Perseus's Shield: The Politics of the Body in Humanitarian Campaigns

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The starved, wounded or otherwise abused body predominates in the iconography of contemporary humanitarian campaigns (by organizations such as Amnesty International, Médecins sans Frontières and Action Aid), being an essential part of their distinctive rhetoric and mode of address. This particular way of visualizing the body has been widely accused of sensationalism, emotional manipulation and de-politicization. On the basis of the historical and cultural contextualization of the role that the image of the abused body has in the articulation both of humanitarian and of nationalist discourse, this paper analyzes the visual rhetoric of humanitarian campaigns with the aim, first, of revealing the contradictions and potentialities of this particular form of body politics; and, secondly, of investigating its significance to the constitution of post/trans-national moral and political communities.

Images of the starved, wounded, tortured, mutilated or otherwise abused body predominate in the iconography of contemporary humanitarian campaigns, acting as the pivot of their distinctive visual rhetoric. Starting with Amnesty International, in the early 1960s, non-governmental organizations, such as Oxfam, CARE, Médecins sans Frontières and Action Aid, have utilized in their fund-raising and information campaigns horrific images of human suffering to appeal emotionally and morally to an international audience. Given the remarkable growth of humanitarian activism in the last few decades, we can safely assume that this particular visual strategy has been quite effective. At the same time, though, it became the focus of a heated controversy which continues, virtually unabated, till today. Numerous cultural critics, social scientists and journalists, have castigated the appropriation of images of suffering, aiming particularly at the way these are exploited by the mass media. In brief, the main points of this polemic are as follows:

a. Images of suffering have become commodities, infotainment, part of the standard diet of sensational violence offered by the media industries to attract audiences. They excite the audience in such a way as to constitute a veritable pornography of pain.

b. The relentless plethora of these images, however, results in the over-stimulation of the audience, which ultimately becomes weary and indifferent. To fend off this "compassion fatigue" and retain the audience's attention, the media resort to more and more dramatic coverage, to even more compelling and sensational images of human crises (Moeller 9 ff).

c. At the same time, repeated exposure to images of suffering makes suffering less real. By rendering atrocity familiar, these images make "the horrible seem more ordinary [...] familiar, remote, inevitable" (Sontag, *On Photography* 21).

d. Used to elicit sentiment and empathy, these images tend to obfuscate the real causes of human suffering, causes which can only be effectively understood and dealt with by means of detailed information and political analysis.

This summary list presents us with an assemblage of heterogeneous discourses ranging from a moral criticism of the media, and more specifically of visual representations of suffering, to assumptions regarding the workings of the human psyche and the political status of emotion. In essense, we are dealing with an intricate and powerfully suggestive net of links between representation, vision, politics, sentiment and reason, woven around the pivotal figure of the abused body. My initial intention in this paper is to try to disentangle this intricate net in order to determine what exactly is at stake in the controversy concerning the use of atrocity images in contemporary humanitarian campaigns. Having clarified this, I will proceed to my main objective, which is to address the singular politics of the body which is articulated through these images, and more specifically, to examine the potential of these images to problematize traditional concepts of politics and community.

I. The Controversy and its Context

War and genocide, torture and persecution, forced dislocation and famine were the hallmarks of the past dark century. Found in every past era, they marked the twentieth century by their sheer scale, intensity and human cost. In either a factual or a fictive mode, the photographic media reported these dramatic events and their catastrophic consequences more consistently and effectively than any other visual medium. The traditional visual arts – painting and sculpture – failed, at least to a large extent, to deal with the catastrophic dimension of modern civilization in any but an oblique way; a poignant reminder of the social and moral disengagement that has been the underside of the formal experimentality that preoccupied most of twentieth-century art. In the post-war era, however, while press and television images of ravaged bodies from a variety of conflict and famine striken areas started to appear in ever increasing numbers and, in addition, a series of popular cultural forms dominated by the image of the abused body – the slasher thriller, the horror genre, a large part of

the science-fiction genre – emerged to capture the attention of a mass audience, we had a fundamental crisis in the representation of suffering. This was a crisis that was marked by the concurrent emergence of two seemingly quite different, yet essentially cognate arguments.

