

***In a Better World* (2011): The Ethics of a Doctor Facing Violence**

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Summary

The main theme "*In a Better World*" (S. Bier, 2011), is violence and its possible answers: forgiveness and revenge. The film revolves around a doctor Anton who works in a refugee camp in sub-Saharan Africa. His family lives in a quiet village in Denmark, where his teenage son suffers bullying at school. This movie shows the fragility of a modern society, normal in appearance but with deep fissures that reflect the tragedies plaguing much of the African continent. It helps to understand the reality experienced by more than 10 million refugees and 15 million internally displaced persons surviving in sub-Saharan Africa. *Hævnen*, the original title whose meaning in Spanish is revenge, invites reflection on another possible response to violence-forgiveness. It is an excellent film for teaching and learning issues related to humanitarian work developed by health professionals in refugee camps around world.

Keywords: Humanitarian medicine, Violence, Refugee camp, Bullying, Medical ethics.

Resumen

En un mundo mejor (S. Bier, 2011), tiene por tema principal la violencia y sus posibles respuestas: el perdón y la venganza. La película se articula en torno a un médico, Anton que desarrolla su labor en un campo de refugiados en el África subsahariana. Su familia vive en un apacible pueblo en Dinamarca, donde uno de sus hijos sufre acoso escolar. Esta película muestra la fragilidad de una sociedad moderna en apariencia correcta, y contrapuesta a las tragedias que asolan a buena parte del continente africano; también ayuda a comprender la realidad que sufren los más de 10 millones de refugiados y más de 15 millones de desplazados internos que sobreviven en África subsahariana. El título original, *Hævnen*, significa venganza conducta opuesta al perdón. En suma es una película excelente para la enseñanza y aprendizaje de temas relacionados con la labor humanitaria que desarrollan los profesionales de la salud en los campos de refugiados de alrededor del mundo.

Palabras clave: medicina humanitaria, violencia, campo de refugiados, acoso escolar, ética médica.

The authors state that this article is original and has not been previously published.

Introduction

"*In a Better World*" (S. Bier, 2011) whose original title, *Hævnen*, means revenge, shows the humanitarian work of Anton, a doctor in a refugee camp in a sub-Saharan country. He serves all kinds of patients, among whom are the victims of a warlord. His wife, Marianne also a doctor, lives in Denmark with their two children. The eldest, Elias, suffers bullying until a new student Christian, arrives. The movie depicts one of the great problems that accompany humanity from its origins - violence and its responses (revenge and forgiveness). *Hævnen* also shows the magnitude of the worldwide problem of refugees.

The main objectives of this paper are to analyze the most relevant medical issues that appear "*In a Better World*", especially health work in sub-Saharan refugee camps. Additionally it addresses the ethics underlying Anton's behavior in response to various forms of violence that he has to face.

Technical details

Title: "*In a Better World*".

Original title: *Hævnen*.

Country: Sweden and Denmark.

Year: 2010.

Director: Susanne Bier.

Screenwriter: Anders Thomas Jensen, Susanne Bier.

Cast: Mikael Persbrandt (Anton), Trine Dyrholm (Marianne), Ulrich Thomsen (Claus), William Jöhnk Nielsen (Christian), Markus Rygaard (Elias), Odiege Matthew (Big Man), Simon Maagaard Holm (Sofus), Kim Bodnia (Lars).

Color: Color.

Runtime: 119 minutes.

Genre: Drama.

Distributor: Golem Distribution.

Production Companies: Danmarks Radio (DR), Sveriges Television (SVT), Det Danske Film Institute, Memphis Film, Media, Zentropa Productions, Film i Väst, Zentropa International, Nordisk Film- & TV-Fond, Film Fyn, Swedish Film Institute, Trollhättan Film AB.

Synopsis. "*In a Better World*" tells two parallel stories of violence linked by a physician, Anton, who performs humanitarian work in a sub-Saharan country. Big Man, a warlord there, ventures into villages terrorizing locals, especially, pregnant women. Anton's family resides in

Denmark, where his son Elias, is being harassed by several of his classmates, until the arrival of Christian. Having lost his mother Christian is full of pain and rage. Pain and lack of communication will sew the violence that supports human relations. This violence is faced by characters with different responses.

