Seeing Suffering

Jeffrey Flynn

Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Fordham University, New York; jeflynn@fordham.edu

Abstract

This review essay focuses on two books, Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno's *Humanitarian Photography: A History* (2015) and Lasse Heerten's *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (2017). It situates the books in relation to broader debates about similarities and differences between humanitarianism and human rights practice, with a particular focus on the visual cultures of and ethical debates surrounding representations of suffering.

Keywords: atrocities; Biafra; humanitarianism; human rights; photography; suffering; visual culture

> There are many uses of the innumerable opportunities a modern life supplies for regarding – at a distance, through the medium of photography – other people's pain. Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen.
>
> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

The subtitle of historian Lasse Heerten's brilliant book on Biafra is *Spectacles of Suffering*. He remarks on the double meaning of the word spectacles in the concluding paragraph. When conflicts or disasters are transformed into global media events, they become spectacles. But it is also a synonym for eyeglasses – the spectacles of suffering are the lenses themselves, through which, in this case, Western observers see distant suffering. A central focus of Heerten's book is how, for a brief few months in the summer of 1968 the Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) was transformed into the international media event 'Biafra'. Biafran secessionists failed at first to get the world's attention with the language of self-determination. But once the West saw the plight of Biafrans through a 'humanitarian lens' the response was overwhelming – involving the largest airlift since WWII. Nothing did more to elicit this response than images of starving 'Biafran babies' that saturated the Western media. Those images, which would become an 'icon of Third World suffering', were the 'watershed that turned the conflict into a global media event' (9).

It was neither the first nor the last time such images were used to draw Western attention to distant suffering. Indeed, the path-breaking collection *Humanitarian Photography* – which includes an essay by Heerten on Biafra – takes a longer view by gathering historians to analyse the visual culture of humanitarianism from the late nineteenth century to the present. Together these books reveal that there is no single 'humanitarian lens' and that the question of how to frame human suffering, both effectively and ethically, has been debated ever since the pain of others could be captured on camera.

Of course, the visual culture of humanitarianism predates the invention of photography (officially announced in France in 1839). Other visual technologies were used during earlier episodes in the long history of Western humanitarianism to depict nightmarish natural disasters, the suffering of slaves, or the horrors of war. Within weeks of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake that destroyed much of the city and killed thousands, woodcuts and engravings portraying the horrific event were everywhere in Europe. It was one of the 'first great mass media events' (Sliwinski, 2011: 88). Decades later, British abolitionists would disseminate the disturbing graphic of bodies packed into the hull of a slave ship, often viewed as a 3-dimensional model. Goya did not need a camera to etch realistic depictions of brutality in *The Disasters of War*. Completed between 1810 and 1820, they were published in 1863, a year after Henry Dunant's impassioned plea for the humanitarian reform of war-making in *A Memory of Solferino*. Goya's images of suffering and atrocity, as Sharon Sliwinski aptly puts it, were 'informal training for the spectator of human rights' (2011:12).

Even if the visual culture of humanitarianism precedes the birth of photography, it is hard to deny the 'special relationship between photography and humanitarianism'

Journal of Humanitarian Affairs Volume 3, No. 3 (2021), 56–63 © The authors
http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/JHA.075

MANCHESTER
1824
Manchester University Press

(Fehrenbach and Rodogno, 2015: 4). Advances in technology, such as the portable Kodak introduced by George Eastman in 1888, secured this connection just before and after the turn of the nineteenth century, as images from multiple waves of Indian famine were disseminated (1876–78, 1896–97, 1899–1900) and 'atrocity photographs' distributed by The Congo Reform Association (1903–13) generated moral outrage about King Leopold's exploits in the Congo. In *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1905), Mark Twain has his fictional King Leopold curse 'the incorruptible Kodak' as 'the most powerful enemy that has confronted us [and]... the only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe' (cited in Twomey, 'Framing Atrocity': 59).

