Fuyuki Kurasawa

How Does Humanitarian Visuality Work? A Conceptual Toolkit for a Sociology of Iconic Suffering

Ente di afferenza:
_()_

How Does Humanitarian Visuality Work?

A Conceptual Toolkit for a Sociology of Iconic Suffering

by Fuyuki Kurasawa

> "You have seen them, these children, as they are represented by this merciless photography: bony, inert, deaf, imploring a mouthful of food with a gaze that is almost extinguished/
> If you do not rescue these poor little ones, this image that you have seen will pursue you like a remorse for the whole of the rest of your life and you will ponder: I saw him agonizing and I turned away from him, and he is dead."
>
> Anatole France[1]
>
> "Without photography, massacres would not exist."
>
> Bernard Kouchner[2]

1. Introduction

Anatole France and Bernard Kouchner – the winner of the 1921 Nobel Prize for Literature and the founder of Médecins sans frontières (MSF), respectively – made these statements nearly eighty years apart, yet they are chronologically interchangeable while encapsulating a problématique that remains current to this day: the interface of humanitarianism and visual representation, or what I term here humanitarian visuality. Specifically, the two quotations lyrically and concisely capture twin themes that animate the following pages. The first of these is the heavy reliance of the Euro-American humanitarian movement upon the figurative and literal visibility

---

[1] As cited in an article entitled "L'Homme qui veut vaincre la famine: Hier, Nansen, acclamé par 6.000 Parisiens, a évoqué la grande détresse des affamés de Russie" in the French newspaper *L'Humanité* [18 February 1922, 1.] The translation is my own. France's statement is also reproduced in Cosandey [1998, 12.]

[2] As cited in Ignatieff [2000.]

of large-scale crises and emergencies in public spheres, for without the presence of images of genocides, famines, and the like, the social prominence of such events and situations and their political traction are virtually nil, as is, by extension, the impact of humanitarianism. Secondly, France and Kouchner's quotations prompt us to realize that, far beyond simply being conduits of information about humanitarian emergencies and surpassing both oral testimony and written description in this regard, pictures are social actants; by viewing them, persons are constituted into audiences that become responsible to alleviate the suffering of those depicted as victims. Indeed, throughout its institutional history, the Western humanitarian movement has drawn upon the belief that seeing an image of a scene of acute vulnerability and suffering implicates the viewer morally, as the act of visually bearing witness to such a scene collapses the geographical, socio-cultural and ethical distance between Euro-American audiences and victimized populations anywhere in the world. Put differently, transnational flows of images of humanitarian crises and their ubiquity in Western civil societies not only invest such images with iconic power, but lead to citizens' generalized loss of innocence in the face of mass emergencies and the duty to lend assistance or provide succour to victims. Seeing means knowing and, in turn, an obligation or compulsion to "do something" and help.

However, the reality of humanitarian visuality is more complicated than what the above logic suggests, as several bodies of scholarly literature make clear. In the first instance, an emerging set of critical social scientific writings on humanitarianism point to the significance of looking further than the latter's self-declared, post-ideological and apolitical character as a universalist discourse devoted to relieving the suffering of any and all human beings wherever it may manifest itself in the world. Rather, because it represents an increasingly powerful actor on the global stage, the Euro-American humanitarian movement can and should be treated as an organizational network. Accordingly, research has touched upon the historically grounded and politically moulded processes of its institutionalization through a variety of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements [Boissier 1978; Durand 1978; Haug 1993; Moyn 2012; Vallaeys 2004], and the ethical and deontological contradictions embedded in its principles and practices (such as human rights, humanitarian intervention, charity and empathy, and neutrality and independence) [Bass 2008; Blanchet and Martin 2006; Brauman 2005, 2006; Destexhe 1993; Wilson and Brown 2009.] In turn, this sort of analysis reveals that humanitarianism, like other large political and socio-economic apparatuses, must actively construct objects and sites for their intervention (i.e., events and situations of mass disaster, scenes and states of emergency, and conditions of victimhood, suffering, and trauma,) and corresponding subjects (i.e., vulnerable, victimized and suffering populations, predom-

inantly of colour and in the global South) [Agier 2008; Bornstein and Redfield 2011; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Fassin 2012; Feldman and Ticktin 2010.] Moreover, as socio-political institutions, Euro-American humanitarian agencies are strategic actors defending and searching to advance a number of different interests: *Realpolitik* objectives that can include advocating military intervention, leading to criticisms of humanitarian neo-imperialism [Bricmont 2006; Foley 2010; Kennedy 2004]; commercial, profit-driven interests that spur descriptions of a multinational humanitarian or disaster relief industry [Rieff 2003; de Waal 1997]; and endogenous institutional goals (speed of deployment in reaching victims, efficiency in the delivery of aid, publicity for campaigns and projects, etc.) that may introduce certain moral dilemmas and instrumentally driven compromises (e.g., lending assistance to victims who also may have been perpetrators, choosing not to denounce the policies of a domestic government to retain access to suffering populations, using sentimentalizing appeals to increase public donations) [Barnett and Weiss 2008; Boltanski 2007; Micheletti 2008; Terry 2003; Weissman 2004.]

Yet for the most part, this literature on humanitarianism has downplayed or overlooked the role of images, thereby – whether inadvertently or not – presenting visuality as an epiphenomenal aspect of the Euro-American humanitarian movement that is strictly dependent upon and determined by the latter's historical, political, and socio-economic dimensions. Hence, to break with this analytical subsumption of visuality, we can turn to writings in the field of visual studies, which provide a more sustained and sophisticated treatment of the roles of impact of images in social life than what generally is found in the social sciences. If a comprehensive overview of this field is beyond the scope of this paper, a few of its most relevant strands should be mentioned here.[3] Most obvious amongst these are works insisting not merely that visuality matters, but that we embark upon a "pictorial turn" [Mitchell 1994] given the extent to which images are key social actants that interpellate us, shape our ways of thinking about and seeing the world, and can provoke various responses, as well as being symbolic force fields that condense and refract social and political relations [Bal 2005; Berger 1977; Freedberg 1989; Mitchell 2005; Rancière 2003.] Writings focusing

---

[3] For comprehensive overviews of the fields of visual studies and visual sociology, see Barnhurst *et al.* [2004]; Dikovitskaya [2006]; Elkins [2003]; Grady [1996]; Mirzoeff [1999]; Moxey [2008]; Sturken and Cartwright [2009]; Wagner [2002], and for a more critical argument about how recent developments in humanities-based visual studies evacuate the social, see Wolff [2012.] For intellectual histories of Western social theory's engagement with visuality, see Jay [1993]; Levin [1993.] I will not be discussing the methodological branch of visual sociology, which uses photography and film as qualitative devices of ethnographic recording, description, and elicitation of persons and groups [Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006; Guillemin and Drew 2010; Harper 2002, 2012; Packard 2008; Rose 2012], which fall outside the scope of this project.

more particularly on visual culture draw out several significant themes: the historical creation of regimes of visuality and perspective, which are tied to aesthetic shifts, scientific and technological developments, and forms of spectatorship [Cartwright 2002; Crary 1990, 1999; Mirzoeff 2011; Mondzain 2003; Panofsky 1991]; the history of forms of visual representation of certain groups, notably as a extension and device of colonial, racial, or gender domination [Boime 1990; Hall 1997; Mirzoeff 2011; Mulvey 2009; Wood 2000], or of socio-cultural stigmatization and objectification of certain marginalized groups [Mulvey 2009; Szörényi 2006; Wright 2002]; the creation and functioning of iconic pictures of major events and situations [Alexander *et al.* 2011; Hariman and Lucaites 2007]; and the study of how persons and groups use technologies of visual representation as conduits for personal and collective memory as well as aesthetic expression [Barthes 1981; Batchen 1999; Buse 2010; Pinney and Peterson 2003], or how they engage in practices of everyday viewing and portrayal through such technologies [Adatto 2008; Bal 2003; Bourdieu and Bourdieu 2004; Bourdieu 1990a; Edwards 2002; Graham et al. 2011; Murray 2008; Radley 2010.]

Within visual studies, as well as media and communication studies, the pictorial turn has been applied to some of the questions that concern us here, notably by examining how pictures create the space for human rights politics and the humanitarian imaginary. Some of these writings make this case by analyzing the history and functioning of the visual economy of humanitarian campaigns [Campbell 2007; Sliwinski 2011], while others consider the impacts and flaws of pictures as evidentiary and memorial artifacts of mass atrocities and subjugation [Delage 2006; Wood 2000; Zelizer 1998.] In this vein, certain works claim that photographic testimony of distant suffering is of limited effectiveness in prompting public response due to collective mechanisms of denial, saturation, habitualization [Cohen 2001; Moeller 1999; Sontag 1978], or on the contrary, the current invisibility of dead bodies in the media [Campbell 2004], whereas yet another set of writings contend that visual material is essential for Euro-American publics to bear witness and respond to mass human rights violations and humanitarian emergencies [Batchen et al. 2011; Gomez-Barris 2010; Linfield 2010; Sliwinski 2011; Sontag 2003; Zelizer 2010], and for these publics to enact political and ethical practices of citizenship, as well as for vulnerable persons and groups to advance claims of injustice and suffering [Azoulay 2008.] From this same body of literature stem examinations of forms of mediated spectatorship generated by the circulation of images of distant suffering and conflict [Campbell 2007; Chouliaraki 2006; Mirzoeff 2005; Rancière 2008], as well as of the ways in which iconic photographs and documentary films are vital components of public culture that stimulate critical reflection and democratic debate in civil society [Chanan 2007; Hariman and Lucaites 2007.] Finally, another strand of research considers the perils

originating from the aestheticization and pornography of suffering found in certain kinds of representational styles and humanitarian outlooks [Baudrillard 2006; Campbell 2003; Cavarero 2009; Halttunen 1995; Reinhardt *et al.* 2007; Stallabrass 1997], the instrumental use of depictions of crimes against humanity by their perpetrators to gain publicity and support [Keenan 2004], and the limits of representation of mass atrocity [Didi-Huberman 2003; Lanzmann 1985; Zelizer 1998.]

Although correcting the epiphenomenal treatment of visuality found in most social scientific writings on humanitarianism, this literature on the latter's representational aspects tends not to attend sufficiently to the matter of how the endogenous aesthetics of images of humanitarian crises and their exogenous politics and ethics are grounded in their social contexts – namely, the role of civil society organizations (notably NGOs) in the circulation of pictures and, more generally, those of institutional networks through which social actors produce, select, distribute, and view these pictures within public spaces, as well as the ways in which these same pictures can only be understood as key political and cultural artifacts if located relationally within humanitarianism's ideological and representational fields.[4] In other words, what remains to be done is to study the "visual economy" [Poole 1997, 8–11] of Euro-American humanitarianism, that is to say, the historically and culturally specific system of social relations, institutional structures, and technologies that organize the humanitarian socio-visual field; in this visual economy, images of humanitarian emergencies circulate and gain or lose material and symbolic value as mediated representations inserted into public discourses and given meaning via interpretive practices.[5]

Hence, beyond the act of bringing the literatures on humanitarianism and visuality together, what is required is the elaboration of a new theoretical and conceptual approach to the topic at hand, which can be termed socio-visual constructivism. The latter posits the mutual constitution and interweaving of the social and the visual, the first corollary of which is the fact that visuality is a social construct to the extent that it ought not narrowly be perceived as composed only of images, but also of the sets of social relations and practices of creating, viewing, and making sense of images, as well as texts, discourses, and modes of thinking about these images [Bal 2003; Becker 1982; Mitchell 2005; Wolff 1993, 2012.] At the same time, socio-visual constructivism contends that the social is itself visually constructed in that visual representations of socio-cultural life, events, and societies in general – as well as

---

[4] A partial yet significant exception to this criticism is found in Hariman and Lucaites [2007.]

[5] I am indebted to Susan Buck-Morss for introducing me to Poole's work and her concept of the visual economy, although my own version of it puts more emphasis on institutional networks and field actors than in Poole.

the institutions, relations, practices, and discourses tied to these representations – are pivotal to the ways in which most persons and groups acquire knowledge about the social world ("a picture is worth a thousand words") and confirm the existence of situations and facts ("seeing is believing".) Consequently, visuality is a central dimensions of processes of socialization, powerfully shaping our habitual perceptions of the world and the actors who inhabit it. The visual does so by performing as a device of evidentiary rationalism that provides ocular proof of reality's correspondence to its description, yet equally by acting upon our affects (e.g., the triggering of strong emotions resulting from seeing certain images) and desires (provoking revulsion, arousal, etc.) in addition to informing our aesthetic sensibilities (i.e., our judgments and systems of evaluation of beauty and taste.) Moreover, visuality opens up spaces for politics within the social, for something that is visually represented acquires social existence and stature and thereby becomes subject to forms of domination, resistance, contestation, conflict, and collective deliberation within civil societies and public spheres [Azoulay 2008; Butler 2010; Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Rancière 2008] – not to mention visual politics, the debates and controversies surrounding the ways in which images depict certain persons and events, the decisions to display or fail to display a given type of image in media outlets and public venues, as well as the meanings of images. To correct the social sciences' usual treatment of the visual as derivative of what are considered more foundational analytical domains (the economic, the political, the historical etc.,) one could venture to amplify the words of Kouchner that serve as an epigram above by asserting, slightly hyperbolically for rhetorical effect, that without visuality, the social world would not exist. This statement is even more evident in the case of humanitarian crises, which because of their spatial and socio-cultural distance from most Euro-American viewers and the latter's lack of first-hand experience of them, only exist in Western public spheres as visually communicated events and situations that become present in everyday lives through dedicated still and moving picture technologies (photography, film, and video) disseminated through printed media (newspapers, magazines, books, flyers, posters) and omnipresent screens (from televisions, computers, tablets, and mobile phones.)

The task of socio-visual constructivism, then, is to avert the proclivities towards analytical internalism and its externalist opposite, both of which are rife in theoretical paradigms of study of the visual. Internalism – or intra-visual determinism and "visual essentialism" [Bal 2003] – treats the image as an analytical monad, a discrete object whose social power is decontextualized and independent from the socio-historical and political settings of its production and reception [Wolff 2012.] This sort of notion of "aesthetic autonomy" [Foster et al. 2005, 23; Wolff 1993, 71–94] is preval-

ent within formalist art criticism [Fried 2009; Greenberg 1984],[6] according to which the meaning and significance of a work of art are established by reference either to aesthetically endogenous criteria or to transcendental aesthetic forms and norms (in the neo-Kantian tradition,) as well as in two other traditions of analysis: visual and aesthetic phenomenology [Flusser 2011; Gumbrecht 2004; Merleau-Ponty 1976], whereby interpretation of an image is grounded in the exercise of reconstructing the experiences of creating and perceiving it; and some strands of visual semiotics [Metz 2003], which sometimes veer towards decoding a picture by treating sets of relations between its signs as closed, hermetic symbolic systems. Conversely – as mentioned above – externalism, or extra-visual determinism, reduces visuality's contents to the effects of the operation of what are assumed to be more foundational socio-economic and politico-ideological forces and processes, thereby giving short shrift to the work of interpreting the meanings and endogenous symbolic organization of images. Externalist analyses are common within orthodox Marxist art criticism,[7] Althusserian and Foucaultian frameworks [Tagg 1988], for which a picture serves as a visual extension of an apparatus of the ideological and governmental exercise of power,[8] as well as in some aspects of Bourdieu's studies of photography and art [Bourdieu 1990a; 1993], where the meaning of visual material is determined by the position occupied by artistic practice, or by the photographer or artist himself or herself, within social fields – a position that is itself determined by fields' unequal and relational distribution of forms and volume of capital across different socio-economic classes.

Instead of dismissing theoretical paradigms that give rise to analytical internalism or externalism, I want to propose a conceptual toolkit seeking to extract some of their most fruitful insights and assemble them in a hybrid manner that addresses the

---

[6] In art criticism, the exchange between T.J. Clark and Michael Fried regarding Clement Greenberg's work and the interpretation of modernist art represents the now-classic paradigmatic debate about formalism [Clark 1982; Fried 1982.]