Awards: Oscar 2011: Best Foreign Language Film of the year. Bodil 2011: Best Actress (Trine Dyrholm). European Academy Award 2011: Best Director (Susanne Bier). Golden Globes 2011: Best Publisher (Teodora Film). Golden Globes 2011: Best Foreign Language Film. David 2011: European Film.

Trailer

Hævnen a story for a better world

"*In a Better World*" starts in a refugee camp in sub-Saharan Africa, where Anton, a doctor from Denmark, is working. In the camp, Anton treats all kind of



American poster.

patients as a young woman with a deep wound in her abdomen arrives and Anton treats her immediately. Shortly after that someone tells him that it is the work of Big Man, a "Lord War" who with his men ravages the villages committing numerous atrocities. Some of which involve opening the belly of pregnant women to check wagers on the sex of the fetus.

Meanwhile, in London, a teenager reads a poem in front of his mother's coffin. Shortly after, his father takes him to live with his grandmother in a small town in Denmark where Anton lives with his wife Marianne, a physician at the local hospital and their two children. Anton's eldest son Elias is bullied by Sofus and his group. The situation changes with the arrival of Christian who takes Elias' sides and despite his physical inferiority, is capable of threatening and beating Sofus with a knife. When police question the teenagers, they have already hidden the weapon and deny the facts.

Anton returns temporarily to Denmark where he is in the process of a separation from Marianne. The couple goes to the school and Marianne denounces the harassment suffered by her son and blames Sofus who she describes as sadistic psychopath. The teachers and Anton, however, downplaying the problem. Meanwhile, Christian's father, Claus, tries unsuccessfully to get his son thinking about the senselessness of violence. At the same time, the school principal brings Christian, Elias and Sofus together for an apology. The teenagers do it without conviction, to the delighted gaze of the teachers who want to avoid delving into the problem.

Ones outside with his children and Christian, Anton's youngest son begins to fight with another boy. Anton separates them and tries to get the children understand the senselessness of violence. However the father's of the other boy argues with and hits Anton, who doesn't defend himself. The next day, Christian and Elias from a silo see Lars, the man who attacked Anton. By his van the adolescences locate the machine shop where Lars works. Anton accompanied by his children and Christian, go to the workshop, and questions Lars about the reason for his aggression. Anton gets a slap and again does not respond to the violence. On leaving the workshop, he tries to convince his children that Lars is an idiot who only knows violence but not how to apologize for his actions. Christian believes that Lars should learn a lesson and urges Elias to avenge his father. The teens decide to make a bomb to be placed on the underside of Lars' car.

Meanwhile, Anton has returned to the refugee camp where he sees another pregnant woman seriously

injured by Big Man. At the same time gunmen arrive with Big Man who request treatment from Anton. The physician agrees but with the condition that all weapons be removed from the camp. Soon after, Big Man, almost recovered, bursts into the surgery's tent where Anton is unsuccessfully trying to revive the warlord's latest victim. Big Man mocks the corpse: "Little pussy, big knife. Give it to Omar, he likes they don't move". Anton, visibly shaken, tries to force him to leave the camp. The warlord's men abandon him, who falls on the ground, where the angry mob kills him; Anton, staring, impassibly remains unmoved.

Thousands of miles away, Marianne discovers the knife, with which Christian threatened Sofus in Elias's room and immediately decides to talk to Claus (Christian's father). Following this conversation, Christian assumes that Marianne and Claus have a loving relationship, then, blames his father for his mother's death. He accuses him of lying about her recovery and complains because his father wished for her death. Eventually his father admits that like his wife, who suffered cancer, wanted her death because the pain was unbearable. Christian beats his father and takes refuge in his room.

The following Sunday, Elias and Christian placed a bomb underneath Lars's car. A few moments later, a woman and her daughter show up on the sidewalk. Elias runs to stop them but the bomb explodes and he falls to the ground, Christian runs to him and cries desperately for help. Elias is admitted to the hospital where Marianne realizes the severity of her son's injury. When Christian arrives at the hospital to visit his friend, Marianne accuses him of trying to control the lives of others and hits him until the arrival of a nurse who reassures her.