Both books under review here explicitly situate themselves at the intersection of scholarship in media studies and visual culture and the sub-fields of both the history of humanitarianism and human rights. The emergence of such scholarship is an exciting and welcome development. Among other things, it provides an additional angle for analysing both affinities and differences between human rights and humanitarian practice – an issue getting more attention of late (Barnett, 2020) – by attending to their respective visual cultures. It also raises conceptual challenges, given that I have already referred not only to 'humanitarian' photography but also to 'human rights' and 'atrocities' above. This is the first theme I take up: books like these are contributing to the history of *what* – of humanitarianism? Of human rights? Of something broader than both, like the visual culture of distant suffering? After addressing these conceptual challenges, I turn to some of the substantive contributions the books make to analysing images of suffering before concluding by reflecting on some of the perennial ethical and political issues raised by such images. Some are specific challenges – how to generate donations for humanitarian relief without using denigrating images of victims; others are more general – what the vivid photographic record of inhumanity spanning nearly two centuries can tell us, if anything.

Interpretive Frames

In 'Framing Atrocity', Christina Twomey makes a crucial terminological point that applies to both volumes and more broadly to the history of humanitarianism and human rights. 'To fully appreciate the development of atrocity photography,' Twomey writes, 'we need to understand both sides of that formulation: the production, reception, and circulation of images (photographs), and the meanings, inferences, and shared assumptions about the language employed to describe them (in this case, "atrocity")' (47). We can call the latter the interpretive language that accompanies the image (see Heerten, 2017: 144). Twomey distinguishes talk of 'atrocity' from talk of 'human rights abuses' since, during the late nineteenth century period that is her focus, 'atrocity' was the dominant term for discussing 'the violation of the human body in the context of war and colonialism' (48). If we want to understand how Western viewers interpreted such photos in the nineteenth century, we need to understand their interpretive frame (more recently, the term 'atrocity' has seen a comeback in discussions of, for example R2P; see Evans, 2008).

Of course, Twomey's essay appears in a book on 'humanitarian' photography, not 'atrocity' photography (see the reflections in *Picturing Atrocity* (Batchen *et al.*, 2012) on the contemporary 'crisis' in the photography of 'atrocity', in which Twomey also has an essay). Twomey clarifies the connection. Her essay 'examines the links between humanitarian concern, photography, and atrocity at three key moments in the evolution of the relationship between them': activism around 'Bulgarian atrocities' in the 1870s, the pioneering use of photography in humanitarian relief efforts in response to Indian famines in the 1870s, and the Congo reform efforts that brought atrocity and photography together 'for the first time in an orchestrated campaign' (48).

That explains why Twomey's essay belongs in a book on 'humanitarian' photography. But could the essay also appear in a volume on 'human rights' photography? In fact, Sharon Sliwinski's book *Human Rights in Camera* (2011) does include a chapter on the Kodak in the Congo. One reason is clear. Atrocity photographs share affinities with the visual culture now associated with human rights – that is, a visual culture focused on violations and harms, and mobilising people around stopping perpetrators. Understood that way, there are four chapters in *Humanitarian Photography* that could easily appear in a volume on 'human rights photography': the two chapters on the campaign against atrocities in the Congo (by Twomey and by Kevin Grant), one on the Armenian genocide (by Peter Balakian), and one on how Holocaust memory affected the Western reception of photos of suffering from Biafra (by Heerten). Of course, to avoid violating Twomey's point about respecting earlier interpretive languages, such a volume on human rights photography would have to be clear that the language of human rights was not the interpretive language used in earlier periods.

The general point is that it can be illuminating to look at the historical developments that made recent human rights photography possible by looking at photos that were not viewed as 'human rights' photography in their time. Sliwinski even includes a chapter on the Lisbon earthquake in a book ostensibly about the visual culture of human rights. This can be confusing if one takes the earthquake to be a central episode in the history of humanitarianism – where it has been situated by scholars ranging from anthropologist Peter Redfield (2013: 42–4) to historian Silvia Salvatici (2019). But the Lisbon earthquake played a significant role in constituting a European public sphere as an arena in which people discuss how to respond to distant suffering in many forms. A public sphere like that enabled new pathways for mobilising responses to distant suffering and, in that sense, was a precondition for any subsequent humanitarian, human rights, or anti-atrocity campaign and for drawing attention to 'causes' under many labels (Boltanski, 1999: 30–2).

