

Rusty Stereotypes

or how fake charity campaigns try to make people think differently about migration

Cornelia Lund, 2017/2020

Abstract:

Overcrowded boats, people trying to overcome fences, people waiting in queues—the representation of the so-called European refugee or migration crisis in the mass media is mainly dominated by stereotyped images and ideas. This is not to say, however, that there are no attempts at developing a more nuanced view of the situation, in documentary and fictionalized films, for example.

While these films generally evolve around individuals whose story is told as an example for the difficulties that people who have to leave their home countries encounter on their long way to Europe or once they are arrived, another, rather small group of short films or videos directly targets the stereotypes that dominate the Western, European discourse. Taking the traditional form of charity campaigns as a starting point, they give an ironic twist to the stereotypes these campaigns work with, confronting the viewers with their inherent absurdity. By analysing some examples such as the videos produced under the label of “Africa for Norway” by the SAIH, the Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund (2012–) or the fake video campaign *Adopt a Dane* (2016), this paper proposes to show which techniques and how they are used to expose the stereotypes in the attempt to expose them by using humour instead of didactic explanations.

Point of departure

This paper is the slightly revised version of a short presentation given in the context of the Lübeck Film Studies Colloquium organised by Anders Marklund at the 59th Nordic Film Days Lübeck in 2017. It was presented as part of a session on “Cinema and Migration,” one of the main topics of the colloquium that year, probably in reaction to the on-going discussions about the so-called refugee or migration crisis in

Europe. This context also explains the chosen focus of the paper on short films or videos being completely or partly produced in one of the Nordic countries and taking directly or indirectly stance on the topic of “migration.”

As we are all aware, I think, the representation of the latter in the mass media is dominated by stereotypes and stereotyped images such as overcrowded boats, people trying to overcome fences, people waiting in queues; we are also aware of the fact that this so-called crisis and the very emotional discourse about it has triggered fears leading to heavy protective reactions that influence political decisions. The cover of an issue of the far-right German magazine *Compact. Zeitschrift für Souveränität* (Compact. Magazine for sovereignty, issue 10/2016), for example, titles “Invasion from Africa. 20 million on their way to Europe,” combined with the photo of a young black man. The—supposed—threat is condensed in his face looking down at us, emerging from a completely black backdrop.

This kind of imagery and imaginary is, however, only part of the general picture. Of course, there are and have been for years, voices that try to develop more nuanced views of the situation—in documentary and fictionalized films, for example. These films generally evolve around individuals or a group of individuals whose story is told as an example for the difficulties these people encounter on their long way to Europe or once they have arrived.

But even if these films certainly contribute to the production of images and a discourse that goes beyond the stereotypes that we are confronted with in the mass media, the picture one gets in Europe privileges certain approaches and perspectives: Even if some festivals present a broader choice of films from various countries, most of the films presented in the regular cinema programmes are made by Western directors and it is rare that they give real agency to the people concerned by migration. How that could look like shows the example of the Danish documentary film *Les Sauteurs* (2016) by Aboubakar Sidibé, Estephan Wagner, and Moritz Siebert. Here, Aboubakar Sidibé, himself one of the migrants portrayed in the film, takes a camera and becomes one of the directors.

Missing voices and divergent perspectives

That some voices might be missing or not be heard enough becomes also clear when considering that one of the latest projects accepted by the German Federal Cultural Foundation in the framework of TURN, Fund for Artistic Cooperation between Germany and African Countries is exactly a collaboration between five curators and five festivals in Ouagadougou, Durban, Zanzibar, Tunis, and Cologne that aims to integrate the African voices in the actual debate about “migration” and “refugees” in Europe.

And when it comes to stereotypes, there is a lot to be said in regard to the representation of Africa and people of African descent from a European mainstream perspective. The image of Africa as a poor continent heavily afflicted by war, corruption, hunger, and disease, unable to help itself and spitting masses of migrants towards Europe, is still widely spread, namely in Western media. An image, the business of the international aid industry still heavily relies on. Almost unavoidably, every year, at Christmas time, campaigns with images of starving African children address the charitable spirit of wealthy Western do-gooders.