According to the first, suffering is strictly speaking inexpressible, involving an exhaustion of language, a disintegration of the power to represent. Initially elaborated in the inter-war period by authors who attempted to give an account of the trench warfare experience (Fussell 169 ff), this argument was subsequently developed with exceptional force in the context of the recording of the Holocaust experience (Friedlander), and more recently, of the experiences of torture and pain (Scarry). The second argument suggests, by contrast, that there is an excess of representations of suffering to such a degree that they mask its painful reality and deaden its social impact. The typical way these two arguments are synthesized is that if suffering inherently eludes the economy of representation, its inflationary representation cannot mean but its effective devaluation, distortion and derealization. With regards to literary, and more generally artistic representation, this position was epitomized in Adorno' s most often quoted pronouncement, that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34).

This crisis of representation has a direct bearing on the controversy regarding atrocity images. The latter is immediately related to the second of the above arguments. Given the frequency, however, with which their condemnation for sensationalism slides into the postulate of the non-representability of suffering, the issues raised by the latter cannot possibly be avoided.

As I had the opportunity to argue elsewhere in more detail, the critique of atrocity images is imbued with a strong anti-visualist bias, aimed particularly at the technical image, the image of photography, cinema and television (Paschalidis 1999). This bias is especially evident not only in the conviction that these visual media are integral parts of the modern regimes of power and violence (Sontag, *On Photography* and Virilio), but also in the explicit exclusion of the traditional visual arts from the indictement that images induce amnesia and anaesthesia (Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*). Besides their debt to the prolific iconophobic tradition that runs through most of the modern era, critics rework some of the most cherished motifs of mass culture theories, sucubas the indiscriminate deamonization of mass media, the depreciation of the audience to the role of undiscerning, self-centred philistines. Just as Tertullian, the revered patriarch of this intellectual tradition, denounced both theatrical spectacle (where the sufferer is an actor) and circus spectacle (where the sufferer is a condemned person) as "equally degrading," without taking into account "whether the action observed is real or fictional" (Boltanski 22), latterday critics tend to group all the different kinds of images of violence and

abuse, irrespective of whether this violence and abuse is factual or fictional, systemic or individual, into one single generic category: "violent images." Depending on the occasion, these images are subsequently held responsible for inciting either that which they represent, that is violence, or its very opposite, that is, withdrawal, apathy, indifference (Enzensberger, Kleinman & Kleinman).

What is at issue in this polemic, however, is not just the images of suffering themselves, but also the context in which these images typically appear and function. It is indeed "the revival of humanitarianism and the spectacle of distant suffering together that are really on trial here" (Boltanski 178). The motives of those who respond to humanitarian appeals for aid are deemed questionable and their presumed altruism is dismissed as sheer self-indulgent hypocrisy. Humanitarian discourse itself is accused of facile sentimentalism and shallow moralization. Leftist critics in particular, echoing Kant's profound distrust of emotions and convinced, as he was, that the demand for justice cannot be satisfied with appeals to compassion, stress the need to replace shocking images with arguments and analysis. This line of reasoning, while unjustly undervaluing the loads of critical information propagated on a regular basis by humanitarian organizations to the public, has led them to a particularly awkward quandary: how to denounce the appropriation of images of suffering, without, at the same time, appearing to endorse their repression by those responsible for this suffering? Quite often, then, we find that their condemnation of the over-exposure of such images by the media is accompanied by the rather disingenuous admission of the even greater danger that resides in their under-exposure. As a result, most of them tread rather uneasily the thin line that separates the demand for restraint and self-censorship from the resignation to self-inflicted blindness. The embarrassment of the humanitarian organizations is symptomatic of the extent to which they fail to appreciate the role that these images had in creating new public spheres of controversy, and thus encouraging, as Keane suggests, new forms of awareness, memory, judgement and remedy-seeking (80).

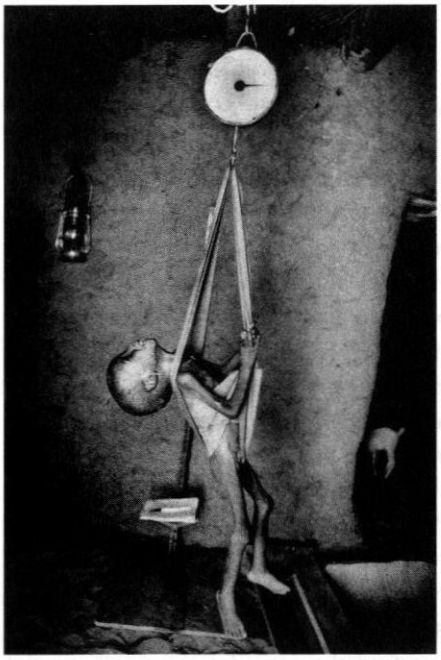
The so-called "politics of pity" had never been a favorite among left intellectuals. Hannah Arendt, for example, associates it with Jacobin terror and reminds us that "it is by no means a matter of course for the spectacle of misery to move men to pity" (70). The fact, however, that both the critics and the defenders (Boltanski) of the humanitarian appropriation of images of suffering bodies focus on the "politics of pity" undervalues the significance of the other two critical terms mentioned dismissively by Arendt: of "the spectacle," that is of sight, and of "misery," that is of pain and suffering. The most significant aspect of images of suffering is the fact that they propound a distinctive politics of the body which articulates these three terms in a historically unique and culturally powerful way.