In short, it is indeed important for historians to inform us about the interpretive languages of previous eras, but it can also be illuminating when they show us how earlier eras provided pathways for later developments. Explaining precisely how or why those pathways ended up being the basis for new developments under different banners in altered political contexts is of course crucial. Twomey brings this point to the fore in her essay: 'While the history of human rights has inspired a dynamic and still evolving historiographical debate, there is less attention to the ways in which photographic representations of human suffering might have contributed, from the late nineteenth century, to the new wave of humanitarian action that was the predecessor of concern about human rights in the twentieth century' (48). Those connections certainly deserve more scholarly attention. In another book on photography and political violence, *Cruel Radiance*, Susie Linfield touches on the issue. Linfield relies on the language of human rights to frame the analysis, pointing to the way suffering has been the 'incubator of human rights' since the Holocaust (2010: 34).

This is all important to keep in mind when analysing periods like the late 1960s and early 1970s when things were in flux. What it meant at that time to be a humanitarian organisation was changing right on the cusp of both a 'breakthrough' for human rights activism as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch entered the world stage (Moyn, 2010) and the reinvention of humanitarianism by Doctors Without Borders (Davey, 2015). A great virtue of Heerten's book is the way he approaches this issue when analysing that period. He rightly asks, 'if we create a sharp distinction between human rights and humanitarianism, how can we understand their collective transformational effect on international politics' (7)? A 'new form of politics and activism' (7) connected to a 'new political imagination that evolved around notions of human suffering' (9) formed the background for both human rights *and* humanitarian practice during this period. We only see this if we analyse some of the commonalities in the politics of distant suffering that coalesced in this period (Flynn, 2020: 65–70).

One shortcoming of the volume *Humanitarian Photography*, however, is that the editors do not take the opportunity to analyse such issues more systematically in their introduction. They situate their endeavour in relation to the recent scholarly focus on 'humanitarianism and human rights' (2), but without clearly identifying affinities and differences between the two. When it comes to defining 'humanitarian photography', they narrowly define it as 'the mobilization of photography in the service of humanitarian initiatives across state boundaries' (1). That just pushes the question back a step: what is a 'humanitarian' initiative? Clearly, they think atrocity photography falls under this heading, but for similar reasons human rights photography could too. Perhaps a broader definition might have been more apt: humanitarian photography, broadly construed, is the use of photography to mobilise concern for distant suffering – whether that suffering is caused by famine or natural disaster, or by an atrocity, massacre, war, or human rights violations. In that way, the label humanitarian photography could lay claim to being the broadest available term for a range of visual cultures revolving around suffering while keeping in mind the different interpretative languages used at different times along with the possibility of multiple 'humanitarian lenses'.

Analysing the respective visual cultures of human rights and humanitarianism is just one of many thorny tasks involved in discerning the relation between human rights and humanitarianism (see Barnett, 2020). Focusing on images and visual cultures may be particularly fruitful because of the overlap and cross-fertilisation of various strands in the representation of distant suffering. I cannot untangle all that here. But the books under review certainly provide much to think about in trying to answer such questions. Both books have 'humanitarian' or 'humanitarianism' in their titles, but both invite us to take an expansive view of the history of humanitarianism in general and as something not easily or cleanly distinguishable from the history of human rights or other histories. Indeed, both books appear in the Cambridge Series 'Human Rights in History', edited by Stephan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Samuel Moyn, an indication of the expansive approach of that series as well. In short, both books provide rich resources for analysing the available lenses for seeing suffering.

Humanitarian and Other Lenses

Humanitarian Photography presents a series of case studies, each of which touches on the editor's framing questions: 'which subjects were featured, which audiences were addressed, what were the politics informing each campaign?' (12). As with any topic approached historically, this reveals both continuities and ruptures in the visual rhetoric of humanitarianism over time. While there are some general and characteristic features of humanitarian imagery, the collection as a whole makes it clear that there is no singular framing that constitutes *the* humanitarian lens. In her essay, 'Sights of Benevolence', Silvia Salvatici aptly makes this point:

> Humanitarianism speaks in different languages. For example, it can play on the distress of the victims or on the efficacy of the aid, it can evoke sympathy for suffering humanity or praise the rescuers, and it can focus on relief of the body's pain or on the 'healing of souls', as in the case of the [displaced person's] rehabilitation through work and professional training (218)

If humanitarianism speaks in many different languages, so do its images. Even when humanitarians rely on stock iconographies of suffering, they always do so in light of specific aims and in a particular context coloured by a background culture.