[7] One needs to distinguish between the extra-visual determinism and economic reductionism of orthodox Marxist claims, in which the work of art is reduced to an ideological reflection of class struggle or of the socio-economic structures and relations of a mode of production according to a strict base-superstructure model of society (whereby the cultural realm is superstructural) [Hadjinicolaou 1978; Lukács 1990], and heterodox or Western Marxist works in which the art work or image can be interpreted an aesthetic expression and symptomatic, socio-cultural microcosm of a particular society's or group's practices, beliefs, and contradictions, or in which the art work is located in its broader socio-historical setting [Benjamin 1999; Clark 1999; Eagleton 1990; Hall 2007; Jameson 1990; Kracauer & Quaresima 1947; Kracauer 1995; Smith 1985; Williams 1989.] The latter approach is one from which I borrow here, notably with the concept of iconological field discussed below. For a discussion of these two traditions, see Wolff [1993, 49-94.]

[8] These reductivist and instrumentally functionalist claims about visuality and aesthetics more generally should not be ascribed to Althusser or Foucault themselves, but rather to those of some of their followers.

flaws of one paradigm by correcting it via the use of the strengths of another; for instance, the socially hermetic and visually endogenous quality of semiotics can be cancelled out if it is complemented by Bourdieusian analysis of aesthetic fields, whereas we can steer clear of the latter's neglect of the question of interpretation of meaning and visually endogenous traits by turning to semiotics' examination of the symbolic structure of an image. Fortunately, there already exists a distinguished precedent for this sort of hybrid strategy integrating endogenous and exogenous elements of the image, in the form of Panofsky's now-classic *Studies in Iconology*, in which he puts forth a tripartite model of visual analysis: the primary or pre-iconographical level concerns itself with identifying the work of art's pure form and motifs (factual objects and events, and expressional qualities;) the secondary or iconographic level, which connects artistic form and motifs to themes and concepts (as present in objects and events, in the form of images, stories and allegories;) and the tertiary or iconological level, which focuses on a work of art's intrinsic meaning or content, arrived at by grasping and synthesizing an epoch's or society's core tendencies and general symbols – that is, being able to situate this work within its proper socio-historical context [Panofsky 1939, 5–16.][9]

Despite not being an exact match, Panofsky's template can be translated into a sociology of humanitarian visuality by appropriating notions that are at the core of contemporary sociological scholarship (structure, convention, repertoire, network, and field) and adapting them to our purposes, thereby yielding the following conceptual pillars of socio-visual constructivism: semiotic structure, iconographic repertoire of conventions, circulatory network, and iconological field. Corresponding to Panofsky's primary and secondary strata of analysis, the first two concepts enables us to concentrate on an image's endogenous elements, whereas the last two concepts – which are sociological extensions of the tertiary level in his model, that of iconology – hone in on its exogenous aspects; hence, bringing them into conversation with each other under the umbrella of a single analytical framework enables us to sidestep the limitations of both visual internalism and externalism. Thus, the first section below discusses the idea of the semiotic structure of images of humanitarian crises, a structure composed of a relatively stable system of formal relations between situational and compositional symbols serving to establish the roles of various actors (victims, perpetrators, aid workers, etc.) who are part of the visual composition of a scene of emergency or mass suffering. Although all still and moving pictures of humanitari-

[9] My own rendition and use of Panofsky's tertiary or iconological level of analysis emphasizes the socially and historically contextualist aspects of his argument, as opposed to the latter's German idealist and Hegelian universalist inflections. As such, I will dispense with notions of the "essential tendencies of the human mind" and of "*Weltanschuung*" [Panofsky 1939, 15.]

an emergencies contain a basic semiotic structure, the repetition of similar relations between situational and compositional symbols give rise to a visual convention or typification that is present across a set of images depicting different circumstances and events. Since every socio-historical setting contains a defined range of culturally legitimate and institutionally validated visual conventions, rather than a random or infinite assortment of ways of representing the social world, the second section discusses what I term the iconographic repertoire of modern Euro-American humanitarian visuality, which contains four such conventions: personification (whereby the figure of the victim personifies a humanitarian crisis;) massification (whereby a mound of indistinguishable corpses or massed group of survivors symbolizes the magnitude of such a crisis;) rescue (whereby a humanitarian aid worker saves the life of a victim;) and care (whereby a humanitarian agency tends to the longer-term recovery and well-being of a survivor or group of them.)

Drawing on the concepts of semiotic structure, visual conventions, and iconographic repertoire enables us to denote the visually endogenous characteristics of Euro-American regimes of representation of humanitarian crises, yet if taken on their own, veer towards the sort of analytical internalism problematized above. Accordingly, the last two sections of this piece are devoted to an exogenous and sociologically informed expansion of our conceptual scope. In the third part of the paper, this is accomplished by elaborating the notion of circulatory networks of humanitarian visuality, which are composed of ensembles of relations and interactions amongst institutional actors and persons contributing to the various processes responsible for images' existence in public spaces: their production, selection, distribution, and reception. By tracing these circulatory networks, we can arrive at socio-institutional biographies of images of humanitarian emergencies, thereby unearthing the lives of such images not only as material or digital artifacts, but as institutional nodes in Euro-American civil societies and actants whose visibility impacts public discourse and collective ways of thinking about the world. The final section draws upon Bourdieusian field theory to elaborate the notion of an iconological field for humanitarian visuality, in which institutional actors involved in the circulatory networks of visual representation of large-scale crises and emergencies – namely, news media and humanitarian aid organizations – are hierarchically located in relation to each other according to the kind of aesthetic style that they favour in their portrayals of such crises and emergencies (ranging from realism to expressivism) and to the ideological coding and meanings that that they inscribe onto these images (based on their support or opposition for the principal actor involved in the event being depicted.) This sort of mapping out of the iconographical field clarifies "iconoclashes" [Latour 2010; Latour et al. 2002], the processes of contestation of meaning and symbolic struggles

that social actors involved in humanitarian visuality pursue in public spheres, where these actors put forth competing (and often incommensurable) interpretive framings of images as well as engage in modes of representational politics that critically assess the ethics of visually depicting certain facets of humanitarian crises and their victims, the kinds of representations of vulnerable societies and segments of humankind most commonly circulated in Euro-American civil societies, and the effects on Western audiences of seeing such pictures.

Combining endogenous and exogenous dimensions of the image into a single conceptual framework allows us to contribute to critical sociologies of visuality and of humanitarianism, and, at the intersections of these, to lay the foundations for critical sociology of humanitarian visuality. The latter aims less to describe pictures of humanitarian crises than to consider how the latter – and the project of Western humanitarianism in general – are constituted through visual representation, how these pictures are symbolically organized as signifying artifacts, the representational genres that they utilize to convey distant suffering, the institutional networks through which they circulate, and the sorts of ideological and aesthetic positioning of institutions involved in these circulatory processes. As such, my aim is to examine the historical and political constitution of humanitarian visuality as an ensemble of relations and institutional structures of representation and interpretation of emergency situations around the world that is integral to Euro-American humanitarianism, and through which Western viewers have acquired ways of seeing that recognize circumstances of distant suffering. Three questions that have yet to be covered in a sustained manner in the existing literature are of particular interest: the visual means through which media and aid organizations present certain events as scenes of mass distant suffering requiring urgent and large-scale mobilization on the part of the Euro-American humanitarian movement and deserving of public support; the ways in which this movement works to ensure that certain kinds of images and narratives about these kinds of events are visible in public spheres; and the matter of images as sites of symbolic and material struggle and politico-ideological contestation amongst social actors holding differing interpretations of humanitarian crises and attributing varying meanings to visual material about these crises.

Seeking to answer these questions makes this project intersect with the recent iconic turn in the social sciences[10] [Alexander et al. 2011; Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Latour 2010; Latour et al. 2002; Mitchell 1987, 2005; Mondzain 2005; Moxey 2008],

---

[10] One cannot speak of such an iconic turn – at least of a visual kind – in the humanities, since the study of both sacred and profane visual icons and iconicity have been at the heart of art history since its inception.

which investigates the historical constitution of iconicity as a social phenomenon, the symbolic and cultural influence of iconic figures and images within different historical and social settings, the making of icons as emblematic or symptomatic entities by virtue of their condensing socio-political dynamics or their insertion into and sites of debate within cultural narratives and social imaginaries, as well as the symbolic and cultural influence of iconic figures and images. Nonetheless, the critical sociology of humanitarian visuality differs from these studies of iconicity in two interrelated ways. Firstly, from a methodological perspective, rather than focusing on particular iconic images, our approach insists on analyzing as large and diverse a number of pictures as possible to produce a sample that is both aesthetically and politico-ideologically representative of the visual ecology that has formed in public spheres around a particular humanitarian crisis. While such a methodology does not exclude description or consideration of iconic pictures for illustrative purposes – a technique that I employ myself below and elsewhere [Kurasawa 2011, 2014] – it does warn against drawing generalizations about an entity as multifaceted as a visual economy (such as modern Euro-American humanitarian visuality) on the basis of a particular image selected to stand in as an icon. This is not to say that all images of an event, person, or group are of equal stature in public spheres, but rather that images that eventually become iconic should be placed within the socio-visual context in which they circulated, a context that contains hundreds if not thousands of other pictures that, when taken together, supply us with a much more complete understanding of what constitute the visual representation of such an event, person, or group. Indeed, systematicity requires ensuring adequate size and representativeness of the visual archive being constructed and researched, methodological norms that can most effectively be met by investigating the material created by the major institutional actors and persons involved in the production, selection, distribution, and reception of images at a given time and place.[11]

Secondly, from an analytical vantage-point, the conceptual framework proposed here decentres the question of iconicity *per se* and repositions it within a comprehensive mapping of the visual economy of a specific socio-historical setting, in order to be able to paint a portrait of the competing imagery and modes of representation of a situation circulating in civil societies, the political and societal discourses that social actors employ to frame this imagery, and its organizational context. If the

---

[11] Concretely, this means that the visual analysis of the coverage of an event in newspapers should not restrict itself to pictures that became iconic due to their being widely reproduced in other publications or awarded journalistic prizes (e.g., World Press Photo, Pulitzer,) but instead should include images published in both the broadsheet (or "quality") and tabloid (or "populist") press, as well as in left-wing, centrist, and right-wing newspapers.

iconic turn in the social sciences is to be welcomed because of its recognition of the socio-political significance of pictures and its attention to matters of signification and interpretation of the meanings of cultural artifacts and practices, it runs the dangers of forgetting the lessons of the sociology of art [Becker *et al.* 2006; Becker 1982; Wolff 1993, 2012], according to which the aesthetic work (or image) itself can better be understood when unearthing the socio-institutional processes and relations of its collective production. To this extent, visual icons can be put back in their place amidst the proliferating ensemble of pictures of an event, situation, person, or group, so as to position these icons within the broader iconological field within which they emerge and to identify the mechanisms of hierarchical differentiation through which, over time, they relationally distinguished themselves *vis-à-vis* rival pictures to acquire an *ex post facto* iconic status.

Before proceeding further, a caveat is in order. To circumscribe the scope of inquiry and focus more explicitly on socio-political dynamics, the following pages limit themselves to analysis of conflict-related and politically generated humanitarian emergencies,[12] principally situations of genocide and famine. As a result, humanitarian crises caused by "natural" disasters, such as earthquakes and floods, will not be considered here – although it should be noted that the influence of social factors in these kinds of disasters is just as significant as that of natural forces, since their impact greatly varies according to different countries' public infrastructure and social programs, as well as being distributed unequally across populations based upon class, ethno-racial, and gender modes of social stratification.

2. The Image's Semiotic Structure

Following structuralist linguistics and its applications in the human sciences [Lévi-Strauss 1966, 1977, 1993; Saussure 1965], a structure can be defined as a system of formal relations between a relatively fixed number of components that constitute a coherently ordered whole isomorphically reproduced over time and space.[13] Thus, as a branch of structuralism shaped by, inter alia, Eco's theories of codes, Barthes' general semiological theories and his analyses of photography and Metz's study of

---

[12] I am indebted to Craig Calhoun for suggesting this distinction to me.

[13] For a recent and stimulating analysis of the notion of social structure, as found in various traditions of US social science and defined in terms of the differential ordering and scaling up of interpersonal relations, see Martin [2009.] My own understanding of the concept of structure owes more to European structuralist traditions than their US counterparts. For an intellectual history of the former, see Dosse [1997a, 1997b] and my own discussion of these traditions [Kurasawa 1998.]

film [Barthes 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1985; Eco 1979, 1992; Metz 2003], visual semiotics aims to identify structures made up of relations connecting linguistic and visual signs or symbols to one another to give rise to certain forms – which I will designate as "iconographic conventions" below.[14] Two key structuralist insights are germane to our purposes, the first of which being the isomorphic character of a structure, that is to say, the exact or close correspondence (within a given range) of forms across cases, thereby giving rise to a set of general signifying rules or semiotic codes regarding the organization of this structure [Alexander 2003; Eco 1979.] Secondly, structuralism underscores the fundamental relationality of meaning, since a semiotic structure is composed of visual symbols or signs whose meanings are neither intrinsic nor created from the relations between signifiers and signifieds, but rather established via a series of binary oppositions and differentiations between signifiers themselves within the image's frame.

However, the version of visual semiotics employed here breaks with structuralist analytical orthodoxy in important ways, since it does not assert that a structure is necessarily or automatically reproduced in identical form in different socio-historical settings. Instead of assuming the functioning of such processes of reproduction, visual semiotics examines if and to what extent they occur by considering how social actors engage in the work of reproducing or transforming existing structures; these actors repeat, adapt, or modify existing institutional mechanisms and patterns of thought and action, or invent new mechanisms and patterns as settings differ. While the number of symbols or signs in a structure is fairly stable, changes in it stem from variations in how actors combine or assemble them into new signifying patterns or interpret already existing patterns. Hence, *contra* structural determinism, the agency of several categories of actors involved in producing, selecting, and interpreting images (photojournalists, editors, audiences, etc.) seriously impacts both the configuration of these images' semiotic structures and their meanings. This is to say, then, that such structures are characterized by their polysemy [Barthes 1982b, 31], for they contain multiple possible meanings rather than a single one that would be determined by fixed relations between symbols or signs; actors creating an image attach an intended meaning to it, yet can neither control nor predict whether and to what extent this signification will change according to the image's recontextualization and the composition of audiences viewing it. Indeed, an image's meanings are always subject to contestation and reinterpretation by persons and groups, with such reframings and hermeneutic struggles generating public controversies. Similarly, the

---

[14] For an excellent overview of Barthes' and Metz's key ideas about visuality and the French intellectual context within which they were writing, see Jay [1993, 435-491.]

visual semiotics proposed in this paper eschew the structuralist tendency toward universalist or transhistorical claims, since a structure emerges out of a specific historical and socio-cultural set of conditions while adapting its general form in every context within which it is present. The semiotic structure of relevance here operates in modern Euro-American societies, although variations of it may well exist in other settings around the world.[15]

Having specified the above items, we can now introduce the general model of an image's semiotic structure (see Figure 1,) which is composed of two categories of elements: actors (protagonists, antagonists, and supporting actors) and circumstances (event or situation, and context.) In an image, actors' respective positions in relation to a specific event are established via situational symbols (S1 to S3 in Figure 1,) namely, signs that convey and thereby situate the roles of protagonists, antagonists, and supporting actors in relation to the event being visually represented; they include textual captions, with designative functions,[16] objects of various kinds (e.g., equipment, accessories, weapons,) clothing, corporeal positioning, as well as facial and bodily expressions. Simultaneously, these same actors have their roles set out in relation to one another through compositional symbols (S4 to S6 in Figure 1,) with an image's visual composition being defined by processes of symbolic arrangement and relational differentiation of roles to signify how persons and groups are linked. Although they can overlap with their situational counterparts, compositional symbols additionally include signs shared amongst actors: objects that one uses to assist or harm another (e.g., a bowl of food being given or a weapon being shot,) facial or corporeal expressions directed at another actor (a smile, a scream, a hand touching or reaching out, etc.,) as well as indicators giving off an actor's hierarchically structured position *vis-à-vis* others in the visual frame (skin colour, gender, age, type of clothing and possessions, and so on.)