II. Sight and Body in Humanitarian Discourse

On the whole, it seems that to use or not to use shocking pictures in humanitarian campaigns are two positions which are both defended by vigorous moral argument, by an equally emphatic appeal to moral outrage, to human dignity and decency. Every discussion of these conflicting positions is appropriately made in order to decide which of the two is ultimately the more morally acceptable and defensible (Ignatieff, Taylor). It is worth noting, on the other hand, that very often the terms used by the critics have explicit sexual undertones. For example, images of abuse are condemned for being indecent and promiscuous, pornographic, voyeuristic. Representing the suffering body is perceived as a violation analogous to rape, and gazing upon it as equivalent to a sexual aberration, to a perversion. The terms of this intense moral debate, however, are not as novel as they may seem. In fact, a historical overview reveals that we are faced with the replay of a drama whose initial staging can be traced back to the beginnings of the modern era.

Modern humanitarian discourse first emerged in the age of the Enlightenment, being one of the most characteristic products of the new social aspirations and moral ideas of the times. According to Karen Halttunen, at the core of this new discursive formation we find the articulation of two crucial elements: foremost, the placement of cruelty foremost among the "ordinary vices" and the subsequent redefinition of pain as socially unacceptable and eradicable, creating thus a radically new ground for the critique of existing political, moral, and religious institutions. Second, a reconceptualization of ethics as a matter not of rules and injunctions, but of spontaneous sentiment. In the context of this new moral philosophy, sympathy is a sentiment stirred primarily through what Locke considered to be the principal sense: sight (Halttunen 304-5).

These two elements – the idea of the unacceptability and eradicability of pain, and the concept of "spectatorial sympathy" – provide us with the key to understanding both the genealogy of the humanitarian appropriation of atrocity images, and more generally, the wider moral authority that these images have possessed since then. Goya, with his series of sketches titled "The Disasters of War," and Delacroix, with his "Massacre of Chios" (1824), by depicting the atrocities committed by the Napoleonic and the Ottoman armies respectively, were the first visual artists who realized the moral-political effectivity of atrocity imagery. In the rest of the nineteenth century, we have a profusion of novels, reports and drawings full of graphic details that champion the anti-slavery, the factory, the prison and the school reform movements. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Lewis Hine's pictures of the abject state of laboring children and FSA's photographic record of the deprivation and physical delapidation of the



Picture 1. Sebastiao Salgado, *A Child is being Weighed as part of a supplementary food relief program,* Gourma Rarhous, Mali, June 1985.

drought-stricken farmers of the Mid-West, established shock photography as a paramount instrument of social reform. In all these cases, just as in the pictures of photojournalists like Don McCullin, Sebastiao Salgado (Picture 1) and their numerous successors, we find the same visual strategy: the depiction of the suffering body "not only as the locus of pain but also as the common bond between those who suffer and those who would help" (Laqueur 177). The use of images of human suffering does not constitute, therefore, a peculiarly recent devise, eclectically connected to the practices of modern visual media, but rather a diachronic constant of humanitarian rhetoric.