For example, in 'The Limits of Exposure', Kevin Grant captures how the moral milieu of reformers and their audience colours the content and mode of disseminating images. He focuses on how gender norms affected when and how sexual violence was or was not portrayed in photographs and narratives by the Congo Reform Association – 'the first nongovernmental, humanitarian campaign to use atrocity photographs to mobilize sustained, international protest' (65) – in the first decade of the twentieth century. Reformers had to calibrate images and narratives to shame the perpetrators without bringing shame upon themselves (85). 'The representation of atrocity must be,' as Grant puts it, 'tolerably shocking' (64), a tricky balance at the mercy of the moral standards and expectations of the audience. That can vary according to the gender of the reformer and of audience members, as well as era and locale. In this way, the history of the visual culture of humanitarianism intersects with other histories, of gender norms and public morals.

In 'Developing the Humanitarian Image in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century China', Caroline Reeves shows how in a very different cultural context, the Chinese Red Cross departed from both the iconography of Chinese philanthropy and Western-style imagery of suffering (14). As in Europe, 'humanitarian' images were used prior to the invention of photography, with woodblocks used as early as 1594 to get elites to care about suffering from famine (117). The Chinese Red Cross, founded in 1904, tended to use photos focused less on suffering victims and more on the effective provision of relief (135). This 'fit with a more general cultural call to action then resounding across China' (128) – a 'call to arms' that was portrayed with 'connotations of modernity' (131) conveyed through images like that of a Red Cross hospital with rows of 'doctors and nurses in crisp Western uniforms' assembled on the lawn. Analysing 'humanitarian photography', Reeves' essay reminds us, requires looking at how humanitarian mobilisations have occurred outside, often influenced but also distinct from, the West. More comparative analysis of the visual languages of humanitarianism as influenced by different cultures is crucial.

Reeves also hits on a common theme raised in other essays: the ways that public portrayals of humanitarian organisations are often wrapped up with specific national projects. This is as true of the Red Cross in China as it was of the Red Cross in Switzerland in the wake of WWI, as Francesca Piana shows in her essay, 'Photography, Cinema, and the Quest for Influence'. Piana highlights the extent to which the ICRC, in spite of its international mandate, 'remained a Swiss organization in scope' (142) and appealed, during this period, to 'patriotic feelings' (142) to motivate Swiss support for the organisation. Although images of suffering were used, there was a clear attempt to communicate that the organisation was 'moving from charity, volunteerism, activism and social service to "modern" values of professionalization, science, and accountability' (158).

Essays focused on other organisations in the post-WWII period (Salvatici on the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and Davide Rodogno and Thomas David on the World Health Organization) show how the images of happy beneficiaries rather than suffering victims was used to project a view of humanitarian organisations as modern, scientific, effective and professional. In the aftermath of WWII this could serve an even larger purpose, as Salvatici maintains: the need for 'hopeful glimpses of the future, such as the idea of a new international body salving the wounds of war and paving the way for a new kind of international cooperation' (217). In 'All the World Loves a Picture', Rodogno and David trace the shift in the 'visual politics' of the World Health Organization (WHO) from a focus in the 1950s and 1960s on 'biomedical determinants and technological solutions' to a focus in the early 1970s more on the social, political and economic causes of poor health and international collaboration in light of the rights of developing countries (226). The imagery shifted accordingly.

The breadth and chronology of this collection helps us see that humanitarian photography has a history. Seeing the breaks and continuities in that history helps us understand how humanitarian imaginary is sustained or transformed over time in part because it supports the aims of different organisations or journalistic outlets as they attend to the expectations of various audiences. Along these lines, one theme that could have been given more attention in the collection is various depictions of the heroic humanitarian or rescuer imagery, along with tropes of sacrifice and even martyrdom (see Neuman, 2017). Heerten's book touches on this theme in his account of the 'white male Westerners' that typically dominate such portrayals (2017, 158–67).