I won't present one of these images, but another one of a very typical campaign that, against all better knowledge, was still based on the belief that we have to send goods to Africa. In this case, a campaign launched in 2015 by the Austrian bank Raiffeisenlandesbank Niederösterreich-Vienna targets privileged (white) Austrian students and their supposed wish to contribute to a more equal world: by opening a student account, the student automatically donates a goat to a family in Africa.¹

¹ As very often in these cases, Africa is presented as an entity, as if there was no geographical, political, and cultural diversity on the continent. This simplification addresses a stereotyped vision of the continent, which is underlined by the presumptuous attitude of the campaign. It has nothing to do with an approach as represented by Achille Mbembe, for example, where Africa is less defined in geographical terms than as a cultural space that includes the diaspora and is characterised by a constant flux and exchange of ideas and people. Achille Mbembe (2010): *Sortir de la Grande Nuit. Essai sur l'Afrique décolonisée*. Paris: La découverte, p. 224.



Photo: Cornelia Lund

The image of Africa as a poor continent populated by even poorer people is getting more and more vividly contested by many voices coming from different geographical and socio-cultural contexts. For Nicole Amarteifio, the director of the Ghanaian web-series *An African City* (2014–2016), it was an explicit aim not only to entertain with the web series, but also to present another image of life in Africa. She states: “My whole life I was told that Africa is about poverty, war, disease, and African women fell along those same lines. So I wanted a completely different story.”² And so she tells the story of five successful and well-educated women who have lived abroad but have moved back to Africa to now build their lives in Accra where they see a more attractive environment for the development for their personal and business lives.³ In one scene (second season, episode 204, The List), Ngozi, one of the five female protagonists of the web series, who works for a development agency, meets a German colleague and, instead of having a lovely date, she sees herself confronted

² “Nicole Amarteifio on what’s culturally inappropriate or not in You Tube series An African City.” Interviewed by Smart Monkey TV, in: *Smart Monkey TV.com*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ip0315ygoKE> [accessed 29.03.2020].

³ That this is by no means something that only happens in fiction, but an on-going movement that is gaining more and more visibility and influence, becomes evident when we consider, for example, that already in 2012, the Nigerian fashion designer Buki Akib has dedicated her collection *Homecoming* these returnees. (See Odessa Legemah (2015): “Fashioning the Future.” In: Theresa Beyer/Thomas Burkhalter/Hannes Liechti (eds.), *Seismographic Sounds, Visions of a New World*, Bern: norient, 2015, p. 83.

with the stereotyped image of a poor Africa and its irresponsible middle class, proficiently used to justify the machinations of the international aid industry. She is, however, absolutely not inclined to politely overlook the (neo-)colonial bias. When the German colleague proudly presents his latest publication on “Child poverty in Ethiopia,” Ngozi loses her patience and explodes: “This is poverty porn!” She reproaches him to use the stereotyped narrative to boost his own career and to enjoy the extremely generous financial arrangements of an expat salary. Furthermore, she not only gives a very critical analysis of his motivation for working in the aid industry, she also shows him the sheer absurdity of his position: When asked if there are no poor people in Germany for him to analyse and work on, and what he would think if she, Ngozi, came to Germany and treated “all Germans as these economically disenfranchised objects that need to be studied” (Season 2, ep. 204), the German colleague remains speechless, because he has never thought of inverting the perspectives and power hierarchies.

“A Norwegian is someone you feel sorry for”⁴

While Ngozi gets angry when confronted with the stereotypes and, consequently, she reflects they still bear of completely unequal political and economic power relations and the north-south divide as long-term consequences of colonial structures, there is yet another way of addressing these issues. And that is, by not only inverting them, but by also tackling them with humour and irony.

The idea of inverting campaigns has, by the way, an interesting forerunner: In 1973/74, the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin founded a Save Britain Fund to help the struggling British economy, and Whitehall was not very amused when they were transmitted the following information: “The people of Kigezi District donated one lorry load of vegetables and wheat—send an aircraft to collect this donation urgently before it goes bad.”⁵