---

[15] It is important to adopt a position of analytical agnosticism *vis-à-vis* a semiotic structure's applicability to settings different from the ones out of which it is originally derived, since this determination cannot be made *a priori*, without empirical investigation of the specificities of the semiotic structures found in other societies and cultural worlds.

[16] Generally, captions will designate the various actors with didactic spatial signifiers (left, centre, right), as well as their names and titles.
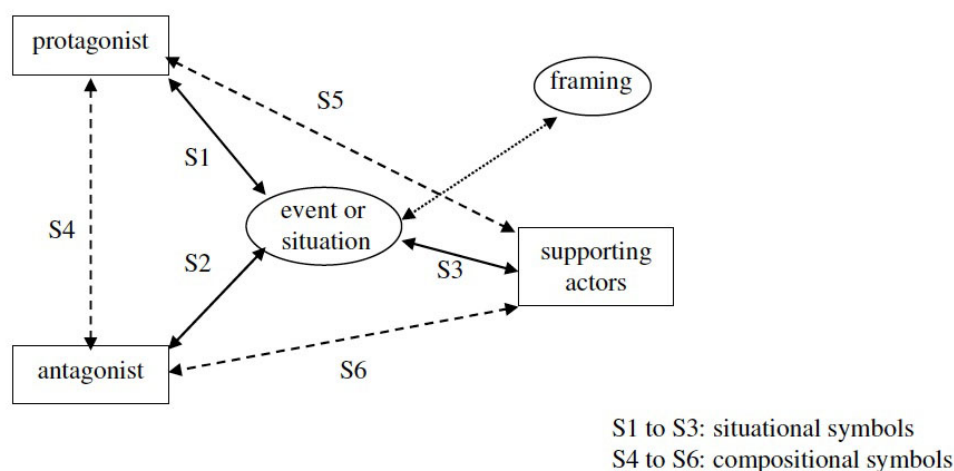
FIG. 1. The Semiotic Structure: A General Model

The general model of the image's semiotic structure can be translated into one applicable to humanitarian visuality, as illustrated in Figure 2:
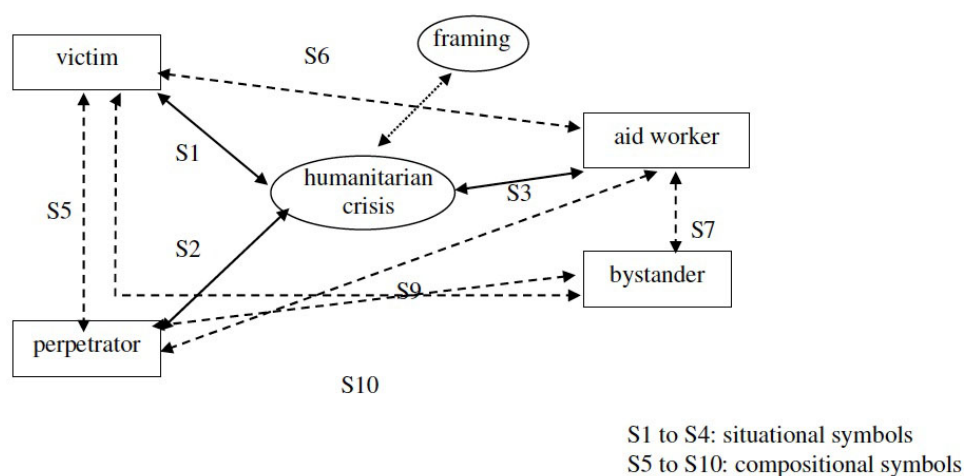

FIG. 2. The Semiotic Structure: A Model for Humanitarian Visuality

In an image of a humanitarian crisis, the actor whose presence is indispensable is a subject or group of subjects symbolically constituted as a victim, who – as will be explained in the next section – represents visual evidence of the crisis while illustrating its human toll. According to the kind of event or situation being depicted, this victim may be supplemented by other actors: the perpetrator or group of perpetrators identified as responsible for the crisis; the aid worker rescuing, lending assist to, and/or caring for the victim; and bystanders who are witnessing the crisis or its aftermath, but are neither directly implicated nor affected by it. None of these roles is

self-evident or naturally given, their distribution and attribution resulting from how those creating and producing an image present and make sense of the interplay of situational and compositional symbols typically associated with certain forms of action and codes read off the physical appearance of each actor. As a representational genre, victimhood is tied to an expression of subordination, pain or distress, with the victim's body in a vulnerable position or showing traces of suffering (the most extreme of which is death itself, as symbolized through corpses,) or yet again carrying signs of extreme poverty or illness. Furthermore, victimhood is correlated with innocence and passivity, the relevant person or group of persons being devoid of situational or compositional symbols that would indicate either a degree of responsibility for their condition or a capacity to change it of their own volition; hence the popularity of the figure of the child, the innocent victim *par excellence* – and one designed to elicit pity or sympathy amongst viewers – in humanitarian visuality. Commonly in Euro-American socio-visual imaginaries, the victim is also a racialized and gendered figure, for persons of colour in the global South, and notably girls and women of colour, stand as the penultimate representational archetypes of victimhood.

The victim's semiotic antithesis is the perpetrator, who stands in as the manifestation of malevolence or moral evil and is attributed direct or indirect responsibility for the unfolding of a humanitarian crisis. The roles of perpetrators are visually inscribed through symbols of their superordinate status and power, such as uniforms of a military regime at fault for such a crisis, weapons used against victims, or their presence amongst decision-making or policy-implementing institutions. It is here that the representational limits of humanitarian visuality become evident, for the tendency to portray a person or group as responsible for large-scale crises and emergencies elides the often determinant structural or systemic causes of complex emergencies and the circumstances producing them. In the repertoire of situational and compositional symbols deployed in still or moving images of these same events, few if any signs function to capture the role of organizations, structures and relations of power, and institutional mechanisms that underpin the frequent reoccurrence of famines and genocides around the world, such as Western weapons-producing or mining corporations fuelling conflicts, neoliberal "free market" reforms leading to mass immiseration and malnutrition because of the privatization of public services and the deregulation of basic foodstuff prices, or the indifference of Euro-American governments in the face of wars in parts of the globe deprived of vital strategic geopolitical or economic importance (defined in terms of "national interests".) Thus, if sometimes implied in the framing of a humanitarian crisis (e.g., through the spoken narrative of a documentary film or the written text of a piece of investigative photojournalism,) structural factors without ready-made and easily recognizable signify-

ing systems remain beyond visual representation – and consequently, beyond public awareness and mass political mobilization.

For her or his part, the aid worker is demarcated from other actors in the image through situational and compositional symbols designating him or her as a benevolent, selfless and often courageous actor who intervenes in a humanitarian crisis to save the lives of victims, provide them with care, and/or ensure their recovery; hence, in addition to their corporeal poses and gestures (the examining or feeding of a subject, the carrying of supplies, etc.,) aid workers' relations to the crisis and its victims are visually signified through their clothing (e.g., a humanitarian NGO's t-shirt, a nurse's or doctor's uniform) and equipment (medical supplies, foodstuffs, aid tents, etc.) The racialization and gendering of aid workers inverts the corresponding logics for victims, for the former are almost always white Westerners, with their archetypal figures being those of the female nurse tending to the wounded, the injured, or the sick, and of the solitary male hero using his expertise and intrepid actions to rescue victims.[17] Despite the fact that aid workers do not appear within all representations of a humanitarian crisis, their presence in the scene is implied through visual metaphors or metonyms, such as the logo of an NGO in the background of a feeding centre or refugee camp, or on the donated clothing, medicines, and food rations distributed to victims; indeed, the absence of such signs of humanitarian aid in an image of an emergency can be alarming to Euro-American audiences, since such an incomplete chain of signification suggests that that no one is on the ground to perform the role of aid worker saving vulnerable populations or giving succour to victims.[18]

What must be reiterated is that, from a socio-visual constructivist position, there is no inherent meaning to an image of an event or situation. Rather, viewers give it signification by trying to make sense of, critically interpreting, and publicly debating its particular assembly of situational and compositional symbols, as well the portrayed event or situation's framing (see Figure 1.) I use the latter term to play on its double meaning in a visual setting. In the literal sense, framing concerns the material boundaries drawn around the still or moving image ("the frame",) determining what is captured by and what lies beyond the photographer or filmmaker's camera and, therefore, what parts of the event or situation is included in its representation and conversely, what parts are excluded from it. In addition, figuratively speaking, fram-

---

[17] In the last few decades, Bernard Kouchner is the most visible and best-known figure of this male archetype of the aid worker, which is supported by and has given rise to the burgeoning literary subgenres of the humanitarian memoir [Kouchner 2004; Maskalyk 2010; Orbinski 2009] and novel [Brunel 2003.]

[18] For self-evidently promotional and public relations reasons, images of humanitarian crises created by aid agencies themselves tend to include aid workers (or at the very least, the logo of the relevant agency) much more frequently than those produced by media organizations.

ing refers to the devices through which an image is presented to those who view it and, in turn, the frames of reference through which they interpret it: its multimedia relations to textual and/or oral material (to form the various pieces of a printed or electronic news article, an editorial piece, an activist or filmmaker's narrative, etc.;) its spatial or chronological positioning (on a website page, in a newspaper or magazine article, as footage in a video, televised news report, or documentary film;) the historically - and culturally - specific conventions of representation of certain types of events or situations, conventions with which viewers will have become familiarized (as discussed in the next section;) and the wider historical, cultural, economic, and socio-political context within which the event or situation is located, with the image being a visual microcosm or capture of a fleeting moment in time of a spatially larger and chronologically lengthier reality.[19]

3.   Humanitarian Visuality's Iconographic Repertoire of Conventions

Several recent developments are pushing the concepts of convention and repertoire at the forefront of sociological scholarship, where at least two branches of the discipline are putting them to innovative uses. The first of these is the "contentious politics" school of political sociology, in which research focuses on comparative historical analysis of repertoires of contention utilized in political protests and struggles, and the diffusion or adaptive transformation of such repertoires according to socio-political conditions at varying scales and contexts of action [McAdam *et al*. 2001; Tarrow 2005; Tilly 2006; Wood 2012.] Cultural sociology represents the second disciplinary branch of relevance here, notably two of its most dynamic paradigms: the post-Bourdieusian sociology of conventions and evaluation, which involves the identification of referential orders of worth and repertoires of evaluation from which social actors draw when exercising judgement, engaging in public critique, and justifying their decisions [Boltanski and Thévenot 1991; Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Lamont 2009, 2012]; and the strong program in US cultural sociology, which turns its attention to the interpretation of narrative patterns, rhetorical genres, argumentative genres, and morally binary structures and codes operating in civil discourse [Alexander and Smith 2003; Alexander 2006; Jacobs and Townsley 2011; Polletta 2006.] In addition to these sociological contributions, my analytical framework draws on the

[19] To be clear, and as will be explained below, an image's meaning is not solely shaped by its semiotic structure, since the three other dimensions of our socio-visual constructivist framework (iconographic conventions, circulatory networks, and iconographic fields) are equally important as signifying mechanisms.

notions of tropes, genres, narratives, and styles formulated in literary criticism and philosophical historiography [Moretti 2013; Ricoeur 1984; White 1973], and from a visual perspective, on concepts of iconographic type and aesthetic genre or style that are common – if much debated – currency within art history,[20] aesthetic and cultural criticism, and visual studies [Foster 1996; Foster et al. 2005; Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Krauss 1985; Mitchell 1987; Mondzain 2005; Panofsky 1939.][21]

To provide a comprehensive account of these large and diverse bodies of literature lies outside of this paper's purview, yet when taken together, they help to define a convention as a typical pattern of thought, action, or representation – that is to say, a motif or form that constitutes a typification, both in the sense of being typically (and thus widely and routinely) used, referred to, and critically engaged with over the course of a given period of time in a certain socio-cultural setting, and in the sense of being a socially recognized type or mode of ordering seemingly disparate or haphazard ways of thinking, acting, or representing into a coherent ensemble. As the structuralist principle of analytical relationality mentioned above indicates, a convention does not exist self-referentially, since its contours and distinctive traits only become visible by being juxtaposed to other conventions against which it is delineated; US abstract expressionism is an aesthetic style precisely because it is not – and sets itself against – French impressionism, whereas protest marches are a form of contentious politics that exist in contradistinction to the lobbying of governments. A visual convention, then, is a typical, isomorphic repetition of a semiotic structure across images that share similar configurations of relations amongst and between situational and compositional symbols used to represent different cases across time and space.

For its part, a repertoire is a limited range of conventions operating in a particular socio-historical setting, which actors deploy and to which they refer through their modes of thought, practice, and representation of the world; within such a setting, actors have a certain repertoire or toolkit of conventions available to them to perform, engage in, and make sense of social life. Any repertoire of conventions in a specific field of thought and action is explicit knowledge for specialists or experts in that

---

[20] While a fuller analysis of these concepts within art history and aesthetic criticism would take us well beyond the scope of this paper, it can be mentioned that the preoccupation with form is rooted in such foundational works as Kant's *Critique of* Judgment [Kant 1987] to Cassirer's neo-Kantian theory of symbolic forms [Cassirer 1955] and post-Second World War formalism [Fried 1982; Greenberg 1984.]

[21] Polletta's and Wagner-Pacifici's writings should be noted as important attempts to bridge the gap between cultural sociology and formalist analyses in literary and aesthetic criticism [Polletta 2006; Wagner-Pacifici 2005], as is the emerging concern with iconicity within the strong program of US cultural sociology [Alexander et al. 2011.]

field, who participate in the repertoire's elaboration and study, as well as exercises to determine, debate, and contest its legitimate boundaries (that is, the collectively validated limits of the range of conventions that it includes and excludes) and the institutional or formal consecration of these boundary-drawing processes around a particular repertoire.[22] And even though laypersons often are less acquainted with these processes, a repertoire functions for them as tacit referential or indexical social knowledge, which informs their understandings, expectations, critiques, and modes of engaging with various conventions in the social world [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 10.] Hence, a cinema-goer will decide to watch a certain genre of movie (say, a romantic comedy or a horror film) based upon implicit expectations about the range of conventions typically present in that genre (plot, types of characters, dénouement, etc.,) whereas an activist will pursue tactical conventions (e.g., sabotage, strike, civil disobedience, boycott) as part of what she or he believes to be an effective range of political strategies to achieve workplace militancy.

For our purposes, we can speak of an iconographic repertoire as a set or regime of visual conventions constituted, developing, and operating within socio-culturally and historically situated milieux. To use *à propos* ocular metaphors, an iconographic repertoire is a lens or frame for the creation and interpretation of images in public spheres, through which visual representations of events and situations are assessed in order to determine whether and to what degree they acquire an iconic status on the basis of several criteria (emblematic capture of reality, aesthetic beauty, timing, evidentiary standing, etc.) [Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 29–30.] Hence, an image's public circulation and visibility depends upon the extent to which it fits within the established conventions of a particular iconographic repertoire, or the ways in which it may, as a significant semiotic outlier, compel an eventual expansion or modification of the representational bounds of such a repertoire over time. Likewise, an iconographic repertoire serves to support the socio-cultural legibility of pictures, providing an interpretive background framing the possible meanings that social actors invest in and ascribe to these pictures, as well as channeling the corresponding processes of signification in certain directions according to existing visual conventions – much like a specific novel is read through the lens of its literary genre, whether it be, *inter alia*, Latin American magical realism or Scandinavian crime fiction, or a social science text is read against the background of the domains and types of knowledge within

---

[22] Experts and specialists' reflexive and acute awareness of the socially constructed and provisional character of their field's repertoire explains their investment in frequent debates and controversies about the seemingly arbitrary or biased nature of such a repertoire; to wit, the reoccurring canon wars in Euro-American humanities and social sciences.

which its author positions it and is situated by readers (say, Marxist political economy or postcolonial feminism.)