Iconic Images

Even if suffering victims are not the only subject of humanitarian photography, they have tended to dominate. In the latter half of the twentieth century, that has meant a torrent of images of suffering children. That motif goes back further though, and in her essay 'Children and Other Civilians', Heide Fehrenbach explores 'the formative years of humanitarianism's "iconography of childhood"' (166) from the late nineteenth century through the two world wars.[1] Fehrenbach credits Eglantyne Jebb, who co-founded the Save the Children Fund in 1919, with the 'innovation' of pushing beyond the focus on children for national reform projects to 'recast them as universal symbols and the valued building blocks of a peaceful, internationalist future' (177). By WWII, images of malnourished children had 'popularized the notion of "the civilian" as imagined through the figure of the innocent endangered child' (191). This 'interpretive lens' (188) shaped the way, in this case, Americans conceived of their relation to distant problems and potential solutions in war-torn Europe. Fehrenbach concludes with speculative questions about whether the moral training of the 'humanitarian eye' of a European and American audience prior to 1945 through photography and other media was a gendered one (167). Other essays in the book discuss gender too. One shortcoming of the book, however, is the surprising lack of discussion of the humanitarian lens or its subjects as racialised ('race' does not even appear in the index, while 'gender' has ten entries).[2]

Fehrenbach's theme sets the stage for one of the most influential episodes in the twentieth century iconography of humanitarianism: Biafra. Heerten's essay on Biafra and Holocaust imagery in *Humanitarian Photography* provides one of the case studies, but it is only a glimpse into the much broader take on Biafra provided by his own book, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism*. Even though images of emaciated adults and starving children were not new, Biafra did produce innovations. First, Heerten highlights how a newly emerging Holocaust consciousness in the 1960s affected the reception of images coming out of Biafra in summer 1968. In fact, he maintains that this way of viewing the images from Biafra – as a potential African Auschwitz – was itself part of cementing Holocaust consciousness in the West. Second, Heerten acknowledges that the use of images of children to draw attention to humanitarian issues did not begin with Biafra (see 2017:155–8). Nonetheless, he insists that when Biafra became an international media event, such images were new to most observers and the images reached a mass audience in a way that others – of colonial famines, for instance – simply had not (129). The images, along with seeing famine live on television for the first time (125), had an impact. By mid-September 1968, *L'Express* published a poll showing that the people whose plight aroused the most emotion were the Biafrans, at 42 per cent, with the Czechoslovaks and Vietnamese in second and third place (129).

The four chapters of Heerten's book contained in Part II – 'Biafra on a Global Stage' – do a masterful job of weaving together various historical strands to show how the humanitarian lens that framed Biafra drew on and transformed both the long history of colonial imagery and the more recent emergence of Holocaust memory. Heerten deftly analyses general elements of the Western humanitarian gaze but, like many of the essays in *Humanitarian Photography*, also stresses how the motives and concerns of Biafra activists in various national contexts – the UK, Germany, United States and France – are best understood against the background of specific historical trajectories and social and political tensions in each country. This includes some fascinating vignettes – as luminaries from the Left and Right, from Günter Grass, William F. Buckley and Jean-Paul Sartre, had to have something to say about Biafra. Capturing all the debates engendered about Biafra in each country hammers home the point that simply seeing suffering never dictates a unified response from viewers; even when one response dominates, images often engender a conflict of interpretations that create political fault lines – or expose existing ones – among the audience.

In this way, Heerten complicates the standard picture. He does tell the story of how a de-politicising mode of humanitarian imagery took centre stage in Western media. Like many authors, he notes how 'the imagery of innocent victims as universalized icons of humanity depoliticizes, decontextualizes, and dehistoricizes our understanding of complex emergencies' (173). But Heerten maintains the use of multiple lenses by also detailing the politics of interpretation that preceded the emergence and accompanied the reception of those images. Even if a 'humanitarian lens' came to dominate Western media in the defining moment of the summer of 1968, it was neither univocal nor the only available lens. The Biafrans themselves first appealed to the UN in 1966 with the language of genocide and human rights, citing their right to self-determination (chapter 2). Throughout the conflict and famine, more politically motivated elements of the 'Biafra lobby' in Western countries explicitly supported the secessionist movement and continued to use terms like 'genocide', 'human rights' and 'crimes against humanity' (188). Heerten is also careful to note how the texts that accompanied images could provide interpretations – 'Biafrans as hard working Christians' (143) – that inscribed Biafra with a variety of different meanings.