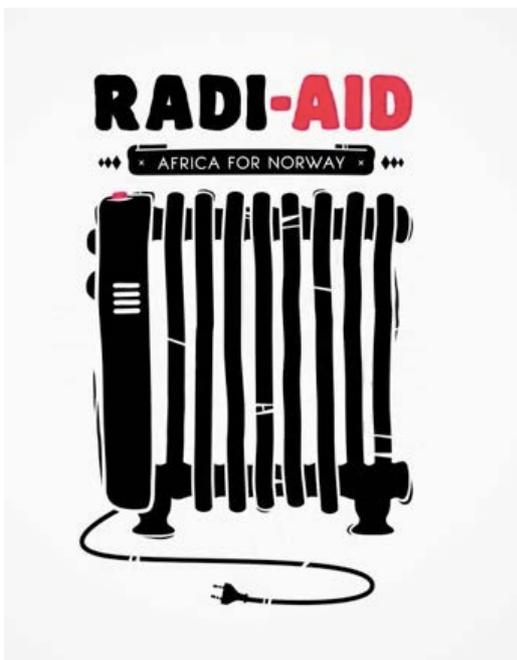
⁴ From the video promoting the Radi-Aid App (2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBrNa-VoJfc>

⁵ See Dominic Casciani (2005): “Despot planned ‘Save Britain Fund.’” In: *BBC News at the National Archives*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4132547.stm> [accessed 29.03.2020].

Idi Amin’s move directly addresses stereotypes on a political level and, by giving an unexpected twist to the standard forms of diplomatic behaviour—usually, representatives of states from the global south do not address the British State as weak or in need of help—challenges the established power relationship between the former colonial power and the former protectorate.

The group of contemporary short films that I would like to introduce targets the stereotypes dominating the Western, European discourse by taking the traditional form of charity or fundraising campaigns as a starting point. The most prominent examples for this approach are probably the short films emerging from the satirical campaign “Radi-Aid: Africa for Norway,” produced by the SAIH, the Norwegian Students’ and Academics’ International Assistance Fund in collaboration with students from South Africa. The campaign is linked to the Radi-Aid Awards (2013–2017), which celebrate every year the best and the worst fundraising campaigns by awarding Rusty or Golden Radiators (see www.radiaid.com).

The film or better, the music video that initiated the campaign in 2012, also inverts the direction of donated goods: Instead of goats or computers for Africa, now it’s radiators for Norway, collected to help the freezing Norwegians (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJLqyuxm96k>).



The Radi-Aid campaign logo

Stills from the first Radi-Aid music video from 2012:



As the last of the stills above shows, the video follows the model of the Band Aid campaigns and videos and thus tackles what Dambisa Moyo, in her book *Dead Aid* from 2009, criticizes as “glamour aid.”⁶ And the video “incorporates all the right tropes,”⁷ as Caitlin Chandler from *Africa Is a Country* notes. The campaign is presented by a “celebrity,” the rapper Breezy, it shows the horrible situation faced by people in Norway and it shows the help workers happily doing their charitable work to remediate that very situation. And, most importantly, it shows the glamour aid at work, that is, the “stars” singing.

The other videos of the campaign take up various elements of contemporary cross media campaigning to address various elements of the aid complex as well as different stereotypes. *Who Wants to Be a Volunteer* (2014; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymcflrj_rRc) tackles the lack of knowledge people from Western countries generally have about the very Africa they want to save. It takes the form of an “Africa challenge” where the aspiring volunteer has to accomplish tasks to win the position of a volunteer, including a quiz about Africa. Another video from 2016 presents the *Radi-Aid App— Just one Swipe to Change a Life* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBrNa-VoJfc>). It starts with an image of an African village “Somewhere in Africa,” as if it was for one of the typical aid campaigns asking for money to help building a well or a school. This poster image, however, is immediately carried away and reveals a contemporary African city setting (Durban). The young man presenting the app is walking along the beach, he greets a group of girls giving them a Christmas bonnet and asking, in a reference to the band aid songs: “Don’t you know it’s Christmas at all?”

The app is, as he further explains, all about finding a meaningful gift for Christmas, because “Granny wasn’t pleased with the goat she received last year from Europe, was she?” And of course, she wasn’t, as she very visibly is part of the more or less

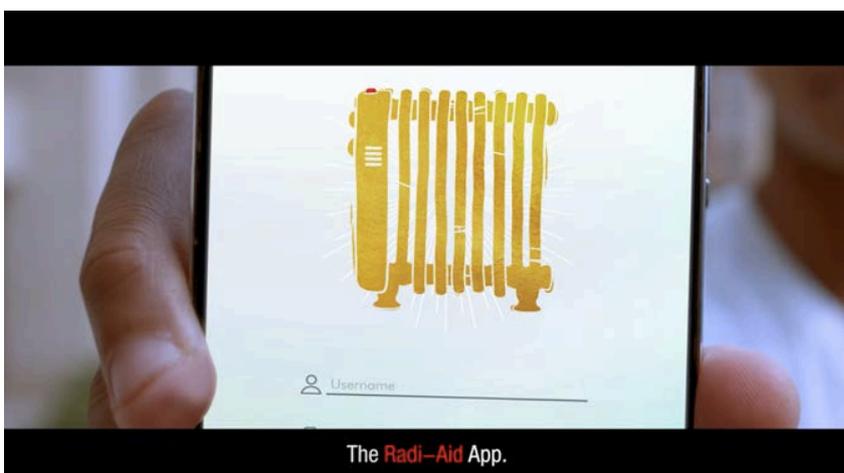
⁶ Dambisa Moyo (2009): *Dead Aid. Why Aid Is not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009, pp. 26ff.