An iconographic repertoire is available to and informed by three categories of social actors involved in the circulation of images: producers, editors, and viewers. Producers of images (photojournalists, documentary filmmakers, eyewitnesses, NGO workers, etc.) tacitly employ and refer to such a repertoire to inform the meanings that they intend to convey and the ways in which they literally frame the reality they are representing (e.g., upon whom they focus in a scene, the picture's composition, what is left outside of the camera's lens.) Equally, persons who edit these pictures (photo and video editors at media organizations, government censors, NGO public relations staff, etc.) keep iconographic repertoires in mind when deciding how to crop a photograph or perform the montage of a news report or documentary film, and at a basic level, what images to select for public release. In turn, viewers draw upon the indexical qualities of iconographic repertoires and codes [Eco 1992, 37] to make sense of images that they encounter in multiple settings and circumstances, since they can thereby give meaning to visual material and recognize they kind of situation or event that it represents – from personal ones such as weddings and birthday celebrations to public ones likes a victory in a sporting competition or a natural disaster – by locating it within the background range of conventions with which these viewers have become familiarized through processes of socialization and practices of looking. But these same repertoires are not merely signifying or implicit taxonomical mechanisms; they act as referential frameworks that shape public discourses about images because they contain representational, political and moral norms that inform the ways in which persons and groups speak about, evaluate, critique and deliberate about these images, setting the terms of collective interpretation and debate of visuality. For instance, it is through historically evolving and culturally variable iconographic repertoires that institutions and members of the public debate whether it is appropriate to display, release, or publish certain still or moving pictures (and where to do so, to what kinds of audiences, etc.,) what the effects of seeing such pictures are (e.g., in terms of public opinion, political mobilization, socio-cultural practices,) and whether and to what extent they are accurate, complete, or reliable portrayals of a given reality (based upon the credibility of the sources creating them, previous visual records, written evidence, and oral testimonies describing this reality, and so on.)[23]

---

[23] Thus, aside from visual conventions, an iconographic repertoire contains moral criteria (so-called "community standards") and evidentiary principles (for legal prosecution set by courts, journalistic reporting set by the media, social persuasion set by advertisers, etc.,) as well as representational limits of what is considered, in a specific epoch and location, possible and desirable to visually depict. As such, an image falling outside of an established repertoire is frequently the subject of

Iconographic repertoires are eminently social and, thus, necessarily intersubjective, for the meanings of the visual conventions that they contain result from the messy interplay of continuous processes of signification and interpretation of images on the part of the three categories of social actors mentioned above. Thus, while they direct and delimit the range of likely meanings attributed to pictures, conventions and repertoires cannot strictly determine these meanings, which remain permanently outside of the control of any particular interpretive institution or mechanism. Image producers or editors may well designate and aim to attach specific intended meanings to a still or moving picture (by constructing or selecting its semiotic structure, positioning it via a certain iconographic repertoire, etc.,) yet these do not necessarily or predictably correspond to the meanings that viewers give to it (which may well be framed more significantly by, e.g., these viewers' socio-cultural backgrounds, the political situation at the time and in the place in which they see it.) Similarly, an iconographic repertoire should not be conflated with a uniform or fixed representational or interpretive gaze that would determine signifying practices, since once they enter public spheres, images' meanings cannot but be subject to perpetual contestation and possible resignification beyond institutionally legitimate or anticipated meanings.

Applying these conceptual and analytical considerations to the subject matter at hand enables us to identify a modern Euro-American iconographic repertoire containing four ideal-typical visual conventions of representation of humanitarian crises: personification, massification, rescue, and care,[24] as outlined in Table 1:

TAB. 1. *Visual Conventions and their Iconographic Archetypes*

Convention	*Art Work (Ur-Icon)*
Personification	"*The Scream*," Edvard Munch [1893]
Massification	"*Disasters of War*," Francisco Goya [1810s]
Rescue	"*Abolition de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises* [27 avril 1848]," François-Auguste Biard
Care	"*La Pietà*," various

public controversy and denunciation by certain actors in civil society, who deem it to be shocking, inappropriate, or simply false. See Cavarero for analysis of the regime of 'horrorism' to represent contemporary forms of violence, Alexander [2012] and Baer [2005] for that of trauma, and Boltanski [1993] and Chouliaraki [2006] for that of distant suffering.

[24] These conventions are Weberian ideal-types, that is, abstract composites devised for heuristic purposes on the basis of large-scale inductive analysis of primary and secondary sources documenting the visual representation of humanitarian crises through the Euro-American media and the humanitarian movement. As such, not all the traits of each ideal-type are to be found in each and every image that corresponds to a particular visual convention.

Each of them should be explained in turn. Humanitarian visuality's first convention, personification, comprises of pictures whose composition is characterized by a close-up shot of a single subject (or small group of subjects) symbolically constituted as a victim of a humanitarian emergency. The representation of this victim's plight serves as simultaneously a figurative and literal incarnation of the intensity and depth of suffering caused by this emergency, whereby he or she becomes the latter's subjective, microcosmic manifestation and, as such, its human face. The personified subject tends to be depicted through an expressionist aesthetic style designed to convey dense layers of corporeal, psychological, emotional, and existential distress. Aesthetic expressionism is bolstered by the portrayal of the victim as an acutely vulnerable figure seemingly isolated from other social actors, presumably abandoned or ignored by them and thereby left to encounter the gravest effects of a humanitarian crisis alone. The impression of social isolation matches personification's decontextualized rendering of the victim, who appears in images with little if any explanatory framing of the underlying socio-economic or political circumstances of her or his predicament; personified images are of raw, naked, and unvarnished suffering, etched on the subject's face and body. The starving, sick, or injured child is the most pervasive trope of personification, displaying a victim whose articulation of vulnerability and innocence make him or her "deserving" of sympathy by Euro-American viewers and of the urgent mobilization of humanitarian efforts.

Although its sources in the history of Western aesthetics are both longstanding and diverse, the convention of personification finds one of its most cogent modern archetypes in Edvard Munch's "The Scream" [1893], the proto-expressionist work that vividly captures a mood of intense existential angst and loneliness. As aid agencies and media organizations institutionalized their use of photography in the first decades of the Twentieth century, they quickly established the centrality of personification to the iconographic repertoire of humanitarian visuality, whether in the form of a picture of a Congolese boy maimed by Belgian colonial troops in 1903[25] or that of a starving girl leaning against a doorframe during the Russian famine in 1921.[26] Since then, personified images have been repeatedly utilized to visually depict famines: advertisements for humanitarian agencies and media photographs during the

[25] This photograph was reproduced extensively in print campaigns and lantern lectures from the Congo Reform Association, which opposed the treatment of Congolese civilians under the rule of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State. It was also part of a collage in Mark Twain's satirical pamphlet, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* [Twain 1905, 41]; see Sliwinski [2006, 352.]

[26] Taken in the town of Buguruslan, this image was published in newspapers such as *L'Illustration* [18 February 1922, p. 160] and in bulletins [AFSC 1921; FSR 1921, 29] and postcards from humanitarian NGOs; for the latter, see http://www.artukraine.com/famineart/famine10.htm (accessed 19 December 2014.)

1968 Biafran famine often featured a starving child,[27] as did many of the defining images of the 1983-85 Sahel famine (which most gravely affected Ethiopia.)[28] A Pulitzer Prize-winning and controversial picture of a child who had collapsed to the ground while a vulture lurked in the background during the 1993 Sudan famine is another widely viewed instance of personification,[29] as is the close-up portrait of woman's face with her mouth covered by an infant's skeletal hand over the course of the severe food crisis in Niger in 2005.[30]

Directly contrasting with personification is massification, the second visual convention of humanitarian visuality, which is composed through wide shots of corpses or survivors piled up against, or in close proximity to, one another in the frame. The resulting images of an undifferentiated corporeal mass, in which each subject is indistinguishable from the other, function as visual metonyms encapsulating the quantitative magnitude of a humanitarian crisis by pointing to the vast numbers of persons affected by it. Massification's symbolic register is located within a realist aesthetic genre aiming to reflect an observable reality in a sober, unadorned, and "objective" manner, for the sheer scale of the humanitarian crisis can be left to speak for itself. In the history of Euro-American art, Francisco Goya's "Disasters of War" (1810s) series of stark, black-and-white etchings of heaps of dead or agonizing subjects can be situated as the *Ur*-iconography of massification. As a convention, the latter informed the visual representation of major humanitarian crises in the early part of the Twentieth century, with images such as those of a group of Congolese prisoners restrained by ropes tied to their necks and bodies under the rule of King Leopold II,[31] of piles of corpses during the Armenian genocide,[32] and of an unburied mound of bodies stacked on the snowy groups of a cematary during the Russian famine of 1921-1923.[33] In the

[27] See advertisements by Oxfam and UNICEF in *The Times* [27 July 1968, p. 17; 18 September 1968, p. 10, respectively.]

[28] See the television news reports by the BBC's Michael Buerk [broadcast on 24 October 1984] and the CBC's Brian Stewart [broadcast on 1 November 1984,] available at: http://youtu.be/XYOj_6OYuJc (accessed 19 December 2014) and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFPr-zAXNuc (accessed 19 December 2014.)

[29] Taken by photojournalist Kevin Carter, the picture was originally published in *The New York Times* [26 March 1993.]

[30] The image, from photojournalist Finbarr O'Reilly, won the 2005 World Press Photo of the Year. It can be viewed here:
http://www.archive.worldpressphoto.org/search/layout/result/indeling/detailwpp/form/wpp/q/ishoofdafbeelding/true/trefwoord/year/2005 (accessed 19 December 2014.)

[31] This photograph, entitled "Native Prisoners at Boma Taking the Air", was published in Morel [1904, 192] and subsequently circulated by the Congo Reform Association.

[32] Three such photographs appeared in a cablegram from the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief dating from 1917.

[33] This photographs were taken in the city of Buzuluk in December 1921. An article from the

latter half of the same century, massified images continued to be integral to human-itarian visuality, whether in the form of groups of starving Biafrans[34] and Ethiopians[35] during the aforementioned famines in Nigeria and the Sahel or yet again, of corpses, skeletel remains or skulls of victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide.[36]

In the iconographic repertoire of humanitarian visuality, the third visual convention is that of rescue. It consists of scenes involving staff from a humanitarian aid agency or a prominent person (typically, a celebrity) attempting to save the lives of victims of a large-scale emergency that are in imminent peril. Images of rescue are symbolically structured to visually inscribe the hierarchically organized roles and vastly unequal capacities of actors in the face of humanitarian crises, through the jux-taposition of positions between a rescuer possessing the agency to intervene to trans-form dire circumstances and a victim portrayed as helpless, passive or acutely vulner-able. The convention of rescue draws upon the racialized iconography and narrat-ive of civilizational chauvinism embodied in the trope of the "white man's burden," which consists of a self-appointed Euro-American mission to save persons of colour and the non-Western world from what is believed to be self-inflicted moral squalor and socio-economic misery. One of the defining visual iterations of rescue can be traced back to François-Auguste Biard's "Abolition de l'esclavage dans les colonies françaises (27 avril 1848,)" which depicts a moment when the announcement of the abolition of slavery was declared by a French governmental official to an audience of former black slaves and white colonial settlers. This convention has continued to inform the pictorial representation of humanitarian crises: two women rescued from the clutches of Turkish military forces, or a child being fed by an aid worker, during

Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* [12 August 2003,] reproduced on the International Committee of the Red Cross' website, mentions its widespread distribution; see http://www.icrc.org/web/fre/sitefre0.nsf/html/5QKJLH (accessed 19 December 2014.) For instance, the image was published in the *Manchester Guardian* [20 April 1922, p. 5] and *L'Illustration* [11 February 1922, p. 135,] as reprinted in Cosandey [1998, 6.] A postcard version of it was published by a Belgian organization devoted to Russian famine relief; see http://www.artukraine.com/old/famineart/famine10.htm (accessed 19 December 2014.)

[34] See, *inter alia*, *The New York Times* of 8 September 1968 [p. 29] for a photograph of starving Biafran children aboard a truck, and *The Times* (of London) of 3 March 1969 [p. 8] for one of a cart containing human remains in Biafra.

[35] In particular, see Sebastiao Salgado's photographs of Ethiopian refugee camps in Bati and Korem during the Sahel famine of 1983-1985 [Salgado 1990, 92-93.]

[36] Some of the most famous and disturbing photographs to emerge from this genocide portray masses of human remains or corpses collected together or regrouped in a room, a field, or a dirt road. For instance, see http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7043411.stm, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/26/rwandan-genocide-mastermind-captured-drc, and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/27/bernard-munyagishari-rwanda-genocide-suspect-arrested_n_868019.html (accessed 19 December 2014).

the Armenian genocide;[37] a nurse feeding a child during the Russian famine,[38] with a semiotic structure reproduced in images of the famines in Biafra[39] and Ethiopia;[40] and in the "Kony 2012" viral video, which replays the visual and narrative motif of self-perceived benevolence on the part of white Westerners taking action to rescue victimized Ugandans.[41]

Care, which represents the fourth and final visual convention in humanitarian visuality's iconographic repertoire, somewhat resembles the trope of rescue, since it also regroups pictures depicting interpersonal relationships between aid agencies or their staff and victims of humanitarian crises. However, unlike the life-saving urgency portrayed in scenes of rescue, those of care relate to situations of longer-term physical and mental recovery of the injured, the sick, and persons recovering from starvation, through institutions providing social services and "moral education" (hospitals, orphanages, nurseries, refugee camps, schools, etc.) Whereas rescue tends to sustain a masculinist iconography grounded in the humanitarian aid worker's visually constituted heroism, care is expressed through a feminine symbolization of altruistic concern for and devotion to the other. Nevertheless, in the humanitarian representational logic, the convention of care naturalizes the reproduction of relations of dependence between caregivers and recipients, nor the global, systemic socio-economic inequalities ensuring that the former are almost invariably white Westerners and the latter, conversely, non-Westerners of colour. Additionally, this same convention rarely puts into question the morally and materially hierarchical distribution of roles between humanitarian staff and victims that is implicit in a scenario of care. Plunging back into the history of the Euro-American visual arts, "La Pietà" emerges as a foundational icon of this convention of care, with its representation of a mournful Mary cradling Jesus' body after his crucifixion. Its symbolic structure is replicated in numerous images of humanitarian disasters over the last century: a group of Armenian refugees, escaping from the genocide in a British camp,[42] or two Armenian children to whom

[37] The first photograph appeared in *The Daily Mirror* newspaper [15 November 1917,] whereas the second one was published in *National Geographic* [Vol. 36, 1919, p. 410.]

[38] This photograph was published in *The Record of the Save the Children Fund* [May 1922, p. 249] [Slim and Sellick 2002, Reel 1.]

[39] See photographs in *The New York Times* accompanying articles headlined "Aid is Snarled for Starving Millions in Biafra" [3 July 1968, p. 1] and "Priest in Lisbon is Link to Missionaries in Biafra" [12 August 1968, p. 2.]

[40] See, for instance, the cover of *People* magazine [28 January 1985,] which features various members of the Kennedy family with children in Ethiopia, and the photograph of Bob Geldof (of Live Aid) surrounded by a group of Ethiopian children in *The Guardian* [10 January 1985, p. 7.]

[41] The video, produced by the US NGO Invisible Children, can be viewed at http://vimeo.com/37119711 (accessed 19 December 2014.)