Christian believes that his friend has died and goes to the silo intending to commit suicide. At the last moment, Anton saves him and tells him about the rapid recovery of Elias. Christian confesses he misses his mother and for the first time, we see him mourn. Anton compares death to a veil that separates the living from the dead and says that when you lose a loved one the veil is lifted and "we see death up close". In the final scene, Anton seems to have reconciled with Marianne and returns to the refugee camp. There, as in the beginning of the film, a group of joyous children receive him.

Medical tasks "In a Better World"

In the refugee camp Anton treats a man complaining of pain after the amputation of his left hand and

forearm (min 2) (Figure 1). In the same sequence, he visits a baby and prescribes a daily IV (Figure 2). He also visits an elderly woman advising her to keep her hand immobilized even after the remission of pain (min 2: 40).

Before the end of the stressful day, for Anton and the team of nurses and native aides, a wheelbarrow arrives with a young woman whose faces has been burned and must be treated urgently (min 3:26) (Figure 3). She has an open wound in her abdomen. Anton correctly orders surgery and he reassures his team, "We can do it". Anton's assistant explains that the injury is the work of a Big Man, the local chief, masochistically enjoys opening the belly of pregnant women.



Figure 1. Anton treating a patient.



Figure 2. Anton exploring a baby.



Figure 3. Surgery for the Big Man's first victim.

The second time we see Anton in the hospital tent is on his return from Denmark after visiting his family. A young woman, with an abdominal wound even greater than the previous victim, arrives at the camp in her husband's arms (53:20 min) (Figure 4). When the

young man asks Anton about his wife's condition, he is told that he must wait for the next day. Soon after, as Anton is examining a man with a deep shoulder wound (min 62) (Figure 5), a jeep arrives with paramilitaries firing indiscriminately. An obese man in the back of the jeep asks Anton if he is a doctor and can heal the wound on his right leg which has whitish worms crawling in it (Figure 6) (63:40 min). The doctor responds that he will try but demands the withdrawal of the armed men. When he asks for help, the nurses remain motionless (Figure 7). Then another man comes over and tells him that he is Big Man and that killed all of his children.

During the medical visit, we see patients lying on the hospital tent floor. Big Man complains to Anton about how long it takes to recover and says that he must be strong, since one of his men is eager to take his place. He also threatens Anton, "If I do not kill you, we can be friends. I can be a very powerful friend." The doctor leaves quietly.



Figure 4. The arrival of the second victim to the refugee camp.



Figure 5. Anton treating a patient, the refugee camp at the background.



Figure 6. The warlord's leg with an infected wound.

In the following sequence we see Anton who tries to revive Big Man's latest victim. Like a robot he repeatedly requests oxygen for the patient even though his assistant tells him: "Anton, we have lost her". Finally the doctor gives up in the face of the evidence (min 71) (Figure 8).



Figure 7. Nurses refusing to help Anton.



Figure 8. Anton trying to revive one of Big Man's victim.

Thousands of miles away, Marianne, also a doctor at the local hospital, attends to a man and tells him that in the coming hours he will experience some confusion (we don't know the pathology). The last sequence of medical action takes place in the same hospital where Elias is admitted, victim of the pipe bomb explosion made by Christian. The physician who attends him announces that his breathing is stable but his circulatory system is affected. He also has an open abdominal wound and several cuts (84:47 min). Later Marianne is informed of the MRI result "There is no brain damage", and "The amount of abdominal fluid is minimal" (Figure 9). Elias will fully recover.



Figure 9. Marianne is informed about her son recovery.

The reality of humanitarian aid to refugees

As in *Loving dangerously* ("Beyond Borders", M. Campbell, 2003)¹, *Hævnen* teaches us the strength of people's humanitarianism, their sense of solidarity and compassion and also loneliness and pain due to their inability to express grief and rage. Marianne believes Anton is faking repentance after having been unfaithful. Christian hates his father for hiding his mother's imminent death.

In *Hævnen* violence is always present, sometimes wild and explicit and other times veiled and tidy. The film shows humanitarian medicine in a sub-Saharan refugee camp where a European physician attends all types of patients, from a baby to an elderly woman. The most difficult cases to understand are those caused by the Ward Lord's cruelty.