⁷ Caitlin Chandler (2012): “Raidy-aid: Spoofy Charity Single Asks Africans to Donate Radiators to Norway.” In: *Guardian Africa Network*, theguardian.com, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/nov/19/radi-aid-charity-single-africa> [accessed 29.03.2020].

wealthy middle class and most probably buys her milk and cheese in the supermarket. If this is a direct reference to and ironic commentary on the Austrian campaign discussed above is not quite clear, but that campaign wasn't the only one ever donating goats to people in Africa . . .

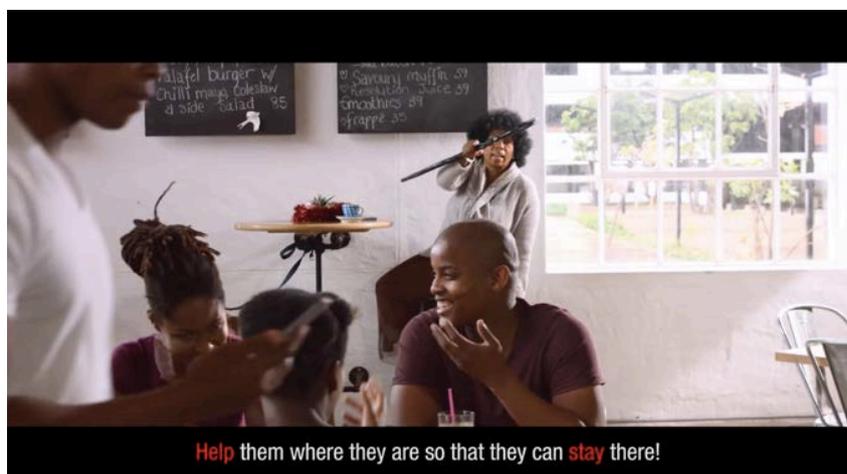


The young man in the video goes on hailing the app as the “newest innovation within the fields of charity and technology,” which allows to find “over a hundred thousand freezing Norwegians just waiting for your kindness.”



The proposed gifts range from a drink against social isolation and some hot rhythms to warm a freezing Norwegian to an axe to keep away the bears that roam Norwegian streets.

In the course of the video the protagonist enters a very fashionable café where people ask question about the app, one of them being: “Bro, can’t the Norwegians help themselves by now?” And granny has a very clear attitude towards that topic:



Thus, besides making a critical comment on the nonsensical and problematic nature of many donated goods and making fun of how donating becomes a social media act that is more beneficial for the feeling of the donator than it is for the receiver, the video comments implicitly on the so-called “refugee question”: Granny’s position clearly refers to a political discourse that has developed in many European countries and that tries to develop strategies to make people stay wherever they are—sometimes by defining new aid programmes, but mostly by building fences and investing in boarder control units such as Frontex.

A very another direct commentary on the question of closing borders and migration is made by the Danish fake video campaign *Adopt a Dane* (2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyVP4dhK5mM>).⁸ The video suggests that the campaign is run by the Adopt a Dane Foundation (AADF), whose founder, Jackson Nouwah, is speaking in the video and whose logo is displayed throughout it:

⁸ It is not easy to find information of who is behind the fake campaign. Most probably the broadcasting station where it was first released, the radio programme P3 broadcasted by DR; Denmark's broadcasting corporation. See Tommaso Perrone (2016): “Adopt an Elderly Dane. An Ironic Video Welcomes Them to Africa.” In: *Lifegate*, <https://www.lifegate.com/people/news/adopt-a-dane-video> [accessed 29.03.2020].