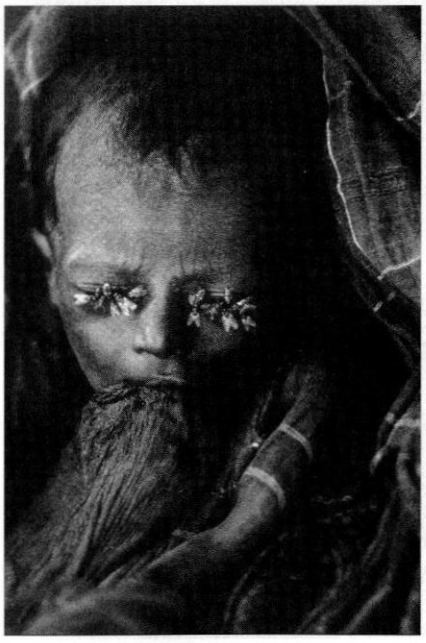
The polemic against these images, on the other hand, has an equally long pedigree, as well. As Halttunen points out, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the new distaste for pain and spectorial sympathy had a rather troublesome underside: the growth of a sensationalist literature – like the Gothic novel, pornographic fiction, popular accounts of horrific murders – which treated pain "as alluring, exciting and ultimately obscene" (Halttunen 319). This increasingly popular pornography of pain became a source of intense embarrassment for humanitarians of the time who were accused, just like their contemporaries, of being sadistic voyuers and hypocrits. Their emphasis on the moral dangers of attending public spectacles of suffering placed reformers in a difficult position: how to describe human abuse in graphic detail as witnesses and yet assume moral integrity? Their response to this acute moral dilemma was to develop a series of narrative strategies to defend themselves from any accusations of sensationalistic pandering, such as omission, formulaic denials (Halttunen 328). In the face of mounting criticism, modern day humanitarians have responded in pretty much the same way. In the past few years, we observe a marked decrease in the shock-value of the images they publish. Although some, such as Amnesty International, persist in their policy of publishing pictures documenting the atrocities commited by oppressive regimes all over

the world (Pictures 2 and 3), others show the most harrowing of the atrocity images only on their websites.

Although symptomatic of the wider cultural conjuncture, this concession has not meant, however, a significant departure from the time-honoured visual strategy of humanitarianism, but rather a renegotiation of its relations with the traditional public sphere of print and audio-visual media. The extensive recent use of the Internet for the publication and circulation of images of suffering testifies not to their withdrawal from the public sphere, but rather to contemporary humanitarianism's rising emphasis on the public sphere of our age. The Internet is after all a type of public sphere which has presented humanitarian organizations with an immense new potential for accessibility, immediacy and mobilization, and at the same time has allowed them to dissociate themselves from the questionable and widely chastized practices of mass media. The latter, on the other hand, usually complement rather than antagonize the activities of humanitarian organizations. The American Red Cross, for example, reported that public contributions for Somalia rose in direct proportion to the amount of media coverage given the crisis (Moeller 99). Prominent, among this media coverage, was *Time*'s four-page photo-essay entitled "Landscape of Death" (Picture 4). The question then remains: what is

Picture 2. *"25 Years of Human Rights: 25 Years of Torture."* Poster for Amnesty International, 1976

Picture 3. "When you look at this picture what do you see?". Street youth wounded in his stomach, Bogota, Colombia. Amnesty International advertisement, *The Guardian*, 14 May 1994. Julio Etchart/Reportage



Picture 4. *"Landscape of Death," Time,* 14 December 1992. Gianni Giasanti, Sygma.

the peculiar semiotic and political resonance of images of the suffering body in humanitarian discourse? It's time to turn our sight on the unsightly.

III. The Abused Body as Text

Humanity, just like the national community, is an imagined community, a community established not on the basis of some actual, lived experience of communality, but through the cultivation of a certain kind of imagination by means of a series of symbolic objects and practices. Humanist discourse has historically utilized two different kinds of imagination in order to construct the idea of human community: the utopian and the dystopian. In the former, exemplified by the literary-artistic tradition of Renaissance humanism, the human body is represented as perfection incarnate, a combination of health, vigour and beauty. The theory of human proportions, whose unprecedented growth and appeal marks Renaissance culture, consisted in a synthesis of the transcedentally inspired tradition of harmonistic cosmology, which links the human body to the universe, with the rules of normative aesthetics (Panofsky 118-20). In the context of this moral-aesthetic discourse, the ideality of the human body, exemplified in the canonization of the human figure, is posed simultaneously in terms of the transcendance of social ills and of natural limitations. The latter kind of imagination, exemplified by the dystopian texts of the industrial and post-industrial eras, and most significantly, by humanitarian discourse, is by contrast, inextricably linked to the representation of the disfigured body; the body corrupted by pain, disease, wound or deprivation, the body denatured because of social evil. By contrast to the transcedental universalism configured in the image of the beautiful body, what prevails here is a reaffirmation of nature, of the species-being, of the lifeworld. In the humanitarian campaigns of the last two centuries, it is this dystopian body which is typically used to evoke the concept of common humanity and incite action for its defense. In a sense, humanitarian discourse developed its visual themes in counter-point to that of humanism, focusing on that which represents the brutalization and violation of its ideal. The age of the technical image, however, has led humanitarianism to a radical break with the iconographical tradition.