The realism of some scenes brings us closer to the real violence that occurs in many refugee camps where sexual assaults by armed groups are quite common². In 2009, for example, Doctors Without Borders (DWB) provided medical and psychosocial care to 5,600 rape victims in North and South Kivu. By January 2011, they had already treated more than 100 violated men, women and children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo^{3,4} when they came back from a local market.

The situation is no different in Ethiopia, Gambia, Mali, Somalia or the Sudan where DWB sources affirm that tens of thousands of displaced people are seeking refuge in nearby camps. In some cases these camps hold up to 70,000 people (in the Upper Nile region of the Sudan)⁵. Sometimes these temporary settlements run out of supplies (water, food) forcing refugees to engage in mass marches of many miles to find water. In the words of Dr. Rijnierse of DWB: "... the weakest die while walking, so dehydrated that even urgent medical care cannot save them"^{6,7}.

The refugee camp "*In a Better World*" is located in a windswept desert. We know very little about its inhabitants where children welcome and say Good Bye to the medical team while is driven to a protected enclosed. This camp in sub-Saharan Africa could be any of those sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). By the end of 2011, they had hosted over 10.4 million refugees and 15.4 million more displaced people, 98% of whom were caught in situations of long-term exile⁸. Note that in 2013, UNHCR serves 35.4 million out of a total of 42.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world. These people include asylum seekers, refugees, returnees and stateless persons^{9,10}.

The United Nations has faced the “refugee issue” since its inception in 1945; however the international community has also assumed this responsibility, involving the defense of human rights, early in the twentieth. It can be said that the phenomenon of refugees and displaced people began in early 1912, with the Balkan wars. The assistance to refugees and displaced persons was in the hands of humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross¹¹.

When the UNHCR began its work in January 1951, they had a staff of 34 based in Geneva. In more than six decades they have increased their operations and presently have 259 offices in 118 countries, with the staff of about 6,600 employees. Their work is complex and includes the procurement of medical supplies and food, the return by air of refugees to their country of origin and/or safety as they monitor high risk areas. The Convention relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 is the legal framework for the international protection of refugees. It defines refugee status, sets out their rights and the obligations of countries¹¹.

A decisive step in the evolution of humanitarian aid occurred in 1968 following the Biafra famine caused by the Nigerian Civil War. The ONU’s decision not to intervene resulted in the first humanitarian operation by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). After this a group of French doctors and journalists founded Doctors Without Borders (DWB). In the United Kingdom the International Disasters Institute and Disasters Journal (still one of the best publications on the subject) came to existence. Besides UNHCR and DWB, the decades of the 70’s and 80’s brought major developments in the humanitarian field with the emergence of new organizations such as Doctors of the World, Action Against Hunger, Oxfam and Care. Responding to the African famine of the mid-80’s, they also contributed to theoretical reflection on the differences between humanitarian relief interventions, support, and action¹¹.

The economic needs of Africa have increased significantly in recent years. While donors have responded generously, the gap is widening between needs and resources. In 2011 the economic needs of UNHCR in Africa were \$1,780,000, mostly intended as a response to emergencies in West and East Africa and the Horn of Africa. The 2013 budget for Africa amounted to \$1,820,000, slightly less than in 2012. It has been possible to reduce some of the budget thanks to investments made in previous years (access roads construction and the opening of camps and facilities not needing renewal). During 2013 programs implemented in Africa are characterized by the need to give priority to protection and

immediate assistance, at the expense of investment in long-term actions such as education, livelihood generation and durable solutions. In 2013 UNHCR hopes to meet a third of the educational needs of refugee children¹².

In any case, resources are scarce and often donors only contribute when crises are at a critical stage. Meanwhile many smaller disasters or conflicts are forgotten. Furthermore, the allocation of these funds is not given only by the severity of the disaster and needs of those affected, but largely by the economic and geopolitical interests of some countries¹³.

Violence, revenge and forgiveness in “In a Better World”

It is striking that in a film directed by a woman, most of the protagonists are men. Practically the only female character is Elias’ mother, as Christian’s grandmother plays a very minor role. Perhaps the director wanted to intentionally put emphasize violence in a male world, since that is where it traditionally has been more crudely expressed.