[42] The photograph appeared in *The Manchester Guardian* [12 November 1915, p. 8.]

the Save the Children Fund is lending assistance;[43] an advertisement for the American Red Cross featuring an oversized nun holding an injured soldier lying on a stretcher;[44] survivors of the Sahel famine in the Korem refugee camp;[45] and a victim of the Darfur genocide, lying on his back while a woman touches his forehead with her hand.[46]

4. On Images' Circulatory Networks

Within the disciplinary confines of sociology, the notion of network has become ubiquitous in the last decade. Although a full account of this phenomenon – which would be grounded in intellectual history and the sociology of knowledge – is of limited relevance here, at least four analytical frameworks should be noted. The best-known of these is actor-network theory (ANT,) which examines the constitution of the social on the basis of interactions between human and non-human "actants" that form provisional assemblages and associations [Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 2006; Law 1992.] While it is necessary to critically interrogate ANT's tendency to downplay the significance of structural or systemic forces that cannot be reduced to situationally composed assemblages of interactions, as well as its overstatement of the agentic capacities of non-human actants within networks, the approach captures a question that is central to socio-visual constructivism: the problem of coordination in social life, whereby a researcher must explain the arduous and tentative processes of assembling and stabilizing the interactions amongst a variety of different actants – which thus produce a network – instead of taking for granted such processes and presuming that such a network (or an institution or structure) already exists.[47] Hence, ANT prompts us to avoid "blackboxing" or reifying pictures by beginning analysis at the moment of their appearance in public spheres or their presence in various venues and sites, whether these be material or virtual in nature. Rather, the analytical task consists of tracing, from the ground up, the formation of an elaborate and situationally specific network of associations amongst individual and organizational

---

[43] The photograph was published in *The Record of the Save the Children Fund* [15 June 1922, p. 296] [Slim and Sellick 2002.]

[44] This image, by Alonzo Foringer, was entitled "The Greatest Mother in the World" – making explicit the aforementioned gendered and maternal character of care – was part of a poster reproduced millions of times as part of a highly successful campaign in the US. It is found at: http://www.redcross.org/museum/exhibits/posters.asp (accessed 19 December 2014.)

[45] The photograph appeared in *The Guardian* (15 October 1985, p. 21.)

[46] This photograph, by photojournalist James Nachtwey, was published on the cover of *Time* magazine [4 October 2004.] It can be viewed at: http://www.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,1101041004,00.html (accessed 19 December 2014.)

[47] Latour sums this up via his dictum about treating a network as a "worknet" [Latour 2006, 208.]

actors that produce, edit and distribute images, the images themselves, and technologies and machinery for their creation and public dissemination (including means of their reproduction and platforms for their viewing.) The second relevant paradigm is social network research, which believes in the patterned structuring of action in social life, which consists of connections and ties between persons and groups and the resulting formation of nodes and networked mechanisms through which individuals and organizations operate and exercise power in a variety of social settings [Kadushin 2012; Scott 2013; Wasserman and Faust 1994.] Despite the fact that socio-visual constructivism does not share social network research's penchant for methodological quantification (via advanced sociometrics and mathematical modelling techniques,) both approaches are committed to understanding the central role of the distribution of ties within social space and the presence of identifiable patterns within networks to come to grips with social interactions, the circulation of ideas and material objects, and institutional outcomes – the workings of which are far from aleatory or random.

A third research paradigm informing socio-visual constructivism's conception of network is that emerging out of communication and media studies, which analyzes the transnationally networked circulation of knowledge and symbolic artifacts (information, opinions, images, etc.) facilitated by new, web-based and mobile technologies. Of particular interest is the emphasis that this body of literature places upon the variety of actors involved in such communication networks (from media organizations and states to social movements and ordinary citizens,) the different spatial scales at which they operate (local, national, regional, and global,) the ways in which power and influence is exercised through them, as well as the mechanisms through which they enable political mobilization within civil societies and the transnational amplification of certain causes, struggles, and events [Albrow *et al.* 2007; Boyd and Ellison 2007; Castells 2009, 2012.] Finally, my understanding of a network is shaped by key contributions to cultural sociology and the sociology of art: Wolff's analysis of the production of art [Wolff 1993], Becker's interactional and processual approach in the sociology of art [Becker *et al.* 2006; Becker 1982] – itself partly guided by Blumer's assertion that "meaning is a social product" [Blumer 1969] –, and frameworks integrating social network analysis with that of cultural practices [Bottero and Crossley 2011; Crossley 2010.] All of these writings decentre both the artist as author or producer (and by extension, the image itself) to consider how an art work or cultural scene is the product of collective activities by various groups of persons involved in different processes and connected to each other via relational nodes and mechanisms. Therefore, an image's coming into being in public spaces is the result of organizational factors at numerous stages of its circulation, from the resources ne-

cessary to its creation to its editing and reception by diverse audiences in a variety of contexts.

Keeping these four literatures in mind, I want to put forth the notion of circulatory network in order to produce socio-institutional biographies of images, that is, an analysis of the ways in which the latter are created, selected, and publicly disseminated via persons, organizations, and technologies present at different stages of these images' lives. This conception builds upon the insights of certain branches of scholarship in visual studies, which consider the circulation of pictures through numerous technological and media circuits, the role of interpretive frames of reference and socio-historical contexts, the significance of both sites and practices of viewing, as well as the political and cultural effects of such pictures [Adatto 2008; Azoulay 2008; Bolton 1989; Mirzoeff 2011; Mitchell 2005.] Such writings have the merit of averting the tendency towards formalist reification of the image, which apprehends the latter as an *ex nihilo* object whose meanings, impacts, and presence in public spaces are abstracted from the material and symbolic circumstances of its circulation.

Hence, in the analytical model proposed here, humanitarian visuality's circulatory networks are composed of four processes that have already been intimated above and formulated in the sociology of art, namely, those of production, selection, distribution, and reception. For heuristic purposes, this model incorporates a linear sequencing and arrangement of these four processes, but to avoid misunderstanding, it should be made clear that these are not intended as chronological stages or phases in the circulation of images, which rarely follows a simple top-down or bottom-up sequential chain (from production to selection to distribution to reception, or vice versa.) In fact, circulatory networks are characterized by relations of mutual determination and feedback loops between the four processes over time, such that, for instance, public criticism of the publication or style of a certain picture, or of the absence of pictures of some events, can change aspects of which images are produced and which ones are selected for dissemination by news and humanitarian organizations.[48] What needs to be underscored is the fact that these humanitarian agencies have never been passive recipients of visual material, "sitting on the sidelines" of processes of representation of emergencies in which they are involved by waiting to receive images of such emergencies from the media, freelance journalists, or members

---

[48] This is particularly the case today, in the era of social media and constant viewer or reader feedback, whereby audiences can respond easily and in large numbers to a particular image as well as engage in online debate about the merits of disseminating it and the ways in which it depicts a given situation. For an example of this with regard to the war in Syria, see the following discussion by Margaret Sullivan, Public Editor of *The New York Times*: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/public-editor-the-delicate-handling-of-images-of-war.html?_r=0 (accessed 19 December 2014.)

of the public. On the contrary, the Euro-American humanitarian movement is an important agent intervening to shape and modify all processes in circulatory networks, by commissioning photographers and filmmakers to take pictures of specific crises about which it is concerned, determining which pictures they will publish and how they will frame them, and disseminating these pictures to their supporters and publics at large through their own communication tools.

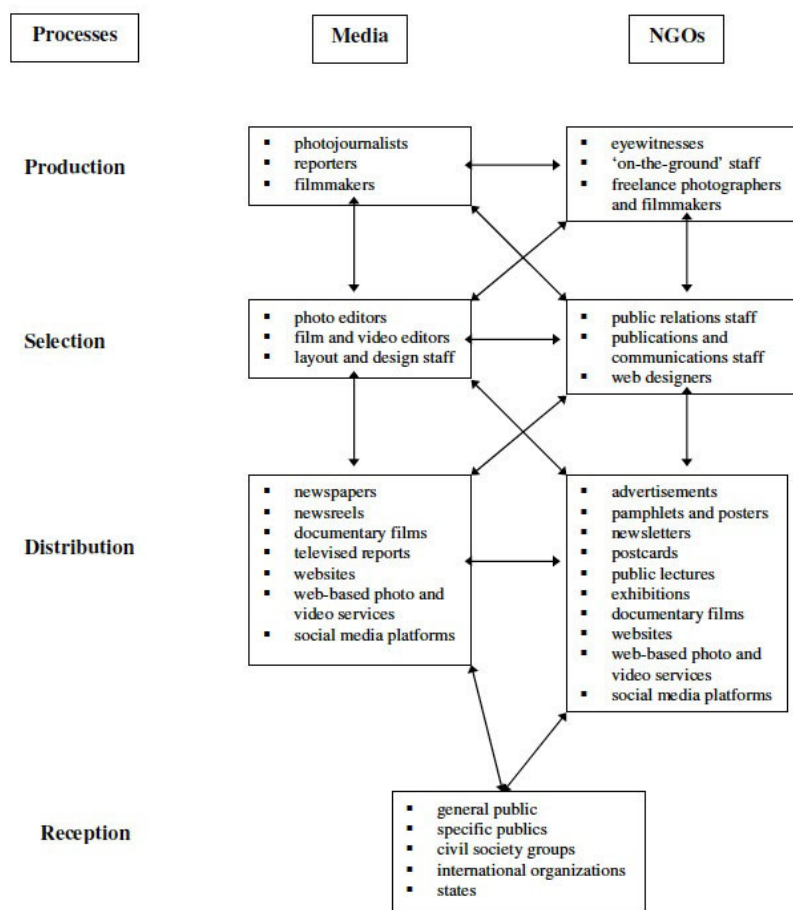| Processes	Media	NGOs
Production	▪ photojournalists ▪ reporters ▪ filmmakers	▪ eyewitnesses ▪ 'on-the-ground' staff ▪ freelance photographers and filmmakers
Selection	▪ photo editors ▪ film and video editors ▪ layout and design staff	▪ public relations staff ▪ publications and communications staff ▪ web designers
Distribution	▪ newspapers ▪ newsreels ▪ documentary films ▪ televised reports ▪ websites ▪ web-based photo and video services ▪ social media platforms	▪ advertisements ▪ pamphlets and posters ▪ newsletters ▪ postcards ▪ public lectures ▪ exhibitions ▪ documentary films ▪ websites ▪ web-based photo and video services ▪ social media platforms
Reception	▪ general public ▪ specific publics ▪ civil society groups ▪ international organizations ▪ states	

FIG. 3. Humanitarian Visuality's Circulatory Networks

In the visual economy of Western humanitarianism, the first process within circulatory networks is that of the production of images, which encompasses the creation of visual material about a given humanitarian crisis by photojournalists (working for photo agencies or news organizations,) reporters, documentary filmmakers, photo agencies, news organizations, as well as eyewitnesses, staff from NGOs, as well as freelance photographers or filmmakers that the latter hire. These actors function through relations of rivalry, collaboration, and hierarchical differentiation, with each of them aiming to acquire and preserve a dominant representational position

vis-à-vis the others in a variety of ways: being the first to capture images of a particular humanitarian emergency (and thus having a "scoop";) becoming the exclusive or principal source of (or "feed" for) photographs or footage of this same emergency to be utilized by other actors; providing visual evidence of the occurrence of a crisis or mass disaster, either to document and support the claims of some groups and institutions about its existence or to counter the denials of other such groups and institutions; and fashioning the public perception of and discourse about a humanitarian crisis by focusing on certain aspects of it or visually portraying it in a certain manner. All news outlets and non-governmental agencies producing images are aware of the field of humanitarian visuality within which they operate, sometimes involving inter-organizational collaboration in the sharing of subjects and locations to depict or logistical support to assist in the coverage of an event (e.g., in the case of an NGO helping journalists and photographers to cover a story by giving them access to a refugee camp or village within which it is present.) Yet just as frequently, these image-producing institutional actors compete with, and thus react to, one another in the representational field. For instance, a particular aid or media organization can send its own photographer, documentary filmmaker, or journalist – or commission a freelancer – to capture visual material about a certain humanitarian crisis if it finds that it can fill a niche by covering an event overlooked by its rivals, or if it aims to reframe how such an event is depicted because it dislikes or wants to propose an alternative to the type of coverage supplied by other organizations.

Despite being frequently neglected, the selection of pictures encompasses a second – and crucial – process in circulatory networks.[49] Public relations staff in humanitarian NGOs and photo or video and film editors in news organizations and documentary filmmaking studios act as vital intermediaries between those who create images and those who view them, performing several filtering and editorial functions that transform "raw" visual materials into the polished artifacts that audiences encounter in public spaces. At a most basic level, selection involves the curatorial sorting through and assessment of these raw materials to determine what photographs amongst a reel of them will be published in a particular news story or NGO's appeal, and what footage will appear in a televised report or documentary film. Hence, most of the footage or photographs of a humanitarian disaster never sees the light of day because it is left on the cutting room floor or on storage devices of news organizations, photo agencies, or humanitarian agencies, and thereby never is pub-

---

[49] Barthes contends that it is is at this level that various procedures of connotation take place, whereby the photographic message's second, implicit meaning is created [Barthes 1982a, 14-18.]

licly displayed for numerous reasons: aesthetic or compositional flaws, excessively graphic content, lack of factual content, meaning that may contradict the intended representational framing of the event, amongst other factors. Aside from this initial culling, social actors involved in selection perform a connotative role by cropping photographs and making related compositional choices, as well as making decisions about these photographs' placement in the page layout and design of a newspaper, magazine, website, or NGO publication. For film footage, the equivalent connotative function involves cutting, montage, and sequencing, which organize this footage into a particular narrative form and chronological order corresponding to and anchoring the film or news report's intended meaning.

A key component of the selection process is extra-visual in character, since it consists of matching still or moving images to textual and/or oral content (e.g., didactic captions, titles, descriptions or commentaries on the part of eyewitnesses, journalists, or narrators) that constructs the meanings of these images by attaching written or spoken signifieds to the visual signifiers of which they are composed, and to insert them within certain narratives concerning a specific humanitarian crisis (for instance, public appeals for financial donations, investigative reporting about perpetrators, and so on.) Although such extra-visual framing does not determine the meanings which audiences will give to images, it does delimit, and thus narrow down, the institutionally authorized, credible, and probable range of interpretations of these same images [Barthes 1982b, 31–33] – providing humanitarian and media organizations with a considerable degree of influence over the functioning of signifying chains and interpretive deliberations in public arenas. This is to say, then, that humanitarian NGOs and media outlets select pictures and ascribe certain meanings to them according to their endogenous politico-ideological stances and organizational interests, which evidently impact their visual depictions of humanitarian crises (emphasizing the significance of specific factors over others, particular forms of humanitarian action over others, etc.) At this level, circulatory networks are also marked by inter-institutional collaborative relations amongst actors charged with selecting visual material about a given humanitarian emergency; the public relations divisions of NGOs can share such material with news organizations to ensure greater dissemination of information about this emergency and increased coverage of the NGO's activities, or a photographer or filmmaker can offer unused portions of a reel or footage to an aid agency to assist the latter's efforts to publicize this same emergency.

The third process constitutive of circulatory networks, that of distribution of images, is composed of various means of reproduction, dissemination, and public display employed by both the news media and humanitarian aid agencies. Corres-

ponding to different stages of development of information and communication technologies, these means are as diverse as to include, from the media side, newspapers, newsreels, documentary films, televised reports, websites, online photo and video sharing services (Flickr, YouTube, Vimeo, etc.,) and social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Orkut, Weibo, etc.,) as well, from the humanitarian NGO side, advertisements, newsletters, pamphlets and posters, postcards, public lectures, exhibitions, documentary films, and – in identical fashion to news organizations – websites, online photo and video sharing services, and social media platforms. The overlap of these means of distribution amongst news media and humanitarian NGOs is significant, since each type of organization shares and borrows visual material from the other for the purposes of public dissemination. For instance, a photo editor for a newspaper may authorize certain images to be used in advertisements that are part of an aid agency's fundraising campaign, or such an agency's public relations department may lend its video footage of a humanitarian emergency to a television news channel for a report about the emergency.

