germany. Pieterse (1992: 182) points out that this has to be seen in the tradition that Black women, alongside with prostitutes, were already in the 19th century associated with Syphilis. Charities build upon the stereotype of the Black body as diseased.
Invalidity is another related topic which is widely depicted by charity advertisements. These images have to be contextualised in the European imagination of Africa as a continent torn by civil wars and natural catastrophes.

Flight
Ad: "What was your longest journey?"
Following a straight road, as far as the eye of the camera reaches, we can see crowds of Black people walking. They carry huge bundles of luggage, water canisters, buckets and blankets. As these items are carried on the backs or heads we can only rarely see the people themselves. There are so many people walking closely side by side that we can only guess the road. To the left and right of the people are green meadows. The camera looks upon the heads in the walking direction of the crowds. The subtitles explain us that "for many people in Africa

flight is a way without return", while the title addresses the viewer directly and asks "What was your longest journey?"[4]

Connected with the theme of invalidity and the notion of Africans killing each other in civil wars is the topic of refugees. Flight and expulsion is displayed as part of the daily life of Africans. The only people who help in these situations seem to be Western NGO's, who cater, build refugee camps and help out and organize in a situation of confusement and distress.

Taking Jan Neverdeen Pieterse's extensive analysis – his book 'White on Black' – of Western images about Blacks and Africans as a basis, one could argue that the image of Africans as poor, ill and as refugees have no historical background and that charities created this new image. Yes and no. Pieterse analyses a big range of different stereotypical images European and North Americans deployed about Blacks and Africans. He describes several dozens of different stereotypes from a wide range of academia, popular culture and advertisements and traces them back historically. The most frequent images are those of the Black person as a servant (Pieterse 1992: 14, 23, 90, 97, 156, 158, 161, 163, 189f, 229), as entertainer (14, 23, 89, 95, 158, 161, 189, 206), as child (11, 33, 37, 88f, 152f, 159, 166, 170ff, 183, 229), as sexually different (either eroticised or desexualised) (11, 84, 155, 159, 161, 172ff, 182f, 188, 206f), as close to nature (11, 30, 34, 91, 92, 166, 199) or as a (noble) savage (30, 32f, 37, 89, 90, 170, 202). Other images contain the notions of Blacks or Africans as wild (24), musical (152), emotional (11), lazy (90f), animal like (30), passive (153), idiots (33ff), happy (161) or naked (94) to name just a few.

What is interesting is that images vary quiet a bit and sometimes even form opposites to each other. In some historical moments it is drawn on single notions while they are not part of the imagination in another period. Pieterse (1992: 233) notes that "[c]hanges in the representations of otherness according to time and place tend to reflect, not changes in the characteristics of the labelling group but rather, in the circumstances of the labelling group, or in relationship between the labelling group and the labelled." He goes on and says that "[p]robably the single most important feature of representations of otherness is the role they play in establishing and maintaining social inequality." (Pieterse 1992: 234)

Keeping these arguments in mind I want to proceed deeper in the analysis and develop what historical images of Blacks are used in charity advertising and how the images through their

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[4] Addressing the viewer and his/her habits directly through a question can certainly help addressing topics of inequality. This is why I consider this series of ads as rather progressive. However, the used imagery is the same and is what will be kept in mind after all by the viewer.

content and through the way or representation create or maintain a feeling of superiority for the viewer.

Nature

The image of Africa as a rural continent and of Africans – and Blacks in general – as close to nature, as savages and in a more original state of nature is one of the leitmotivs of the European epistemae concerning Africa and its people. Pieterse traces this notion back from Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau to Hegel and into contemporary thought. While until the Middle Ages Europe itself was nature and savage, this image was exported, first to the New World and later to Africa. (Pieterse 1992: 30ff) While during 'discovering' Africa, writers still praised the beauty of African cities, this was soon to be forgotten. None of the discussed photographs was shot in a city. An urban reality in today's Africa remains again invisible. Rather, the natural environment is often times emphasised. Black people are displayed in a – either deserted or tropical – landscape, without indications of civilisation. The stereotype of Blacks as natural and uncivilised beings is completely manifested here. The argument is even reinforced through the frequent use of naked or half naked Black bodies.

Nakedness

"Waiting for bread"

The image depicts a row of young Black boys, standing one behind the other. It seems that they are queuing for something. This impression is confirmed through the title saying "waiting for bread". All of the boys are bold headed. We can only see their naked upper parts of the body and only their backs as the picture is taken from the behind. Everything we see from the guys is their naked bodies. The photographer could be on the place of the next boy queuing, though his camera position is a higher one. The photograph is quite dark, although through short shadows one can see that the sun is at its highest position. The boy's bolded heads reflect the sun.