Nonetheless, the heart of the story about the iconography of suffering that came to dominate Western news media in 1968 is still one in which multiple attempts to get the world's attention largely failed until a particular humanitarian lens was spectacularly effective in transforming Biafra into an object of international concern. 'Biafran babies' are what got the most attention from Western audiences. They became an iconic image of 'postcolonial disaster' (chapter 5). They helped fuel the efforts of more 'non-political' organisations like Oxfam, which 'sought to recast "Biafra" as a space of victimhood, standing in isolation from the political agency of a secessionist movement' (133). The costs of such depoliticising are by now well-known. For example, as Heerten aptly asks, 'who, in the end, thinks a people symbolized by starving infants to be capable of creating a state?' (139). This is the damage done when people are fed a steady diet of images of starving children, which came to dominate the meaning of Biafra and, subsequently, the Western view of Africa more generally as a 'site of human tragedy' (138) and 'space of victimhood' (133). Images of innocent children that were supposed to appeal to our 'shared humanity' (187) instead distorted Western perceptions of the postcolonial world – now 'the African child iconically encapsulates the pain of the Third World for the Western observer' (335).[3]

This is one of the 'afterlives of Biafra' – the title of the third part of Heerten's book. When the secessionist leadership surrendered in January 1970, the 'Biafra lobby' supporting them dissolved in most Western countries even while the iconography of suffering fortified during the famine would live on.[4] In another valuable analysis of politics in particular national contexts, in the final chapter of the book Heerten analyses Biafra's afterlife through its impact on the revival of 'humanitarian intervention' among international lawyers in the United States and the rise of *sans-frontiérisme* in France.

The Ethics (and Politics) of Representation

The practice of capturing suffering in photos and disseminating them for humanitarian purposes raises numerous by now familiar ethical questions. The historical essays in *Humanitarian Photography* (particularly Curtis and Grant on anti-atrocity campaigns) tell us that concern about whether such images elicit compassion or instead breed feelings of pity, disgust, or titillation have been asked since their first use well over a century ago.

In 'Picturing Pain', Heather Curtis tells us that 'throughout the 1890s, and especially during the devastating Indian famines of 1896–97 and 1899–1900, the practical imperatives and ethical ambiguities of depicting distant suffering for humanitarian purposes were the subject of anxious deliberation, especially among American evangelicals actively engaged in relief efforts both at home and abroad' (24). Secular publications raised such questions too – for example, in the series of reports on the Indian famine that appeared throughout 1897 in the illustrated monthly *Cosmopolitan*, in which the author Julian Hawthorne, hired for a 3-month expedition 'to 'seriously investigate… rumors of famine and plague' in the British colony from the perspective of an impartial eye-witness' (22), raised ethical questions that remain relevant. Curtis writes:

> Harrowing scenes of human torment, [Hawthorne] implied, stimulated the viewers' emotions in ways that some found disquieting. Was titillation an effective and moral means of stirring up sympathy for sufferers in far-off places? Did photographs of 'utterly destitute and helpless' people cultivate condescension rather than compassion for a 'common humanity'? (24)

In fact, the conflicting views of such images were much more pointed in the debates among evangelicals. It quickly became clear that the 'emerging visual culture of humanitarianism was beginning to fracture under the pressure of an increasing sensationalist culture' (32). That was over a century ago, and long before Biafra. Have we learned anything since then?

Both of the concluding essays in *Humanitarian Photography* delve into recent debates over the ethics of representation, which heated up in reaction to coverage of the 1984–85 Ethiopian famine. Henrietta Lidchi's essay, 'Finding the Right Image' – which comes right after Heerten's essay on Biafra – explores the media response to the Ethiopian famine and finds the same patterns 16 years after Biafra (280–4). The use of images of starving Africans, mostly women and children, once again left the impression of Africans as passive recipients of aid. The complex history and political causes behind the famine were reduced to the simple issue of 'money and food' (282–3). There was much criticism at the time and a 1989 survey, *Images of Africa,* concluded that 'none of the image-purveyors – NGOs, the media, or Band Aid – had made a concerted effort to address and broadcast positive indigenous efforts to allay the crisis' (283). Lidchi explores how the subsequent commitment to producing more 'positive' images played out in ad campaigns by the British NGO Christian Aid in the 1990s. Although positive images are preferable to negative ones, Lidchi argues that they are also two sides of the same coin, one that leaves unchallenged the basic question of whether 'a realist, or documentary mode, of representation' (292) is most apt since it 'prevents new modes of representation from emerging' (284).