The representation of the beautiful body, whether in the humanist tradition or in the traditional visual arts, is highly regulated by an elaborate series of rules and norms, established both by stricture and by the artistic canon. The same holds with the representation of the suffering body, which, interestingly enough, has developed rather as a thematic variant of the iconography of the beautiful body, obeying the same fundamental rules of aesthetics and decorum. The new visual media, by contrast, have brought about a dramatic departure from all this

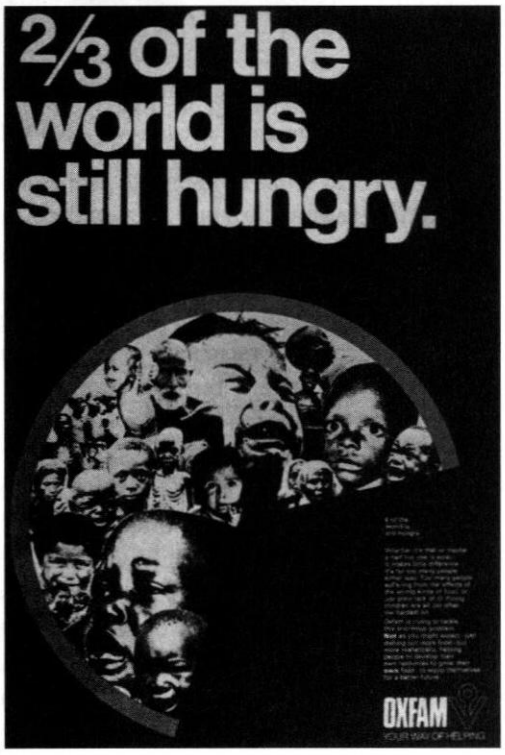
heavily coded tradition, ushering the body into an age characterized by the massive deregulation of the representation of pain, suffering and death. The photographic, and more generally, the technical image of the abused or suffering body is strictly speaking a text without codes. Its apprehension does not presuppose competence in any specific repertory of rules or conventions. Far from wishing to resuscitate here the naïve iconism of Barthes' early conception of photography (Barthes), what I want to stress here is the fact that we are dealing with a text which, paradoxically perhaps, resists the play of codes. The suggestion that a certain "iconography of predicament," based on the Christian iconographical tradition, provides the essential visual resourses to represent human catastrophe (Wright) is quite untenable. Notwithstanding the sporadic analogies that may inevitably turn up, it is impossible to reduce the vastly variegated photographic record of the disastrous past century to variations on a few biblical motifs; any attempt to do so is certain to distort it beyond all recognition, rather than ensure its proper recognition. More significantly, we are all aware of the fact that, however calculated and studied the picture-taking may really have been, even the slightest suspicion of the mediation of some code or convention in the representation of victims of warfare, torture or famine is enough to severely undermine the sense of the picture's authenticity, and more generally, its moral authority as a document.

By contrast, then, to the textual or canonical grounding of the traditional iconography of pain and suffering, the photographic image of the suffering body does not rely on any specific cultural intertext for its signification. It is itself established as an intertext, or more precisely, as an inter-body, as the image of some-body who is essentially every-body. Here pain and suffering act not as a universal language – for any language, however universal it may be, is still rule-bound – but as a translation machine, which weaves equivalences across ethnic or racial differences, establishing the body as the space of an archetypal writing, as the primordial site of the origin, but also of the destruction of all signification.