The picture is in black and white with the only colours being the words of the title – in red – and the name of the charity (bread for the world) – in orange. Both sentences together (waiting for bread – bread for the world) give a poetic touch to the image.

Ahistoricity

Connected to the notion of 'natural people' is the stereotype of Africans as a 'people without history' which came into modern discourses through the German philosophers Hegel, Marx and Engels. (Pieterse 1992: 34f) Through not displaying technological tools, more complex

systems of e.g. cities or signs of 'modern civilisation', Africa is placed in a stone-age time. During colonialism as today, this perception legitimises that Europeans (and now also Northamericans) come and make history and 'develop'. The image selection follows a 'pars pro toto mentality' and takes one reality in Africa and applies it for the whole continent and willingly or not, even to all Black people. Multiple and complexer realities are left out. At the same time, again, the focus stays on the current situation and denies that it is a result of a historical development. Particularly, there is not one reference to colonialism or neocolonialism and an involvement of Western politics or economics is not even rudimentary discussed.

Deficiencies

Pieterse summarizes: "The icon of the nineteen century savage is determined by *absences*: the absence or scarcity of clothing, possessions, attributes of civilisation" (Pieterse 1992: 35 italics in original) This is exactly the case in the German charity ads of 2006. In both cases Africans are defined negatively: via absences or deficiencies: without clothes, without technology, poor, ill, and on the flight.

Needy

„Starvation through opulence"

A middle aged, skinny Black men stands in the middle of the photograph. He wears a white robe and a white turban on his head. From the visible upper part of his body, his chest and his arms are uncovered. His stretched out hands which he holds together, are filled with grain, it seems like rice. His hands look over dimensional big in comparison to the rest of his body. Directly behind him, the viewer sees a big pile of yellow sacks which are stacked to almost the same height as the guy. They are well rounded filled and one suggests fastly that the content of the sacks is the same as the grain he holds in his hands. Behind the pile of sacks the outlines of a house is visible and behind the blue sky.

But charities don't focus on absences all the time, instead they actually do depict food, technology, etc. But in all cases they do, implicitly or explicitly, it is clear, that these attainments are achieved not through the merits of Blacks but through Western Aid. Blacks are constructed as needy receiver who are not able to function without Western interference.

Passiveness

That Blacks are dependent on others in their daily lives is a recurrent stereotype in Western popular culture. With this idea, a notion of passiveness is often coming along. Except of

certain allocated roles (e.g. serving or entertaining), they are portrayed as not acting themselves (e.g. Pieterse 1992: 153) The same is valid for the depiction of Blacks in charity advertisements. They are always shown as the passive receivers who are not acting / not able to act in favour of their own future. The German aid donator on the other hand is constructed as an actor. This is dramatically visualised through the 'before – after' ads of the Welthungerhilfe, where Blacks are displayed helpless or frustrated before Western aid reaches them and cheerful and with a new job or a new acquisition afterwards.

What is worth noting here is that the Welthungerhilfe defines people as 'poor' or 'fund less' before the aid giving. A wider identity is denied.

The fact that Africans were stereotyped as passive and dependent subjects was one of the major ideological justifications for colonialism and exploitation: which were undertaken to help and develop the colonies. Charities justify their own policies and interventions with the same argument.

Grinning

"Help for living"

The poster is divided into three sections. A black background with the name of the charity on the upper part and the title as well as bank details on the lower part, frame the picture in the middle. A teenage Black women's head is depicted. She is grinning and keeps her mouth quite open. She seems disconcerted. Her white teeth build a contrast to her Black skin colour and is matched exactly with the white of the letters of the titles. The camera meets her at eye-level and depicts her face from her neck that carries a necklace to her forehead with a blue hat. The picture is a close up and cuts of part of her head and everything below her shoulders.

Grinning always implies a certain embarrassment and generally a diminutivity. One grins out of politeness and when one has nothing to say or when one knows that one is not listened to anyway. Depicting Blacks as grinning stands in a long tradition of European painting. But also in popular culture and in various advertisements (e.g. the Sarotti-Mohr in Germany), Blacks who are often in a serving or childish role are made smiling or grinning by their image producers. Showing Black children grinning suggests a double diminutivity.

Children

Pieterse discovers in his research that the comparison between Blacks and children and the depiction of Blacks as childish is leitmotiv of the European construction of the Black subject. He argues that this comparison has a long history, especially in the philosophic, 'scientific' and academic fields. In racial theory and later as well by psychoanalytic thinkers such as

Freud or Jung, savages were on an equal state of mind as children. The development of a human life was seen equivalent to the development of species. Savages, e.g. Blacks were equated in this mindset to children – or to Europeans in an earlier historical moment. (Pieterse 1992: 88, 166f, 171ff) One similarity was seen in the lack of moderation and the characteristic of not being able to control emotions.