Two things are particularly notable about the process of distribution of these kinds of images. Firstly, no less than news organizations, humanitarian NGOs always have been at the forefront of the adoption of new means of mass communication; they are what are termed today as "early adopters" at every phase of technological innovation, from photography and newsreels to documentary film, and from television to the internet and social media. The Euro-American humanitarian movement has eagerly embraced these information and communication technologies as soon as they have become available because, by enabling pictures to spread widely and be seen by the largest possible number of viewers, they greatly facilitate the achievement of the movement's organizational objectives: to alert and inform the public about humanitarian crises, to mobilize public opinion and political action on the part of formal institutions of governance (international organizations and states,) and to gain financial support for its campaigns and programs (via individual or corporate donations, or grants from government agencies or multilateral organizations.) Secondly, the sheer number and diversity of sources, techniques and sites employed to disseminate pictures of humanitarian crises produce a vast and overlapping visual tapestry in public spaces, whereby viewers encounter a variety of formats of images of such crises in different places and contexts, as well as divergent – and possibly contradictory – meanings attributed to these images by news and humanitarian organizations occupying dissimilar positions along the politico-ideological spectrum. Thus, for any given humanitarian emergency, the distributional platforms never have been uniform in their means of delivery or homogenous in their signification. In the early decades of the Twentieth century, for example, members of the public could

come across images of humanitarian emergencies when reading a newspaper, attending a public lecture, seeing a newsreel that preceded a movie in a theatre, receiving a postcard or newsletter in the mail, or picking up a pamphlet on the street, in a manner and to an extent that are no less diversified than today's multimedia visual ecology blending print, digital, and in-person technologies of distribution and viewing.

Consideration of this distributional visual ecology leads us to the process of reception, the fourth and final component of circulatory networks. Both the media and aid agencies create images of humanitarian crises and situations that are seen by and aimed at several different kinds of viewers: the general public, specific publics (ethno-cultural groups, diasporic communities, concerned citizens, corporate donors or sponsors, think tanks, etc.,) politicized civil society groups (e.g., social movements, activist networks, NGOs), as well as more formal audiences composed of civil servants, policymakers, and politicians working within national governments and international organizations (notably those within the United Nations system.) Within humanitarian visuality's circulatory networks, picture-producing actors compete for the attention – or, in marketing and advertising parlance, the "eyeballs" – of these viewers, who are bombarded with images of grave emergencies on a nearly daily basis. However, what bears underscoring is the fact that audiences do not exist as already formed publics, but gradually constitute themselves as such by engaging in practices of viewing and inserting themselves at certain points in networks of circulation. Accordingly, persons and groups become publics not simply because they see visual material about humanitarian crises, but also because they reflect, react, and respond to this material in a variety of ways. Indeed, along with gaining information about a particular humanitarian crisis, viewing images of it can prompt citizens to engage in multiple types of political activity, ranging from the low-sharing of knowledge and pictures with one's family and friends to higher-intensity participation in activist responses (protest marches, lobbying of officials, boycotting of countries or corporations deemed responsible for the crisis, etc.)

Yet viewers also become publics by contributing to representational politics [Azoulay 2001; Hariman and Lucaites 2007; Rancière 2008; Zelizer 2010], that is to say, participating in public debate and deliberation about the visual representation of humanitarian emergencies by referring to at least three sets of norms of evaluation of images. Firstly, viewers engage in dialogue with each other, as well as with the media and humanitarian NGOs producing, selecting, and distributing pictures, on realist grounds, namely, whether and to what extent a given picture or set of pictures accurately and completely depicts the realities of a given emergency and the experiences of those most severely affected by it (according to oral testimonies, written descriptions,

existing analyses of its causes, and previous visual records of it.) The second set of criteria of visual assessment referenced by audiences taking part in representational politics can be described as moral in nature, for they concern whether, where, and to whom it is appropriate to publicly release, publish, and display certain still or moving pictures of humanitarian crises; viewers tend to be particularly interested in debating the morality of being shown graphic or explicitly horrific images of human suffering and death resulting from war or famine, as well as whether such visual portrayals exploit humanitarian disasters for instrumental purposes (increased circulation numbers of a publication, garnering attention for a cause through shock, etc.) Thirdly, audiences transform themselves into publics by evaluating images of humanitarian crises according to consequentialist criteria, which deal with the socio-political effects of seeing these images (in terms of political mobilization or indifference, compassion fatigue or cultivation of empathy, influence on public opinion and political decision-making, and so on.)

In processes of reception, then, publics are never passive recipients of the officially sanctioned meanings that the media and the humanitarian movement attributes to images, for their interpretive labour does not merely consist of decoding and thus recognizing such meanings. Rather, viewers interpreting images become publics when they attempt to assess the quality, worth, and credibility of these officially sanctioned meanings on realist, moral, and consequentialist grounds. Part of this interpretive labour, then, may well entail criticizing, contesting, and even squarely rejecting the institutionally validated meanings given to pictures of humanitarian emergencies, as well as creating alternative significations. When it draws in sufficiently large numbers of persons and groups, this evaluative interpretation of visual material generates public controversies, such as denying that a certain image is evidence of the occurrence of a famine or genocide (realist norms,) denouncing the publication of what is deemed to be a distinctly lurid visual depiction of a humanitarian situation fitting into a genre of pornography of suffering (moral norms,) or questioning the lasting impact of distributing an image or set of images of humanitarian crises (consequentialist norms.)

5.   Mapping Out an Iconological Field

Although field theory has diverse origins in the physical and human sciences [Martin 2003], in addition to being the subject of important recent reformulations [Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Martin 2011], the iteration of the notion of field applied here is partially Bourdieusian in orientation, albeit with certain important modifications in order to give greater weight than does Bourdieu to the interpretation

of the cultural meanings and symbolic codings of images.[50] As is well known, two core principles govern the operation of his notion of a field, the first being relationality in the distribution and significance of positions within it, according to which a particular actor can only be fully understood when situated within a space of objective relations and positions *vis-à-vis* other actors with which it is competition – with no actor within a field existing as a self-referential or discrete monad. Secondly, a field is marked by a principle of hierarchical or asymmetrical differentiation, established through the unequal distribution of forms and total volume of capital across this field's social space; dominant (or superordinate) actors within a field distinguish themselves from dominated (or subordinate) ones by having their own socio-cultural practices and worldviews institutionally legitimized or consecrated as intrinsically or objectively superior.

However, we need to avoid two tendencies that afflict many Bourdieusian analyses of culture: firstly, a socio-economic reductionism that treats symbolic meanings, aesthetic concerns, and socio-cultural practices as epiphenomena that unilaterally reflect the distribution of different forms and aggregate volume of capital (which are posited as necessarily causally determinative) within a field; and secondly and relatedly, the denial of partial endogenous autonomy to "minor" or relatively dominated fields within the socio-cultural domain, such as the journalistic and humanitarian fields that interest us here, which risk being subsumed to the functioning of "major" or relatively dominant fields whose exogenous structure and rules of the game are assumed to determine the internal distribution of capital of these "minor" fields prior to actors' performances and struggles within them.

To offer a buffer against the perils of reductionism and extrinsic field determinism, I want to articulate Bourdieusian principles to Panofsky's aforementioned iconological framework of art-historical analysis to propose the notion of an iconological field, a socio-political and aesthetic space of humanitarian visuality composed of variably distributed positions amongst media and humanitarian organizations in conflict and competition with one another to acquire and retain symbolic capital (in the form of public standing, credibility, and reputation.) This heterodox version of field theory is related to several others recently developed in comparative and historical sociology [Go 2008; Steinmetz 2007, 2011], cultural sociology [Benson and Neveu 2005; Savage and Silva 2013], as well as in the study of the humanitarian movement

---

[50] A thorough review of Bourdieu's writings on the concept of field is beyond our scope, but it should be specified that I am drawing on both his more synthetic explanations of the concept [Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 94-115; Bourdieu 1971; 1990b, 66-68; 1997; 1998a, 297-303; 1998b, 31-34; 2005] and his applications of it in aesthetic or cultural domains of practice [Bourdieu 1984, 1993, 1998a.]

[Krause 2009.][51] An iconological field combines the logics of Euro-American human-itarian and journalistic fields, which are interdependent for our purposes given the organizational integration of aid agencies and news outlets in the visual economy of humanitarianism and the structural homologies of their respective rules of the rep-resentational game.

Yet, somewhat *contra* Bourdieu, I am arguing that the distribution of symbolic capital within an iconological field is just as much the result as the cause of the rela-tionally-prescribed and hierarchically-demarcated ideological and aesthetic stances that actors adopt – and therefore that such a distribution of symbolic capital can-not be granted extrinsic or *a priori* causal determinacy in a field or be treated as an independent variable that is autonomous from these stances. Humanitarian and media organizations within a specific iconological field struggle against each other and occupy positions within it in order simultaneously to differentiate themselves from their rivals and to try to establish the symbolic dominance of their preferred ideological codings of a humanitarian crisis and aesthetic style of representation of the latter; during each event and in its aftermath, such actors compete to have prin-ciples of journalistic objectivity or partisanship, and of humanitarian impartiality or advocacy, publicly recognized as the most credible or prestigious – to the point that their stances can be validated through formal institutional consecration (e.g., ob-jectivity as the self-evidently superior and honourable journalistic norm or impartiality as the natural humanitarian ethos.) Consequently, what matters in an iconolo-gical field is less the quantitative calculation of the distribution and volume of sym-bolic capital *per se* than the hermeneutical interpretation of the respective stances of each actor *vis-à-vis* the field-specific rules of the game, which in the case that in-terests us have to do with how an organization ideologically codes and gives mean-ing to the set of images of a humanitarian crisis that it produces or disseminates, and how that same organization represents this crisis according to certain aesthet-ic criteria found in what is a historically constituted Euro-American cultural rep-ertoire.

An iconological field is structured along two axes,[52] as illustrated in Figure 4:

---

[51] I am indebted to Monika Krause for sharing a unpublished chapter of her doctoral disserta-tion [Department of Sociology, New York University, 2009], in which she applies field theory to contemporary humanitarianism.

[52] The distinction between aesthetic and ideological categories of analysis is derived from Barthes [1982a], although he neither employs them in a relational manner nor applies them to field theory, as is the case here.

Aesthetic Style
realism

Ideological Framing   partisanship advocacy   objectivity impartiality
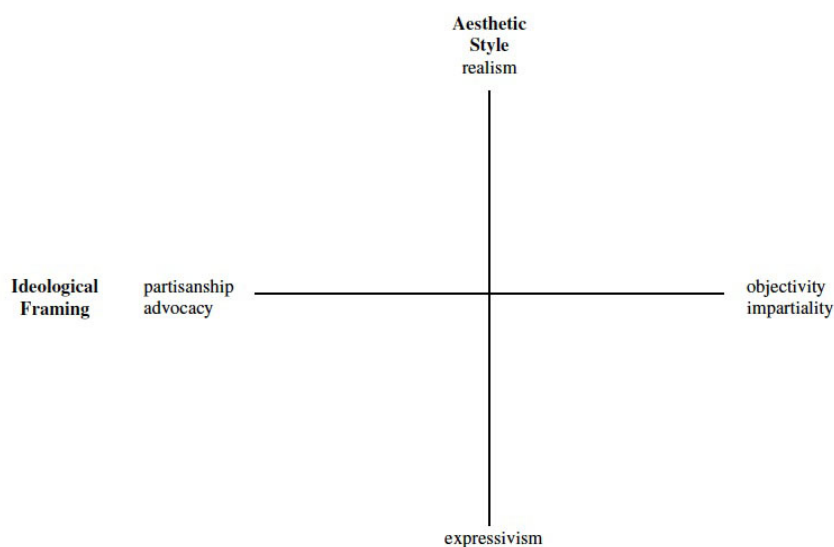
expressivism

FIG. 4. Humanitarian Visuality's Iconological Field

The horizontal axis represents the ideological coding given to images of a humanitarian crisis, with the positional morphology of different actors along it being determined by the interpretation of the meanings that they invest in the visual material that they create and distribute, that is, the extra-visual framing that news and humanitarian agencies give to a picture (via titles and captions, didactic panels, accompanying written articles or verbal commentaries, etc.) In the journalistic field, ideological coding varies between the poles of objectivity (the impartial and opinion-less or apolitical reporting of facts and description of events) and partisanship (the blending of factual and opinion-based journalism as well as subjective interpretation of events according to a politically- or ideologically-informed perspective,) which approximately corresponds to the opposition between impartiality (remaining neutral in a conflict or hostilities between parties involved in a humanitarian crisis) and advocacy (taking sides in a conflict or hostilities to criticize the party or parties believed to be most responsible for the humanitarian crisis in question) in the humanitarian field.

In the iconological field, as shown in Figure 4, the vertical axis depicts the predominant aesthetic style employed by news and humanitarian organizations in the visual portrayals of humanitarian emergencies that they circulate. The fundamental opposition organizing this axis is that between expressionism and realism, which correspond to Panofsky's distinction between the "expressional" and the "factual" [Panofsky 1939, 3–4] while capturing the constitutive tension between visual technologies as mostly connotative modes of *auteurist* self-expression and transformation

of reality, on the one hand, and these same technologies as mostly denotative, scientific modes of exact reproduction of reality, on the other [Barthes 1982a.] At one end of the aesthetic spectrum is expressionism, a subjectivist and empathetic style that favours explicit representations of victims' experiences of corporeal, emotional, psychic, and spiritual suffering, as well as extra-visual coding that expresses the interior states of being and feeling of these victims.[53] As explained above, expressionism characterizes most images that fit within humanitarian visuality's convention of personification, in addition to that of rescue. Realism is at the other end of the spectrum of aesthetic style, for it is defined by a more objectivist or factual visual genre whereby the lens dispassionately captures the reality of a humanitarian crisis "as it it," in a detached and analytical manner that presents information unembellished by rhetorically florid or sentimentally connotative language and visual symbols.[54] The pictorial conventions of massification and care are most frequently associated with a realist style, since they tend to adopt a restrained visual and textual language when representing a group of victims of a humanitarian disaster or a situation where an aid worker is contributing to the long-term recovery of such a group.

Actors participating in an iconological field must be familiar with and invested in the rules of the game that structure this field, yet given rivalries and struggle that define it, these same actors also contest the legitimacy of such rules through the very process of contributing to the visual economy of a humanitarian crisis. Accordingly, while it is widely believed – at least in North America – that impartiality and objectivity are the "highest" or most "distinguished" principles structuring the coverage of a humanitarian emergency, this convention is far from being consensual or even hegemonic within the iconological field. Beginning in the latter half of the Nineteenth century, the Red Cross movement has been the chief organizational and deontological architect of the argument that humanitarianism had to be constructed around an apolitical neutrality,[55] but historically, few aid agencies have followed this prescription [Barnett 2011] and at least since the Biafran famine (1967-1970,)[56] it

---

[53] In Twentieth century Euro-American aesthetics, expressionist artists include Edvard Munch (whose aforementioned "The Scream" is considered a foundational proto-expressionist work) and Käthe Kollwitz. In journalism, expressionism is most commonly associated with populist or tabloid-formatted publications.

[54] In recent Western visual history, realism is grounded in traditions of colonial, missionary, and ethnographic photography in both anthropology and sociology (e.g., James Mooney, Jacob Riis, *National Geographic,*) as well as those of documentary film and post-Second World War Italian neorealism. In journalism, realism frequently is tied to "highbrow" or broadsheet-formatted publications.

[55] The humanitarian principle of neutrality has existed in some form within the Red Cross movement since the First Geneva Convention (1864.) For detailed explanations of its *raison d'être* and various components, see Haug [1993, 461-468]; Pictet [1979.]

[56] The famine in Biafra is the event that led Bernard Kouchner, at the time an a doctor working

has been openly criticized and even vocally denounced by important segments of the humanitarian movement for which advocacy is a far preferable stance in order to defend victims and avert complicity with the institutions, policies, or actors responsible for their mass suffering (e.g., domestic or foreign governments, international organizations, structural adjustment programs, etc.) Likewise, the advent of the norm of objectivity within the North American media, which emerged in the 1920s via "quality" newspapers (*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, etc.) [Schudson, 1978] has never been widely adopted within the Western journalistic field, whether from a longstanding European tradition of clearly demarcated ideological positioning of newspapers along the Left-Right political spectrum[57] or the populist tabloid press in North America itself.

As for aesthetic style, highbrow media outlets and aid agencies highly integrated within the infrastructure of global governance have tended to favour a realist mode of visual representation because of its restrained, seemingly objective depictions of suffering, which have become institutionally validated as "tasteful" and "appropriate" ways of portraying humanitarian crises. On the other hand, populist news organizations and less established, politically activist fractions of the Euro-American humanitarian movement have put into doubt attachment to realism amongst their more consecrated rivals in the iconological field, arguing instead that more graphic, expressivist representational forms are more effective to gain public attention and are equally legitimate as means to convey the suffering of victims of humanitarian emergencies.