Focusing on the ethical question, one attempted solution has been the 'birth of regulation', which Sanna Nissinen discusses in her contribution. For instance, in

1989 the General Assembly of European NGOs adopted the *Code of Conduct on Images Related to the Third World*, which stressed the need to emphasise the equality and dignity of subjects represented in images. In 2006, a revised *Code of Conduct on Images and Messages* aimed to be 'more workable in practice in comparison to the previous prescriptive code, which emphasized what *not* to do' (299). But Nissinen, whose essay is based on ethnographic work carried out among professional photographers and communications staff of NGOs in Bangladesh, sees the downside to regulatory efforts too. 'Increased reliance on regulatory ethical codes … homogenizes the image economy' and 'undermines individual agency and the personal code of accountability by image producers, creating a system of inflexible conformity to protocol rather than relying on, or promoting, individual accountability' (317). A core challenge, as she puts it, is that 'the notion of an ethical photograph' is 'unhelpful as a singular prescriptive concept' (316).

The perennial ethical tension in these discussions is, as Nissinen puts it, how to provoke audience response by depicting 'need' while upholding ethical principles that require more 'positive and dignified representations of subjects' (302). On the one hand, attracting attention so that donor funding and political pressure can produce solutions requires portraying people in need – the more dire the need the better if that is what draws more attention and more support for the ethically important aim of saving lives and alleviating suffering. On the other hand, that can mean sacrificing the ethical aim of portraying people as dignified human beings with agency. Curtis captures humanitarians already grappling with this dilemma in the 1890s, wishing they didn't have to use such images – 'it seems a pity that intelligent people should need to have their feelings stirred by pictures', Marcus Fuller wrote in 1900 (33). But the photos presumably get the attention organisations need if they are going to get people to do anything about the suffering. 'One strategy for portraying negative situations in a dignified, positive way', Nissinen notes, 'is to emphasize activity and the resilience of the photographic subjects, despite the negative and vulnerable circumstances they live in' (306). This way of threading the needle makes sense: not portraying any vulnerability at all won't draw attention to a cause, but that can be combined with portraits of resilience – resilience that can still require support from others – rather than extreme vulnerability and dire need for help.

A similar proposal by political theorist Jennifer Rubenstein may help here. In her book, *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs* (2015), she uses the tools of political theory to determine what responsibilities international humanitarian NGOs have in light of proper analysis of what kinds of organisations they are. Such organisations, she argues, are quite often more political and 'governmental' than they admit; as such they must take responsibility for the larger systems of which they are a part. For instance, Rubenstein highlights the negative effects of INGOs use of their 'discursive power' in affecting the beliefs of people in donor country publics. The goal of INGOs should not just be motivating donations, she argues, but also promoting sound deliberation about issues like famine and poverty, and potentially motivating political solidarity oriented toward broader change rather than just pity. One concrete proposal she recommends is the use of 'critical visual rhetoric' that would 'meet people where they are' but then move them beyond their comfort zone. This two-step process might involve using powerful images of suffering as a 'hook', but then providing information that could foster a more nuanced and critical understanding of the issues (193–204).

These are important questions to contemplate for organisations that produce representations of human need, and the essays in *Humanitarian Photography* afford rich resources for thinking about the history of these practices. The value of reading the history of the visual culture of humanitarianism lies in seeing that many visual languages are possible. Selecting the frame, authoring surrounding text, envisioning the audience, training what their eyes will see – these are all part of the politics of seeing suffering. Its contours are, collectively, up to us.

A Vast Repository of Images

If we zoom out to ask, as Susan Sontag did in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), what to make of the 'vast repository of images' (114) generated over the course of nearly two centuries of humanitarian photography – an endless archive of photos and now videos of atrocity, famine and the devastation of war – a more unsettling perspective emerges. We can pull it all up on our screens right now. Should we?