Another aspect of the equation of Blacks = children is the notion of Europe as older nations which should help and develop and guide the younger nations (colonies). Charities, on the contrary, favourably depict children in their ads. Out of the 58 posters, 25 depicted one child or several children as their main subjects. Pieterse warns us here that "[t]he hierarchy of age overlaps with and reinforces the hierarchy of race." (Pieterse 1992: 171) Charities implicitly suggest a superiority of the viewer.

Camera perspective

In half of the cases, 29 times in my material, the photographer took the picture from an upward angle. The viewer looks down on the subjects of the advertisement. This unconsciously enforces a feeling of superiority of the viewer and manifests thereby a suggested hierarchy.

Panoptical camera position

In the beginning of the twentieth century, 'peoples exhibition' was a favourite mis-en-scène in Europe to show racial superiority. In central Berlin, among other cities, one could visit a 'panopticon of peoples', where one could watch people from different continents in their 'natural habitat'. And all this without being seen oneself. About half of the pictures used in charity ads follow this tradition through depicting Black people in their 'natural habitat' without them realizing that they are watched. The camera – and with it all the viewers – look at the subjects, who meanwhile continue doing what they were doing anyway without paying attention to the camera. Following Foucault et al, this voyeuristic gaze is a strong symbol of power.

Light / colours

Although lots of pictures are taken in day light, light conditions of the pictures are quiet dark in about half of the cases. The predominant colours of the used photographs are brown, black and grey: some of the pictures because of the chosen backgrounds while others seem to be edited or taken with a (e.g. sepia) filter. In my opinion, these effects produce and manifest an atmosphere of misery. In quite a few examples, however, the predominant colours are used for (parts) of the name of the charity or their symbols. To contrast the dark pictures, often titles

and/or names of charities are written in white letters and therefore make up the brightest spots on the ad. Staying in a symbolic interpretation, Charities are the once who bring light and colours into the darkness.

Speechlessness

Another technique of power which Charities make use of is denying the subjects of their advertisements to speak for themselves. Through titles, the charities speak above the heads of the displayed people and reduce them to objects. They take not only the authority to represent Black people – and strongly participate in shaping their representation in German public sphere – but also speak for them. The German charity, in with it the mostly White viewer and donator, defines what the Black person needs through speaking in 'his/her favour'.

Black and White

Interestingly, on all advertisements, only three times White people are depicted. Every time women. While once a white women is the only subject of a poster, another time a White tea consumer and a South Asian tea picker are depicted on two separate photographs on one poster. The third example portrays two separate pictures as well: a group of White women demonstrating together, on the upper part of the poster, and a picture of an African village harvest scene. There is not one single advertisement which shows Black and White people on one photograph. The 'demonstration' one is the only ad that suggests a political action. The other two ads where Whites are depicted focus on Fairtrade. This way of depiction practically denies that there is a relationship and a connection between 'here' and 'there'. It totally de-politisices White actors.

Pieterse notes that there is a long tradition that images don't focus on a relation of dialogue but rather on on of domination (Pieterse 1992: 10), e.g. through camera perspectives, etc. The relationship is not shown as an equal one. Rather, even the 'good examples' of the Fairtrade industry stay in the context that "in most advertising blacks are shown as producers […] but not of consumers of the product." (Pieterse 1992: 190) This suggested international division of labour is reproduced without question.

Individuality

While White people – in these ads as well as in most advertisements – are depicted as individuals who speak for themselves and who make their own decisions, Black people are displayed as interchangeable masses. Any right of individuality is denied, as they are not recognizable through own characteristics, special clothes or attributes. The only exception are the ads of the *Welthungerhilfe* which I discussed above. In these cases, they try to focus on

individuals and how perspectives changed 'in small units'. However thoughtful their approach might have been, the occupation with individuals is not enough as long as an own decision power and activism of the subjects is taken into consideration as well.

Summarizing, I could say that the charity advertisements are totally conform with what Pieterse (1992: 22) calls the "pictoral architecture of power." Through the selection of images as well as through ways of representation such as light and camera perspective, the construction of a dependency of the Black subject from the White subject is confirmed throughout. A "civilisational narcissism" (Pieterse 1992: 23) and the unquestioned notion of Europe as the civilised centre and Africa as the periphery which needs to be (re-) colonized, or 'developed' as it's called today, go along with these images.

Charities draw on these stereotypical images in order to collect donations for their 'positive work' and to 'make the world a better place'. Through images they are able to very subtle communicate ideas "which had they been put in words, would have been unacceptable." (van Leeuwen & Jewitt 2001: 1).

Using these images leads, finally, to "an empowerment of the west [and t]he agency that comes off best in this kind of advertising is the relief agency itself – catering the western stereotypes and recycling the imagery of blind passivity." (Pieterse 1992: 209)

Bibilography

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