In any field, the rules of the game are variable according to socio-cultural and historical settings, since they evolve over time and space as actors interpret and work to transform or redefine them, or yet again, attempt to invent new rules (e.g., through practices or discourses positing alternatives to humanitarian neutrality and journalistic objectivity.) Thus, an iconographic field is recomposed for every humanitarian situation to take into consideration such possible changes in the rules or shifts in actors' own stances and relational positioning *vis-à-vis* existing rules. At the same time, we must recognize a certain institutional path-dependency in these stances, since established organizational actors within a field tend to maintain relatively consistent positions toward the rules of the game across periods and events for a host of reas-

for the International Committee of the Red Cross, to break with the latter's norm of humanitarian neutrality and establish MSF [Vallaeys 2004: 53-90.]

[57] The French journalistic field is paradigmatic in its ideological structuring, with the Left side of the spectrum occupied by newspapers such as *L'Humanité* and *Libération*, the centre-Left by *Le Monde* and the magazine *Le Nouvel observateur*, and the centre-Right by the newspaper *Le Figaro* and the magazine *L'Express*; see Albert [2008.]

ons: organizational philosophy, conventionalized or habitualized procedures, inter-organizational rivalry, public familiarity or legitimacy, etc. Transformations within the iconological field therefore tend to be pushed by new entrants in it, for they can more easily occupy distinctive positions by advocating in favour of new criteria of valuation, while the costs of questioning traditional evaluative norms and referential practices within the field are relatively low for these new entrants. For instance, MSF was founded in 1971 in response to dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the International Committee of the Red Cross' (ICRC) staunch commitment to neutrality in the Biafran conflict on the part of French doctors and aid workers (most notably Bernard Kouchner) who had worked for the ICRC in Biafra, enabling the new organization to rapidly gain a differential foothold within the humanitarian field because of its more overtly political and critical stance. Similarly, the French newspaper *Libération* was founded in 1973, originally as a voice for the culturally avant-gardiste and politically radical far Left that would compete with the orthodox Communist *L'Humanité* and the established centre-Left daily *Le Monde*, considered to be the newspaper of record in France; as such, in its selection of photographs, titles, and editorial positions, *Libération* adopted a much more expressivist style than *Le Monde*, contributing to the reconfiguration of the representational boundaries of the French journalistic space.

Being relational and hierarchically differentiated, an iconological field is constituted through what have been termed "iconoclashes" or "image wars" [Latour 2010,] struggles amongst and between news organizations and humanitarian agencies over the meanings attributed to images and the modes of interpreting the latter; each social actor deploys symbolic and material resources in order to establish its own representational framings of a humanitarian emergency as authoritative or hegemonic in public spheres. Thus, both media outlets and humanitarian NGOs work to have their preferred aesthetic styles of representation of such an emergency and ideological framing of its causes publicly recognized as the most credible or legitimate. A news or humanitarian organization aims to accomplish this by naturalizing its visual interpretations, converting decisions that it makes about how to present an event among many possible ways of doing so into what appear to be "common sensical" or self-evident for most viewers. Conversely, the naturalization renders illegitimate or less credible other modes of presentation and interpretation of this same event, to the extent that publics perceive them as untruthful (using realist norms,) indecent (using moral norms,) or as having undesirable effects (using consequentialist norms.) For example, the visual trope of the starving black African child, presented in an expressionist style underscoring his or her innocence and experience of suffering, was for most of the Twentieth century unproblematically accepted as a personified icon

of famine that required little if any historical and socio-political contextualization; it is only in the last few decades that the doxic character of this trope have been critically interrogated, notably due to its victimizing, exploitative, and civilizationally pathologizing consequences.[58]

Humanitarian NGOs, then, never leave images speak for themselves. Far from treating a photograph or film footage as semiotically discrete material that endogenously produces its own meanings for publics to grasp, or being content to leave the dissemination of images and what they signify to the media, these NGOs are key participants in public discourse about visual representation. They actively and strategically intervene in all the processes of production, selection, distribution, and reception within circulatory networks (see Figure 3) in order to publicize their preferred politico-ideological and aesthetic framings of images of humanitarian emergencies, and thereby shape the ways in which viewers make sense of them in public spheres. Moreover, both humanitarian NGOs and news organizations perpetually compete against one another to resignify a given image's content within an iconological field according to these ideological and aesthetic factors. This is so because the lack of an intrinsic and irrefutable correspondence between signifiers and their signifieds in the semiotic structure of pictures makes it possible for these actors to contest rival organizations' signifying chains and rhetorical presentations of visual material about a particular humanitarian crisis, as well as to invent different signifying that would attach alternative meanings to this material. Given that a scene or event of mass suffering can be captured according to a variety of aesthetic styles (ranging from expressivism to realism) and ideologically framed in several different ways (ranging from support for to opposition to a central political actor) via textual and oral means, the same image can be attributed widely disparate meanings in the hands of humanitarian and news organizations at opposite ends of the politico-ideological spectrum. Hence, in an iconological field for a specific famine, a media outlet can present a photograph of this famine as evidence of the effects of failed socio-economic reforms pursued by a domestic government, whereas a humanitarian aid agency can employ this very photograph to indicate the devastating impact of drought on vulnerable populations.

---

[58] Following the Ethiopian famine, the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation sponsored the "Images of Africa" Project in 1985. Through it, several European and African humanitarian NGOs analyzed their own and the media's use of visual material about the famine itself and Africa more generally, finding that this material overwhelmingly tended to reproduce longstanding clichés about the pathological nature of African societies while presenting Ethiopians as passive victims and white Westerners as their saviours. See http://www.imaging-famine.org/images_africa.htm (accessed 19 December 2014.) This project marked the launch of a period of critical self-reflection within the Western humanitarian movement about representational politics, despite the fact that these clichés and tropes remain entrenched in humanitarian visuality to this day.

Nevertheless, ideological reframing does not determine visual signification and interpretation, since this reframing is bounded by the existence of a credible range of meanings given to a certain picture ensuring that signifying chains are not completely arbitrary and that signifiers do not float freely or *ad infinitum* within them; in semiotic terms, instead of having an infinite number of signifieds to which they can be related, signifiers acquire meaning within a certain institutionally validated or collectively recognized span of signifieds. If media or humanitarian organizations attempt to stretch or rearticulate the meaning of an image beyond this span, they are likely to encounter a backlash on the part of viewers and to generate public controversies over their use of this image. For example, a video about a starving child cannot be repositioned anywhere in the iconological field, so as to aim to generate antipathy towards him or her or, in a different register, to market a certain product to consumers.

From the perspective of socio-visual constructivism, then, the interesting question to ask is not whether a particular image is an icon, but rather, of what is it considered an icon? In other words, iconoclashes over the signification of this image are also over its resignification, since organizational participants in the iconological field aim to destabilize the relations between visual signifiers and their signifieds in order to reframe what publics understand the image to represent. In many instances, processes of a picture's resignification occur through its decontextualization, whereby it is stripped of specific situational information and contextual knowledge (e.g., location, year, names of the subjects portrayed in it) in favour of generic written or spoken signifiers of human distress or mass suffering. As a result, a photograph of survivor of a particular genocide can be extracted from explanatory material about her or his circumstances and the socio-political and historical underpinnings of the event, and converted instead into a universal emblem of victimhood or of trite moral lessons about human beings' barbarism towards each other. Whether produced by a news or humanitarian organization in the iconological field, a decontextualized image of a victim tends to depict him or her to an actor in a reductionist narrative about good and evil or about the dramatic unfolding of a tragedy, often bypassing analysis of the specific functioning of globally- and nationally-rooted relations of power and structural causes that led this subject to find himself or herself in circumstances of acute vulnerability and suffering.

6.   Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have laid some of the conceptual foundations for a critical sociology of humanitarian visuality, anchored in the notions of symbolic

structure, visual convention and iconographic repertoire, circulatory network, and iconological field. In this manner, the socio-historical analysis of the constitution of Euro-American visual regimes of representation of humanitarian crises, and of the social actors participating in the creation of these modes of representation or in debate about them, can contribute to a more analytically precise and less normatively sweeping treatment of the topic of depicting distant suffering. Rather than speaking in universalizing tones about either the imperative or the impossibility of engaging in such depiction, we can adopt an analytical pragmatics and critical hermeneutics of humanitarian visuality that studies the specific socio-cultural mechanisms, political struggles, and ethical issues at play in particular representational circumstances. Much has been written about the duty or the indecency of representation, notably by evoking the responsibility to document suffering for collective mnemonic purposes or, yet again, the perils of the exploitative spectacularization of humanitarian crises (and the attendant pornography of suffering) in the Western media. However, such overarching defenses or denunciations would gain political effectivity and critical traction by being grounded in given sets of historical and socio-cultural situations, for actors aiming to find points of leverage and intervention within a visual economy must be guided not only by a general normative or political worldview, but equally importantly, by detailed and empirically grounded knowledge of the structural variations and constants in the symbolic, institutional, and field dynamics across several instances of humanitarian crises – something that the conceptual framework proposed here is designed to do.

From the perspective of humanitarianism, this framework underscores the centrality of still and moving images to the humanitarian project as a whole, since such images are essential to the social existence and popular awareness of emergencies and crises from around the world, to the symbolic construction of these situations as sites for humanitarian activity, as well as to the public legitimation of Euro-American humanitarianism as a viable and effective response to the distant suffering displayed therein. Moreover, the social scientific study of the Western humanitarian movement can benefit from being more attentive to the fact that the visual portrayal of humanitarian crises, and their consequent symbolic framing, are the principal means through which laypersons in North Atlantic societies acquire information about and make sense of these crises, and that humanitarian NGOs are key conduits in the institutional circuits of the visual economy of humanitarian visuality that shapes the public understanding of mass emergencies in various parts of the globe.

Conversely, the conceptual framework proposed here can assist the analysis of visuality by binding endogenous and exogenous aspects of the image's signifying processes together, in order to eschew the visual self-referentiality of internalist tenden-

cies and the socio-political structural determinism of their externalist counterparts. Thus, an image's presence in public spaces and the question of whether or not it acquires an iconic status are related to its symbolic structure and indexical correspondence to a visual convention within an iconographic repertoire, but just as importantly, to how it is inserted into institutional networks that produce, edit, distribute, and engage with it, and to how it is relationally positioned and ideologically framed by competing social actors in a given visual economy. Additionally, foregrounding humanitarian visuality can help address a gap in visual studies, which in its analyses of the myriad of significant actors shaping the ways in which images are created, selected, displayed, and interpreted – whether we think of national governments, private corporations, media organizations, political movements and campaigns, or lay audiences – has tended to overlook the crucial role of NGOs in informing the visual cultures of national and global civil societies. Indeed, one could argue that the visual cultures formed during the late modern era in the North Atlantic region are indelibly inscribed by humanitarian NGOs, amongst other civil societies organizations, which have powerfully influenced what most inhabitants of this region believe about the global South (as a zone of perpetual catastrophe) and the populations that inhabit it (as permanently victimized,) the interpretive lenses through which they identify and make sense of the pictures of scenes of distant suffering that they see, and the kinds of responses that they have when viewing these pictures (ranging from solidarity and empathy to hostility and indifference, based upon whether the suffering person or group is understood to be, or not be, deserving of aid and succour.)

Hence, a critical sociology of humanitarian visuality seeks to explore the fundamental and irresolvable tension between the signifying power of images and the socio-institutional contextualization that animates them. On the one hand, visual representations of persons suffering as a result of large-scale disasters and crises have an undeniable iconographic force, for viewing them can meaningfully impact public discourse by fostering concern for the fate of those depicted and prompt action to prevent or change the circumstances that are causing the relevant humanitarian emergency. On the other hand, however, the meanings that pictures of distant suffering adopt and their degree of public visibility cannot be apprehended by concentrating on the symbolic dimensions of these pictures alone, since these factors are determined just as much by institutionally filtered processes of production, selection, distribution, and reception, as well as by the manner in which key organizations participating in these processes (i.e., the media and the humanitarian movement) work to present humanitarian crises to Euro-American publics and make them meaningful in aesthetic and politico-ideological terms. Ultimately, then, we can approach the visual economy of Western humanitarianism as a contested terrain that simultaneously con-

denses and refracts public debate about the current world order, the ethics and politics of representation, and the state of permanent yet preventable structural vulnerability and situational distress to which most of the world's population is subjected.

References

Adatto, K.

2008   *Picture Perfect: Life in the Age of the Photo Op.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

AFSC

1921   *"Do You Know the Reality of the Russian Famine?"* Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee.

Agier, M.

2008   *Gérer les indésirables: des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire.* Paris: Flammarion.

Albert, P.

2008   *La presse française.* Paris: La Documentation française.

Albrow, M., Anheier, H.K., Glasius, M., Price, M.E. and Kaldor, M. (eds.)

2007   *Global Civil Society 2007/8: Communicative Power and Democracy.* London: Sage.

Alexander, J.C.

2003   *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology.* New York: Oxford University Press.

2006   *The Civil Sphere.* New York: Oxford University Press. (1st ed.)

2012   *Trauma: A Social Theory.* Cambridge, UK: Polity. (1st ed.)

Alexander, J.C., Bartmanski, D. and Giesen, B. (eds.)

2011   *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Alexander, J.C. and Smith, P.

2003   "The Strong Program in Cultural Sociology: Elements of a Structural Hermeneutics." Pp. 11-26 in *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology,* edited by J.C. Alexander. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Azoulay, A.

2001   *Death's Showcase: the Power of Image in Contemporary Democracy.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

2008   *The Civil Contract of Photography.* New York: Zone Books.

Baer, U.

2005   *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bal, M.

2003   "Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture." *Journal of Visual Culture* 2(1): 5-32.

2005   "The Commitment to Look." *Journal of Visual Culture* 4(2): 145-162.

Barnett, M.

2011   *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Barnett, M. and Weiss, T.G.

2008   *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Barnhurst, K.G., Vari, M. and Rodriguez, I.

2004   "Mapping Visual Studies in Communication." *Journal of Communication* 54(4): 616-644.

Barthes, R.

1981   *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.

1982a   "Le message photographique." Pp. 9-24 in *L'obvie et l'obtus: Essais critiques III*. Paris: Seuil.

1982b   "Rhétorique de l'image." Pp. 25-42 in *L'obvie et l'obtus: Essais critiques III*. Paris: Seuil.

1985   "Éléments de sémiologie." Pp. 17-84 in *L'aventure sémiologique*. Paris: Seuil.

Bass, G.J.

2008   *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*. New York: Knopf.

Batchen, G.

1999   *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Batchen, G., Gidley, M., Miller, N.K., and Prosser, J. (eds.)

2011   *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis.* London: Reaktion Books.

Baudrillard, J.

2006   "War Porn." *Journal of Visual Culture* 5(1): 86-88.

Becker, H.S.

1982   *Art Worlds*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Becker, H.S., Faulkner, R.R., and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (eds.)

2006   *Art from Start to Finish: Jazz, Painting, Writing, and Other Improvisations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Benjamin, W.

1999   *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press.

Benson, R.D. and Neveu E.

2005   *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Berger, J.

1977   *Ways of Seeing.* London and New York: BBC and Penguin.

Blanchet, K. and Martin, B. (eds.)

2006   *Critique de la raison humanitaire: dialogue entre l'humanitaire français et anglo-saxon*. Paris: Cavalier bleu.

Blumer, H.

1969   *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Boime, A.

1990   *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Boissier, P.

1978   *Histoire du comité international de la Croix-Rouge: de Solférino à Tsoushima.* Geneva: Institut Henry-Dunant.

Boltanski, L.

1993   *La souffrance à distance: morale humanitaire, médias et politique.* Paris: Métailié.

2007   *La souffrance à distance: morale humanitaire, médias et politique, 2e Éd.* Paris: Gallimard.