Logo of the Adopt a Dane Foundation (AADF)

The logo is a very important element for aid as a business, as it is for every business. As key element of the corporate design it allows to identify the sender of a message and to authenticate the message—just the same as showing the founder of a foundation is meant to authenticate it, but also to give it a credible face. After all, one doesn't want to give money to a phoney charity . . .

Adopt a Dane not only inverts the direction of goods but of people: Instead of Africans to Europe, now elderly Danes migrate to Africa. The starting point for this idea were protectionist reactions to the so-called refugee crisis in Denmark, one of them being a law allowing the government to seize valuables from incoming refugees to minimize the cost of their stay in Denmark.⁹ In the video, the fake founder starts by commenting on this situation: “A lot of Danes are commenting on Facebook—that so much money is being spent on Africa instead of old people in Denmark.” And the charity sets immediately to work by proposing to adopt a Dane:



⁹ See for example Kim Bellware (2016): “Satirical Video Urges Africans to Rescue Old People from Denmark.” *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/adopt-a-dane-video_n_56b0eac9e4b0a1b96203d453 [accessed 29.03.2020].

With a somewhat ironic twinkle, African societies are presented as assuming their social responsibility towards elderly people, whereas the relationship between younger and older generations in Europe is defined in different ways, as the text suggests: “Old people are not a burden [...] In Africa we cherish our old people.” Similar to the Radi-Aid videos, *Adopt a Dane* shows stereotypical elements of such a charity campaign: besides the face of the campaign, in this case the founder of the AADF, it presents the problem, the helpers in action, and the first happily smiling receivers of the aid:



Using and inverting stereotypes

As the analysis has shown, the fake charity campaigns and videos are working with similar approaches: By using standard elements of campaigning they comply with professional marketing standards; on the surface, they are therefore not immediately and not necessarily recognizable as fake campaigns. More specifically, they take up typical elements of charity campaigns, mainly of those addressing Africa and Africans as main “beneficiaries” of their help. Some of them even refer to specific initiatives such as the Band Aid campaign, which is, for example, referenced by the Radi-Aid campaign, but also by the Norwegian artist and filmmaker Morten Traavik in his satiric video *Pimp My Aid Worker* (2011; <http://traavik.info/works/pimp-my-aid-worker>). As this type of campaign is based on a set of stereotypes still firmly implanted in a Western mainstream imaginary such as the “poor and heavily working but smiling African,” “the poor rural setting where water is scarce,” or the “African

unable to help her-/himself,” but also the “happily helping white aid worker,” referring to this type of campaigns also implies working with these stereotypes. The way the fake campaigns deal with them is by twisting and inverting them in different ways: the directions of goods and people are inverted; heat is no longer linked to drought and hunger in Africa, but heat or warmth on a physical and social level is something very much needed by Europeans; instead of the expected poor rural setting, the viewers are presented with an urban middle and business class setting—and consequently, the disenfranchised no longer live in Africa, but in Europe.

The campaign “RescEU” (2015, <http://www.resceu.org/>), developed in Accra by the German studio yvjo (Johannes Kuhn and Lukas Yves Jakel) in collaboration with the musicians FOKN Bois and a local theatre group does not even invert the direction of goods or people, but it gives a new interpretation to an already existing movement, that is the migration of people from African countries to Europe: Basically, they go to Europe to save the people there from their bad living conditions, meaning mostly loneliness and social isolation. The slogans of the campaign show what Africans can bring them: teach to talk, show to share, help to love. What is inverted here is the perspective: the migratory movement toward Europe is not a threat but brings help, while leaving Africa and migrating to Europe becomes a voluntary and welcome aid activity. The satirical inversion of the standard perspective in this fake campaign is meant to induce a change in how people think about migration and thus contribute to change society.¹⁰ Just as the inversion of stereotypes in the Radi-Aid campaign wants to make people aware of these stereotypes and wants to change the way they think, by exposing the absurdity of the stereotypes and making people laugh about them, RescEU chooses a playful approach instead of being deadly serious.¹¹

Although it is never without risk to tackle extremely serious topics by inverting circumstances and thus provoking laughter, it is also an effective satiric technique to raise awareness in an entertaining way. And as the campaigns all had a rather large international media echo, one can also assume that they have reached many people beyond the circle of those who would usually find this kind of campaign because they are anyways aware of and working on the topic.

¹⁰ See the German press release, http://www.resceu.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Pressemitteilung_14092015_resceu.pdf [accessed 29.03.2020].

¹¹ Ibid.

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