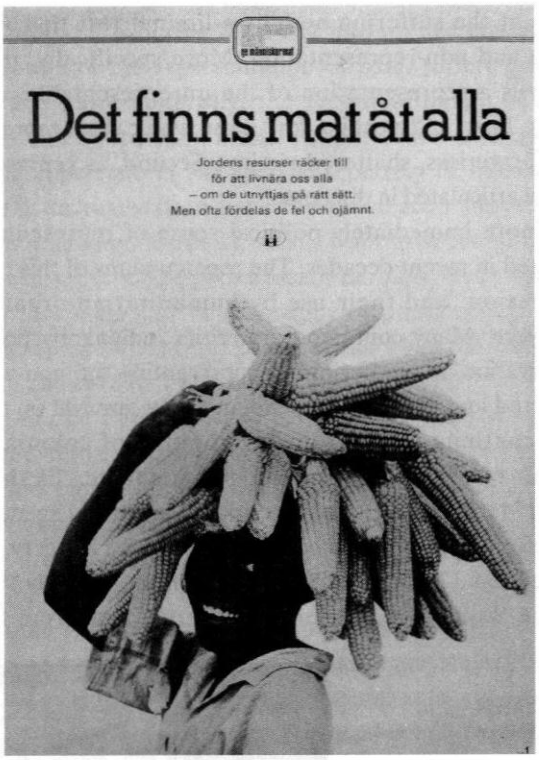
The image of the suffering body is a text that resists not only code and convention, but also interpretation. Distended bellies, destroyed limbs, open wounds, emaciated or vitiated bodies (the signs of starvation, injury, mutilation, torture or death) need no systematic interpretative method to be understood. There is no latent or deep meaning hidden in the scars and stigmata of suffering. The traditional hermeneutic distinction between textual surface and depth is, in this case, irrelevant. The boundary between inside and outside, between the skin and the bones or the viscera, all that which in effect constitutes the social body, the site inhabited by the codes of culture, the clues of social status and of character, is dissolved. The suffering body signifies by virtue not of its depth, but of its lack of it.

The image of the suffering body is a liminal text that wavers between representation and non-representation. More specifically, the image of the suffering body is a representation of the unrepresentable, and that in two different senses. First, as "speaking for" those who cannot represent themselves, the nameless, powerless, shattered victims. Second, as representation of that which cannot be articulated in discourse.

The first, more immediately political sense of representation, has been widely challenged in recent decades. The repercussions of this challenge for the images in question, and their use by humanitarian organizations, were particularly severe. Many contemporary critics indignantly point out that the pictures of starvation and suffering, by representing the non-western world as uncivil, disordered and deprived, dependent for its survival on the mercy of the West, simply continue the patronizing rhetoric of colonialism. Morality, according to Enzensberger's characteristic aphorism, "is the last resort of eurocentrism" (74). In response to this criticism, many aid agencies have revised their visual rhetoric by adopting a much more positive imagery. The difference, for example, between Oxfam's campaign poster from the early 1970s (Picture 5), and that by the Swedish Aid Agency Lutherhjalpen, from the early 1980s



Picture 5. Oxfam campaing poster, 1973.



Picture 6. Swedish Aid Agency, Lutherhjalpen, 1982.

(Picture 6), is quite striking. It is, in fact, the latter kind of imagery that predominates in the recent publications of aid organizations like Médecins sans Frontières or Action Aid.

It is true, then, that the commerce of images between the West and the Rest takes the form of a rather unequal exchange. The West exports images of euphoric bodies, mainly through advertizing, films and television programmes. The images it imports from the non-western regions of the world, though, are mainly those of suffering bodies. At the same time, a wealth of maps and graphs produced regularly by various international institutions and agencies cast global geography in terms of a corporal geography, a world-wide hierarchy of bodies represented in terms of rising discomfort, want, danger and deprivation. The corporal geography that emerges from these kinds of images and maps undeniably coincides with the anomalous geography of imperialism and (neo)colonialism. However, to adduce that, in order to support their effective synergy and complicity seems rather misguided. As Spivak, in her critical engagement with the recent current of counter-representational thought

emphasizes, "representation has not withered away" (308). The task of representing those who cannot represent themselves remains an issue of paramount urgency in the intellectuals' agenda.

In the second sense of representation, the image acts so as to fill in the absence of language, through a discourse which is figurative without being metaphorical: its tropes are the literal disfigurations of the body. Given that pain, agony and deprivation cannot properly inhabit language, their visual representation allows them to enter the public sphere and address our moral imagination, our relation, that is, with the distant suffering Other. The representation of the unrepresentable in this case has little in common with the problematics of the sublime as elaborated by Lyotard. Images of suffering do not address a failure of imagination to produce an object that can match a concept, but a failure of language to produce a concept that can match an experience. They try not to make visible that which is invisible, as the postmodern arts aspire to do (Lyotard 77 ff), but to make visible that which is unseen, on account of being distant, and fundamentally unsayable, unable to be fully articulated in discourse. By contrast to the sublime's definition as an allusion to the inconceivably abstract, the Absolute, the intrinsically formless, images of suffering are representations of formidable materiality, of the painfully concrete, of the glaring, almost blinding vision of the deformed.

