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20/20 Vision: Participatory Communication in Visual Media

A typical colonialist story involves two actors—a subject and an object. The subject invades a foreign territory, declares supremacy, foists their own ideals on the people that live there, and exploit for their own gain. While the traditional ideas of colonialism and imperialism regard political and/or economic control, the modern world has moved away from material command and towards colonization of the minds of people living in foreign territories and controlling dominant discourse about them. Colonization of the mind makes people feel inferior to western society, that they aren't good enough to or can't modernize to the level of the west, or that they must fit in to the western ideal. Dominant discourse is a powerful tool that can be used to shape history. It is reflected in culture and media, reinforcing certain narratives about everything from sports cars to entire peoples. As it stands, dominant discourse is controlled by the hegemonic class, with little allowance for marginalized, oppressed, or faraway groups to tell their stories. Participatory communication is a way for these stories to be told. It is more of a process than a neo-colonialist action, involving a certain group in dialogue or giving them the tools to add to the narrative about them. Participatory filmmaking calls traditional methods of development and communication into question by directly involving a community in an artistic venture—thereby opposing these established colonial-type structures.

There is a clear power differential between artist and subject in traditional visual media, especially when photographing/taking videos of groups of marginalized people. For example, a filmmaker may go into a foreign country in order to make a documentary or film, using the people who live there for their image and nothing more. This is exploitive, long-standing artistic behavior that has been normalized. A film that uses a people just for their image (and not their story) is *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980). The plot follows a glass Coke bottle that falls from the sky into a tribe of San people portrayed to be so far removed from "modern" or "western" society that they think it must be a gift from the gods. Clearly, this is a racist and stereotypical take on people who don't live in the "modern" world. Even though this film is fictional, it shows the power differential between director and actor in non-participatory filmmaking. A director has the power to shape a certain story, and therefore a narrative, in whatever way they wish—they can choose to challenge hegemonic discourse or reinforce it. The subject has no say in the story that is finally produced and released to the public, which can (and oftentimes does) include harmful stereotypes that perpetuate a dominant culture, insinuating superiority and/or inferiority.

Non-participatory communication can also be seen in suspicious attempts at social change, such as " . . . <u>short-term</u> planning and quick fix solutions . . . <u>individual</u> behavior change . . . <u>for</u> the community . . . donors' musts are the focus . . . " (Singhal and Devi 2). This reflects a kind of communication or "aid" that is not actually aimed at helping, just in furthering a neo-colonialist group's interests. For example, Nanda Shrestha's 1995 text "Becoming a Development Category" tells of his experience with the attempted westernization/modernization/ development of rural Nepal in his boyhood. He calls it "development by a colonized mind" (Shrestha 103), meaning that foreign "aid" uses development as an excuse to create a new

western ideal. Westerners use cultural imperialism in order to uphold their influence across the globe. Once content with their lifestyles, culturally imperialized peoples feel inferior compared to westerners, because they are introduced to and indoctrinated with an unrealistic ideal. Shrestha uses the Nepali words *bikasi* (developed) and *abikasi* (underdeveloped) to demonstrate how the entire culture of Nepal changed once foreigners laid their claim. The Nepali culture, like the Hindu pillars of Bhakti (devotion) and dharma (duty and good deeds), was completely undermined by foreigners—they were subjected to the subversion of political, economic, religious, intellectual, social, and even medical norms by foreign people. The Nepali people were barely involved in their own development, instead, they were subject to the whims of those who wanted to develop for them.

Participatory communication is radically different from the subject-object method of communication. Singhal and Devi, in "Visual Voices in Participatory Communication," define it as "a dynamic, interactional, and transformative process of dialogue between people, groups, and institutions that enables people, both individually and collectively, to realize their full potential and be engaged in their own welfare" (Singhal and Devi 2). Participatory visual media projects allow for people to tell their own stories, instead of somebody telling it for them. They have the opportunity to truly be heard, instead of putting their stories in the hands of someone who doesn't understand them, if they even get the opportunity to consent. They also have the opportunity to learn new things, like camera skills. All of these benefits can be very empowering for people, especially the ability to tell their story. Most people in dominant groups take their ability to share for granted, without realizing that things could be so much more difficult. Participatory communication allows for empowered expression, something that marginalized or

oppressed groups may have never been exposed to or even knew existed. Putting the ability to tell a story in their own hands helps to develop people and communities from the bottom up.

Participatory communication directly opposes long-standing, unfair structures. While the colonialist mindset has foreigners "save," "develop," or "help" a foreign country by doing things for them, participation allows people to help themselves, and be involved in their own progress. Dialogue between both subjects, as outlined in "Visual Voices in Participatory Communication" allows each group to state their intentions, and to move forward in a positive and beneficial manner. In addition, the general standard of living and consciousness in the community is raised, because they are enabled and empowered to reflect and become more aware of what they need or want. This is incredibly powerful, because such empowerment may not have felt possible.

In terms of participatory photography and filmmaking, this empowerment is a way to start to dismantle established narratives about certain people. When they are given the chance to shape their own story, they can shape their own narrative, directly adding to the discourse about them. It is abhorrent for the dominant group to create and perpetuate narratives about groups that won't be heard if they attempt to tell their story. By participating in participatory photography and filmmaking projects, marginalized groups can wield the power of the dominant group to try and make a new narrative. It gives value to people who may not have felt like they had much, and it forces others to acknowledge their plight. In addition, it can draw attention and help to solve structural inequalities that may have gone unnoticed without such a project.

However, participatory filmmaking may just be a feel-good way for white artists to produce "new" forms of art. In Hannah Hoechner's "Participatory Filmmaking with Qur'anic Students in Kano, Nigeria: 'Speak Good about Us or Keep Quiet!'", another side of participatory

filmmaking is shown. She writes that the risks that come with participating in these projects are not worth the benefit of being heard for certain groups. These risks could be something like not feeling heard, or be as frightening as harm incurred from speaking out. The case study she uses is a participatory film that she worked on, in which "one of the [boys] who acted as thief in a scene in the film was afraid that people in his village, who had little/no exposure to film, would not be able to tell reality and fiction apart" (Hoechner 644). Other examples of harm from speaking out may include ostracism of people involved, backlash from powerful superiors, or exposure as a member of a certain group. Hoechner also found that an entirely participatory model was difficult. She writes that, "Ideally, participants are involved not only in the creation of data but also in the formulation of research goals and the interpretation and dissemination of findings" (Hoechner 636), but admits that she took control of a lot of the project. Participatory communication projects that don't include all participants from the conception of the projects aren't truly participatory, however, they can take the name of a "participatory" project, lending it legitimacy and credibility that it shouldn't have. In addition, some projects still leave certain structural inequalities addressed, even though a main goal of participatory communication is to focus on the needs of the participants.

Despite its drawbacks, participatory communication can be lauded as a better way to shape discourse about certain groups. It helps to lessen the power differential between subject-object relationships, morphing them instead into a subject-subject relationship. People who are subjects are able to help shape the narrative that is told about them, instead of directors perpetuating stereotypes. Instead of maintaining cultural imperialism and colonization of the mind, influence is shared or even relinquished by filmmakers and photographers. Overall,

participatory communication is extremely important in order to try to start to dismantle colonialist power structures.

Works Cited

Hoechner, Hannah. “Participatory Filmmaking with Qur’anic Students in Kano, Nigeria: ‘Speak Good about Us or Keep Quiet!’” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, vol. 18, no. 6, Nov. 2015, pp. 635–649. *EBSCOhost*, doi: 10.1080/13645579.2014.929877.

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