Haevnen emphasizes Big Man’s violence against pregnant women. He is able to dominate men through their women’s bodies and children’s lives. The response to this attack is revenge, with the lynching of Big Man, something that is done by the weakest people. So the least expected becomes “hero” who seeks redress the wrong suffered by the victim and at the same time tries to get recognition of its value^{14,15}. The question that arises is how to apply justice without it becomes a revenge accepting that the impunity for violence is perhaps one of the most serious forms of violence.

Another type of violence corresponds to bullying, a phenomenon of our time. This takes the form of insults to Elias (“Where are you going, Rat Face? Sissy, go gnaw cheese”), while the victim only asks to be left in peace. Christian tells his father: “No, if you hit him very hard the first time. You have no idea about this, Dad, it happens in all schools. Now no one will dare to touch me”. Then the father tries to give reasons about the consequences of violence (“He hits you, you hit him and it’s a never ending story. You don’t realize, that’s how wars start”). This is a phenomenon whose consequences affect both bullies and their victims. In a study of 1,420 participants between 9 and 16 years of age who were evaluated with relation to school bullying, and then between 19 and 26 year olds, it was found that the effects extend beyond adolescence. These include psychiatric manifestations such as depression, anxiety, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and a tendency to suicide¹⁶.

Of all the scenes, those starring Anton and Lars on the playground and in the machine shop best illustrate how we humans threaten each other with small differences, how benevolence confronts intolerance and harmony confronts belligerence. Lars' behavior, both to his son as well as to Anton, is an example of someone who uses violence as a normal way of relating to the world. As for Anton, he gives us clues about how we can move towards a better world. With him we see that one must take sides and be true to oneself, even in the most extreme conditions. Anton is not a moralist; he is someone who does not accept violence and tries to eradicate it with dialogue, kindness, understanding and reflection.

Another type of violence is that which is brewing inside Christian who unable to bear the death of his mother, a reality exacerbated by his inability to communicate his feelings to a parent who does not know how to share his firstborn's pain. Both characters are vulnerable and everyone reacts differently to their problems, but nobody knows how to ask for help.

Director Susanne Bier points out the urgency of ending that endless series of responses dominated by vengeance¹⁷. In that sense, *"In a Better World"* also presents forgiveness as the possible answer to violence. This is forgiveness that is given from the heart and calls for repentance from the offender. It's the kind of forgiveness that Christian asks Elias for in the hospital, or Marianne gives to Anton for admitting his error, or is reflected in Christian's reconciliation with his father. Obviously it is not the false forgiveness asked for by the three children to the delighted gaze of their teachers, a crude and simplified representation of forgiveness.

"In a Better World" correctly reflects the fragility of modern society but it is one with deep fissures and contrasts hidden inside with the tragedies plaguing much of the African continent. Bier is capable of changing points of view through the confrontation of the places that act as a background for the film, the poverty of Africa and the material prosperity of Northern Europe.

Bier belonged to the film movement Dogma 95 initiated by, the Danes, Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, in 1995. It involved simple movies with certain rules that change the traditional way of making films and thinking about them, distancing itself from the artificialities of Hollywood productions. Filmed in natural spaces, shot with a hand held camera, with no postproduction manipulation, it emphasized the drama of the story and characters. Consequently one observes the

constant, nervous movement of the mobile camera in action scenes and in the quiet desolation of the landscape, whether it be north or south, and in the characters' faces in moments of maximum tension.

From a teaching perspective *"In a Better World"* can be used for analysis of medical work in refugee camps, since it offers scenes which deal with various health problems. It also shows the contrast in working conditions with regard to the facilities (patient wards and outdoor surgery) and medical equipment (anesthesia and surgical instruments) in a refugee camp in contrast to a Danish hospital (private rooms with a high-tech operating room, etc.) Other important issues are bullying and parent-child relations. All these aspects have an ethical component especially evident when the physician is in the position of caring for a murderer¹⁸.

The subject, but especially the teacher's intention, can make *"Hævnen"* a resource for teaching both medical and health and social issues.



Poster for the original version.

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