If the first sense of representation relates to the most manifest and, at the same time, most controversial aspect of the politics of the body propounded by these images, the second sense confronts us with the most distinctive and compelling aspect of this politics. Although in recent history atrocity images have proved to be extremely powerful political weapons, no regime that has ever exploited them as such succeded in safely containing their disturbing potential. The image of the suffering body cannot be recuperated fully by any political discourse. It is instructive that Amnesty International's picture of a street youth wounded by Colombian police forces caused the rage not only of the Colombian but also of the British Government. However hard pressed into the service of a political institution or ideology, the signifier of the abused body disrupts any totalizing discourse by overflowing its artificial boundaries, breaking up its constitutive oppositions and overturning any determined closure into indefinite disclosure. Hence its protagonistic presence in the characteristically anti-political politics of contemporary humanitarianism. In what precise sense, though, is this politics "anti-political"? How can this deconstructive potential of images of suffering, moreover, be reconciled with the need to create a basis for political community and action?

IV. Towards New Communities?

Charles Dickens devotes the fourth chapter of his novel *Bleak House* (1852-53), which he entitles "Telescopic Philanthropy," to satirizing the international aspirations of humanitarianism. Here we are introduced to Mrs Jellyby who is so preoccupied with aiding the people of an African village that she neglects her own children. Her eyes have "a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if [...] they could see nothing nearer than Africa!" (Dickens 37). At her antipodes, there is Esther Sumerson, who takes care of Mrs Jellyby's children and espouses a more sane philosophy of social action: she concentrates her efforts not on the distant but on "those immediately about [her]" (Dickens 96).

As Dickens' satire makes clear, humanitarian activism does not restrict itself to the territorial bounds of national community. It is widely recognised that humanitarian activism has been one of the earliest globalizing agents. Indeed, in recent years it has developed to become one of the central pivots of post-national politics, forging moral principles and allegiances that transcend and even question those associated with the most cherished political community of modernity, the national community. But what kind of political communities do humanitarian campaigns interpellate and construct through the use of images of suffering, and how do they differ from national communities? At first sight, there seems to be an important similarity between these two kinds of community. They are both founded on representations of death and suffering. On close examination, however, we discover a number of fundamental differences.

Imagining the nation entails a scene of mourning from which the actual object of this mourning is strangely absent. There exist, argues Benedict Anderson, "no more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism [...] than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times [...] Yet void as these tombs are of identifable human remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings" (9). Just as religion gave meaning to human suffering and death, transforming them into intimations of immortality, nationalism provided "a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contigency into meaning" (11). Death is thus radically abstracted and anaestheticized, turned into the figure of the national community's extra-historical, immortal being.

From the perspective of nationalism, therefore, the corpse "is strictly speaking the *unimaginable*," with the paradoxical consequence that "the nation as an imagined community comes into existence thanks to a death that it cannot mourn, a corpse it cannot bury – a corpse that must be foreclosed, expelled from the nation's abstracted, aestheticised anonymity" (Redfield 68). In the

case of humanitarian discourse by contrast, the emphasis is on specific bodies, on particular sufferings, on death and suffering unredeemed by aesthetic or metaphysical abstractions. A particularly instructive way to perceive this fundamental difference between the abstract, spectral body of nationalist discourse, and the concrete, material body of humanitarian discourse is through the concepts of the martyr and the victim.

The moral and sentimental bond of national community is based on the solemn commemoration of its martyrs, of those who have suffered and died for its defense and glory. Through his suffering and death, a martyr exemplifies and testifies to the nobility and legitimacy of the national ideal. His status is heroic; he is to be remembered and revered, envied and emulated. Humanitarian discourse, by contrast, is articulated around the body of the victim, the victim of war, of dislocation, of famine, of torture, of cruelty, of persecution. Victims do not exemplify or testify to any communal ideal, but the crude reality of the body's vulnerability, of mortality. Victims are typically the non-combatants. There is nothing particularly heroic or glamorous about them. They are no source of pride, but of frustration and indignation.

The martyr is an essential part of the collective iconography of modern societies. The first half of the twentieth century is dominated by a wave of monument-building devoted to the cult of martyrs, mostly the war dead. In front of the virtually absent, ghostly body of the martyr our body is dissolved into the collective organism of the nation. We are transported with feelings of self-negation and self-transcendance. At the same time, if it were not for humanitarian iconography, the body of the victim would have remained completely invisible. These highly controversial images of human suffering form the only public memorial that exists for the victims of twentieth-century atrocities. Looking at them, we cannot indulge in any fantasy of self-transcendence. Instead of forgetting or sublimating our body, this comes forth as an absolute and singular corporeality, defined by its frailty and its finitude.