Sontag distinguishes this broader question – whether we have an obligation to look at this vast repository in general – from narrower ones about the duty to look when something can be done right now (her example is photos of the My Lai massacre when first disseminated in March 1968) or when pictures of past pain are tied to national projects of coming to terms with historical injustice (her example is recent willingness by some Americans to view photos of lynchings – although they are less willing, she thought, to look at images of the 'disproportionate use of firepower in war' [93–4]). In going beyond those questions, Sontag pushes us to consider the value of this repository of images in its totality, a question that induces ethical vertigo. For what the practice of humanitarian photography has generated from its origins to the present is a vivid permanent record of our inhumanity. There is value in seeing this, according to Sontag:

> [I]t seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others.… Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget. (114, 115)

I carried the books under review around with me while reading them, and teach classes using them and similar books. Their pages, and covers, contain horrific images. I often found myself turning them over on my desk so they would not stare up at me. But one can also get used to seeing the photos; they can lose their force. Until suddenly, while paging through a book or catching a glimpse of the cover, one sees the suffering again and comes up short. After well over a hundred years of such images being disseminated, one can hardly do better than Sontag's remark on the photo by Eddie Adams from February 1968 of the chief of the South Vietnamese national police, Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, shooting a Vietcong suspect in a Saigon street at point blank: 'We can gaze at these faces for a long time and not come to the end of the mystery, and the indecency, of such co-spectatorship' (60).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Ana Garcia, Michaël Neuman and Juliano Fiori for helpful comments.

Notes

1 Other essays in the collection discuss imagery of children, such as Peter Balakian's essay on 'sentimentalized depictions of women and children' (13) in the poster art of the Near East Relief organisation just prior and after WWI. In an essay published after the book, Fehrenbach and Rodogno (2016) extend their analysis up to recent images of 3-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on a Turkish beach in September 2015.

2 For a trenchant analysis of race and humanitarian imagery, see Benton (2016).

3 On the general problem with images of 'innocent' suffering, see Ticktin (2020) and Fassin (2012: chapter 6).

4 For extensive treatment of the iconography, see Chouliaraki (2013).

Works Cited

Barnett, M. N. (ed.) (2020), *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A World of Differences*? (Cambridge University Press).

Batchen, G., Gidley, M., Miller, N. K. and Prosser, J. (eds) (2012), *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis* (London: Reaktion Books).

Benton, A. (2016), 'Risky Business: Race, Nonequivalence and the Humanitarian Politics of Life', *Visual Anthropology*, 29:2, 187–203.

Boltanski, L. (1999), *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Chouliaraki, L. (2013), *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

Davey, E. (2015), *Idealism beyond Borders: The French Revolutionary Left and the Rise of Humanitarianism, 1954–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Evans, G. (2008), *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and for All* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press).

Fassin, D. (2012), *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).

Fehrenbach, H. and Rodogno, D. (eds) (2015), *Humanitarian Photography: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Fehrenbach, H. and Rodogno, D. (2016), '"A Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child": Humanitarian Photography and NGO Media Strategies in Historical Perspective', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97:900, 1121–55.

Flynn, J. (2020), 'Suffering and Status', in Barnett, M. N. (ed.), *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A World of Differences*? (Cambridge University Press), pp. 49–70.

Heerten, L. (2017), *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Linfield, S. (2010), *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).

Moyn, S. (2010), *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press).

Neuman, M. (2017), 'Dying for Humanitarian Ideas: Using Images and Statistics to Manufacture Humanitarian Martyrdom', 15 February, https://msf-crash.org/en/publications/humanitarian-actors-and-practices/dying-humanitarian-ideas-using-images-and-statistics (accessed 26 September 2021).

Redfield, P. (2013), *Life in Crisis: The Ethical Journey of Doctors Without Borders* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press).

Rubenstein, J. C. (2015), *Between Samaritans and States: The Political Ethics of Humanitarian INGOs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Salvatici, S. (2019), *A History of Humanitarianism, 1755–1989: In the Name of Others*, trans. Philip Sanders (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Sliwinski, S. (2011), *Human Rights in Camera* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press).

Sontag, S. (2003), *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

Ticktin, M. (2020), 'Innocence: Shaping the Concept and Practice of Humanity', in Barnett, M. N. (ed.), *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A World of Differences*? (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 185–202.