As Marc Redfield points out, the death that this wealth of monuments devoted to the cult of national martyrs remember, mourn and celebrate is not, however, entirely abstract. It is "a male death, suffered in war—war with some other, anonymous, abstract nation." In effect, from the perspective of nationalism, "only male citizens can die, and they can only die on war. All other kinds of loss or damage are to be sublated into this death, to the extent that national identity succeeds in trumping all other forms of identity" (69). It is on these other forms of identity that the humanitarian iconography of suffering tends, by contrast, to focus: women, children and above all, foreigners, all those which nationalism had traditionally excluded as belonging to a different "natural" order, as strange, paradoxical or inferior bodies.

The distinction between the martyr and the victim is in practice frequently ambiguous. In many cases, those whom a certain national or political community perceives and treats as martyrs—for example war casualties—are reclaimed as victims by humanitarians and pacifists. The often contentious character of these two identities goes a long way towards explaining the contradictions and controversies surrounding the activities of organizations like Amnesty International or Médecins sans Frontières. Who exactly are or should be their beneficiaries? Only the innocent bystanders of the various military and political conflicts or some of their very protagonists as well—i.e., political prisoners, prisoners of war etc.? Given that "the ethics of victimhood generate empathy only where victims are obviously blameless" (Ignatieff 68), it is not mere sentimentalism, as Moeller presumes (98-99), but dire political exigency which makes children the preferred subject of humanitarian imagery. Humanitarian organizations are painfully aware of the fact that failure to identify such innocent victims will tend to significantly reduce the public impact of their appeals.

While, then, national community is founded on the supersession and sublimation of suffering and death, the humanitarian community is based, by contrast, on the acknowledgement and confrontation of suffering and death. If death, though, is "indissociable from community, for it is through death that the community reveals itself [...] for community itself is revealed in the death of others" (Nancy 14-15), the national community is found wanting. Unwilling to fully admit and assume responsibility for the destroyed body, and simultaneously unable to expel it permanently, the national community is condemned to be inherently unstable, menaced by the ghosts it itself created. The distinctiveness of the humanitarian politics of the body, on the other hand, is that its primary aim is not to predicate—i.e., to *incorporate*—a subject as a member of a certain polity, but to confront polity with precisely that which exceeds and questions it: the destruction of the body. Here lies one of the most dramatic, long-term implications of the humanitarian politics of the body: in the radical problematization and redefinition of the relationship between the individual, material body and the body politic.

Epilogue

The recent emergence of monuments for victims, the transformation of war-memorials, such as the Vietnam War Memorial, from sites of redemptive sacrifice to sites of personal and collective trauma, and more generally, the fact that, far beyond the reach of humanitarian activism the rhetoric of victimhood has become the moral vernacular for the articulation of a wide variety of claims and demands in the field of contemporary cultural politics, all point to an incipient change in the forms of political authority and legitimacy, both on a

national and an international level. Although many governments continue to violate more or less systematically the human rights of their citizens, (and notwithstanding the sceptical, and often even cynical attitude of many Western intellectuals), the legal force of human rights claims and the emergence of moral norms in the international context have grown significantly stronger over the last decades. Humanitarian organizations were instrumental in bringing about this situation, first, by initiating cultural constructions of human suffering and proceeding to identify a range of until then rarely, if at all, seen human abuses as unacceptable cruelties. Second, by utilizing a visual rhetoric that differs radically from that used in traditional, nationally based politics, a visual rhetoric, moreover, which, as our review of the history of humanitarianism revealed, is not contigent or incidental, but integral to the emergence, evolution and efficacy of its discourse. The harrowing representations of atrocities are not simply means to an end, but, as Siegfried Kracauer emphasizes, "an end in themselves." When we look at "the piles of tormented human bodies in films about Nazi concentration camps," he goes on to add, "we redeem the horrible from its invisibility behind the veils of panic and imagination. This experience is liberatory, because it ends one of the most inviolable and repressing taboos. Perhaps the biggest labour of Perseus is not that he cut off Gorgon's head, but that he overcame his fear and looked at her reflection in his shield. Wasn't this that enabled him to cut off the beast's head?" (423). The polemic against images of suffering has often accused them of actually shielding their viewers from the agonies they depict, by establishing a protective distance between them and gruesome reality. This is, in fact, true of all representation, whether factual or fictional. Kracauer's point, however, makes clear that the reflective surface of the images of suffering allows them to serve simultaneously as a means of defense and as an assault weapon, as long, that is, as we overcome our fear, and look.

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