Boltanski, L. and Thévenot, L.

1991   *De la justification: les économies de la grandeur.* Paris: Gallimard.

Bolton, R.

1989   *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bornstein, E. and Redfield, P. (eds.)

2011   *Forces of Compassion.* Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press.

Bottero, W. and Crossley, N.

2011   "Worlds, Fields and Networks: Becker, Bourdieu and the Structures of Social Relations." *Cultural Sociology* 5(1): 99-119.

Bourdieu, P.

1971   "Genèse et structure du champ religieux." *Revue française de sociologie* 12(3): 295-334.

1984   *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

1990a   *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

1990b   *The Logic of Practice.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

1993   *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature.* New York: Columbia University Press.

1997   *Méditations Pascaliennes.* Paris: Seuil.

1998a   *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire.* Paris: Seuil.

1998b   *Practical Reason: On The Theory of Action.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

2005   "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and the Journalistic Field." Pp. 29-47 in *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, edited by R. Benson and E. Neveu. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. and Bourdieu, M-C.

2004   "The Peasant and Photography." *Ethnography* 5(4): 601-616.

Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L.J.D.

1992   *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Boyd, D. and Ellison, N.B.

2007   "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13(1): 210-230.

Brauman, R.

2005   "Indigènes et indigents: de La 'mission civilisatrice' coloniale à l'action humanitaire." Pp. 169-176 in *La Fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*, edited by P. Blanchard, N. Bancel, and S. Lemaire. Paris: La Découverte.

2006   *Penser dans l'urgence: parcours critique d'un humanitaire: entretiens avec Catherine Portevin.* Paris: Seuil.

Bricmont, J.

2006   *L'impérialisme humanitaire: droit humanitaire, droit d'ingérence, droit du plus fort?* Montréal: Lux.

Brunel, S.

2003   *Frontières*. Paris: Denoël.

Buse, P.

2010   "The Polaroid Image as Photo-Object." *Journal of Visual Culture* 9(2): 189-207.

Butler, J.

2010   "Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag." Pp. 63-100 in *Frames of War: when is Life Grievable?* London and New York: Verso.

Callon, M. and Latour, B.

1981   "Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: How Actors Macro-Structure Reality and How Sociologists Help Them to Do So." Pp. 277-303 in *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology Toward an Integration of Micro and Macro-sociologies*, edited by K. Knorr-Cetina and A.V. Cicourel. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Campbell, D.

2003   "Salgado and the Sahel: Documentary Photography and the Imaging of Famine." Pp. 69-96 in *Rituals of Mediation: International Politics and Social Meaning*, edited by F. Debrix and C. Weber. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

2004   "Horrific Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media." *Journal for Cultural Research* 8(1): 55-74.

2007   "Geopolitics and Visuality: Sighting the Darfur Conflict." *Political Geography* 26: 357-382.

Cartwright, L.

2002   "Film and the Digital in Visual Studies: Film Studies in the Era of Convergence." *Journal of Visual Culture* 1(1): 7-23.

Cassirer, E.

1955   *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Castells, M.

2009   *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2012   *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Cavarero, A.

2009   *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chanan, M.

2007   *The Politics of Documentary*. London: British Film Institute.

Chouliaraki, L.

2006   *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage.

Clark, T.J.

1982   "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art." *Critical Inquiry* 9(1): 139-156.

1999   *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cohen, S.

2001   *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering.* Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Cosandey, R.

1998   "Eloquence Du Visible: La Famine En Russie 1921-1923, Une Filmographie Documentée." *Archives (Institut Jean Vigo)* (75/76).

Crary, J.

1990   *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

1999   *Suspensions of Perception Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Crossley, N.

2010   "The Social World of the Network. Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Elements in Social Network Analysis." *Sociologica* 4(1). doi:10.2383/32049

Delage, C.

2006   *La Vérité par l'image: de Nuremberg au procès Milosevic.* Paris: Denoël.

Destexhe, A.

1993   *L'Humanitaire impossible, ou deux siècles d'ambiguïté.* Paris: Armand Colin.

De Waal, A.

1997   *Famine Crimes: Politics & the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa.* London: African Rights & the International African Institute.

Didi-Huberman, G.

2003   *Images malgré tout.* Paris: Minuit.

Dikovitskaya, M.

2006   *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Dosse, F.

1997a   *History of Structuralism, Vol. 1: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

1997b   *History of Structuralism, Vol. 2: The Sign Sets, 1967-Present.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Durand, A.

1978   *Histoire du comité international de la Croix-Rouge: de Sarajevo à Hiroshima.* Genève: Institut Henry-Dunant.

Eagleton, T.

1990   *The Ideology of the Aesthetic.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Eco, U.

1979   *A Theory of Semiotics.* Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

1992   "Critique of the Image." Pp. 32-38 in *Thinking Photography*, edited by V. Burgin. London: Macmillan.

Edwards, E.

2002   "Material Beings: Objecthood and Ethnographic Photographs." *Visual Studies* 17(1): 67-75.

Elkins, J.

2003   *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge.

Fassin, D.

2012   *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Fassin, D. and Pandolfi, M. (eds.)

2010   *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Interventions*. New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books. (Distributed by the MIT Press.)

Fassin, D. and Rechtman, R.

2009   *The Empire of Trauma: an Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Feldman, I. and Ticktin, M.I. (eds.)

2010   *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Fligstein, N. and McAdam, D.

2012   *A Theory of Fields*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Flusser, V.

2011   "The Gesture of Photographing." *Journal of Visual Culture* 10(3): 279-293.

Foley, C.

2010   *The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War*. London and New York: Verso.

Foster, H.

1996   *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Foster, H., Krauss, R., Bois, Y-A., and Buchloh, B.H.D.

2005   *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism.* Thames & Hudson.

Freedberg, D.

1989   *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Fried, M.

1982   "How Modernism Works: A Response to TJ Clark." *Critical Inquiry* 9(1): 217-234.

2009   *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

FSR

1921   *The Russian Famine: Pictures, Appeals*. New York: Friends of Soviet Russia.

Gauntlett, D. and Holzwarth, P.

2006   "Creative and Visual Methods for Exploring Identities." *Visual Studies* 21(1): 82-91.

Go, J.

2008   "Global Fields and Imperial Forms: Field Theory and the British and American Empires." *Sociological Theory* 26(3): 201-229.

Gomez-Barris, M.

2010   "Visual Testimonies of Atrocity: Archives of Political Violence in Chile and Guatemala." *Journal of Visual Culture* 9(3): 409-419.

Grady, J.

1996   "The Scope of Visual Sociology." *Visual Sociology* 11(2): 10-24.

Graham, C., Laurier, E., O'Brien, V., and Rouncefield, M.

2011   "New Visual Technologies: Shifting Boundaries, Shared Moments." *Visual Studies* 26(2): 87-91.

Greenberg, C.

1984   *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Guillemin, M. and Drew, S.

2010   "Questions of Process in Participant-Generated Visual Methodologies." *Visual Studies* 25(2): 175-188.

Gumbrecht, H.U.

2004   *Production of Presence*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Hadjinicolaou, N.

1978   *Art history and class struggle*. London: Pluto Press.

Hall, S.

1997   "The Spectacle of the 'Other.'" Pp. 223-279 in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by S. Hall. London: Sage.

2007   (ed) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.

Halttunen, K.

1995.   "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture." *American Historical Review* 100(2): 303-334.

Hariman, R. and Lucaites, J.L.

2007   *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Harper, D.

2002   "Talking about Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation." *Visual Studies* 17(1): 13-26.

2012   *Visual Sociology*. Abingdon, UK and New York, NY: Routledge.

Haug, H.

1993   *Humanity for All: The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*. Berne: Haupt.

Ignatieff, M.

2000   "The Reluctant Imperialist." *New York Times Magazine*, August 6. Retrieved November 27, 2013. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/06/magazine/the-reluctant-imperialist.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm

Jacobs, R.N. and Townsley, E.R.

2011   *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere*. New York: Oxford Universty Press.

Jameson, F.

1990   *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jay, M.

1993   *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Kadushin, C.

2012   *Understanding Social Networks: Theories, Concepts, and Findings.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kant, I.

1987   *Critique of Judgment.* Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. [1st ed. 1790]

Keenan, T.

2004   "Mobilizing Shame." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 103(2/3): 435-449.

Kennedy, D.

2004   *The Dark Sides of Virtue: Reassessing International Humanitarianism.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kouchner, B.

2004   *Les guerriers de la paix: du Kosovo à l'Irak.* Paris: Grasset.

Kracauer, S.

1995   *Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kracauer, S. and Quaresima, L.

1947   *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Krause, M.

2009   "Boundaries of the Universal: How Humanitarians Make Decisions about Relief." New York: Department of Sociology, New York University.

Krauss, R.E.

1985   *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kurasawa, F.

1998   "The Adventures of the Structure." *Thesis Eleven* (55): 83-96.

2011   "The Making of Humanitarian Visual Icons: The 1921-1923 Russian Famine as Foundational Event." Pp. 67-84 in *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*, edited by J.C. Alexander, D.M. Bartmanski, and B. Giesen. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

2014   "In Praise of Ambiguity: On the Visual Economy of Distant Suffering." in *Suffering, Art, and Aesthetics*, edited by R. Hadj-Moussa and M. Nijhawan. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lamont, M.

2009   *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

2012   "Toward a Comparative Sociology of Valuation and Evaluation." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38(1): 201-221.

Lamont, M. and Thévenot, L. (eds.)

2000   *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Lanzmann, C.

1985   *Shoah* [France]

Kurasawa, *How Does Humanitarian Visuality Work?*

Latour, B.

2006   *Changer de société, refaire de la sociologie*. Paris: La Découverte.

2010   "What Is Iconoclash? Or Is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?" Pp. 67-97 in *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Latour, B., Weibel, P., Bigg, C., and Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe

2002   *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*. Karlsruhe [Germany]; Cambridge, Mass.: ZKM, Centre for Art and Media; MIT Press.

Law, J.

1992   "Notes on the Theory of the Actor Network: Ordering, Strategy and Heterogeneity." Retrieved on September 2011. Available at: http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/Law1992NotesOnTheTheoryOfTheActorNetwork.pdf

Lévi-Strauss, C.

1966   *The Savage Mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1977   *Structural Anthropology, Vol. 2*. London: Allen Lane.

1993   *Structural Anthropology, Vol. 1*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Levin, D.M., (ed.)

1993   *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Berkeley (Calif.): University of California Press.

Linfield, S.

2010   *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lukács, G.

1990   *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. London: Merlin.

Martin, J.L.

2003   "What Is Field Theory?" *American Journal of Sociology* 109(1): 1-49.

2009   *Social Structures*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2011   *The Explanation of Social Action*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Maskalyk, J.

2010   *Six Months in Sudan: A Young Doctor in a War-Torn Village*. Toronto: Anchor Canada.

McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., and Tilly, C.

2001   *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M.

1976   *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

Metz, C.

2003   *Essais sur La signification au cinéma*. Paris: Klincksieck.

Micheletti, P. and Traore Meite, A.

2008   *Humanitaire: s'adapter ou renoncer*. Paris: Marabout.

Mirzoeff, N.

1999   *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

2005   *Watching Babylon: The War in Iraq and Global Visual Culture*. New York and London: Routledge.

2011   *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mitchell, W.J.T.

1987   *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

1994   *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2005   *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Moeller, S.D.

1999   *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*. New York: Routledge.

Mondzain, M-J.

2003   *Le commerce des regards*. Paris: Seuil.

2005   *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Morel, E.D.

1904   *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*. London: William Heinemann.

Moretti, F.

2013   *Distant Reading*. London: Verso.

Moxey, K.

2008   "Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn." *Journal of Visual Culture* 7(2): 131-146.

Moyn, S.

2012.   *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press.

Mulvey, L.

2009   *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Murray, S.

2008   "Digital Images, Photo-Sharing, and Our Shifting Notions of Everyday Aesthetics." *Journal of Visual Culture* 7(2): 147-163.

Orbinski, J.

2009   *An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-First Century*. Toronto: Anchor Canada.

Packard, J.

2008   "'I'm Gonna Show You What It's Really like out Here': The Power and Limitation of Participatory Visual Methods." *Visual Studies* 23(1): 63-77.

Panofsky, E.

1939   *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press.

1991   *Perspective as Symbolic Form*. New York: Zone Books.

Pictet, J.

1979   "The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary." Retrieved March 15, 2013. Available at: http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/misc/fundamental-principles-commentary-010179.htm

Pinney, C. and Peterson, N. (eds.)

2003   *Photography's Other Histories*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Polletta, F.

2006   *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Poole, D.

1997   *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Radley, A.

2010   "What People Do with Pictures." *Visual Studies* 25(3): 268-279.

Rancière, J.

2003   *Le destin des images*. Paris: La Fabrique.

2008   *Le spectateur émancipé*. Paris: La Fabrique.

Reinhardt, M., Edwards, H., and Dugganne, E. (eds.)

2007   *Beautiful Suffering: Photography and the Traffic in Pain*. Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art.

Ricoeur, P.

1984   *Time and Narrative*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rieff, D.

2003   *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rose, G.

2012   *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. London: Sage.

Salgado, S.

1990   *An Uncertain Grace*. New York: Aperture.

Saussure, F. de.

1965   *Course in General Linguistics*. 3rd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Savage, M. and Silva, E.B.

2013   "Field Analysis in Cultural Sociology." *Cultural Sociology* 7(2): 111-126.

Schudson, M.

1978   *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. New York: Basic Books.

Scott, J.

2013   *Social Network Analysis*. 3rd ed. London: Sage.

Slim, H. and Sellick, P.

2002   *Western Aid and the Global Economy: Archives of Major Aid Agencies; Series One: The Save the Children Fund Archive, London*. London: Gale Primary Source Microfilm.

Sliwinski, S.

2006   "The Childhood of Human Rights: The Kodak on the Congo." *Journal of Visual Culture* 5(3): 333-363.

2011   *Human Rights in Camera*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, B.

1985   *European Vision and the South Pacific*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sontag, S.

1978 *On Photography*. London: Allen Lane.

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

Stallabrass, J.

1997 "Sebastiao Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism." *New Left Review* (223): 131-160.

Steinmetz, G.

2007 *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2011 "Bourdieu, Historicity, and Historical Sociology." *Cultural Sociology* 5(1): 45-66.

Sturken, M. and Cartwright, L.

2009 *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Szörényi, A.

2006 "The Images Speak for Themselves? Reading Refugee Coffee-table Books." *Visual Studies* 21(1): 24-41.

Tagg, J.

1988 *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Tarrow, S.

2005 *The New Transnational Activism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Terry, F.

2003 *Condemned to Repeat?: The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Tilly, C.

2006 *Regimes and Repertoires*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Twain, M.

1905 *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defence of His Congo Rule*. Boston: P. R. Warren.

Vallaeys, A.

2004 *Médecins sans frontières: la biographie*. Paris: Fayard.

Wagner, J.

2002 "Contrasting Images, Complementary Trajectories: Sociology, Visual Sociology and Visual Research." *Visual Studies* 17(2): 160-171.

Wagner-Pacifici, R.

2005 *The Art of Surrender: Decomposing Sovereignty at Conflict's End*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wasserman, S. and Faust, K.

1994 *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Weissman, F. (ed.)

2004 *In the Shadow of "Just Wars": Violence, Politics, and Humanitarian Action*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

White, H.

1973   *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Williams, R.

1989   *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. London: Verso.

Wilson, R.A. and Brown, R.D. (eds.)

2009   *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wolff, J.

1993   *The Social Production of Art*. New York: New York University Press.

2012   "After Cultural Theory: The Power of Images, the Lure of Immediacy." *Journal of Visual Culture* 11(1): 3-19.

Wood, L.J.

2012   *Direct Action, Deliberation, and Diffusion: Collective Action after the WTO Protests in Seattle*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Wood, M.

2000   *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780-1865*. New York: Routledge.

Wright, T.

2002   "Moving Images: The Media Representation of Refugees." *Visual Studies* 17(1): 53-66.

Zelizer, B.

1998   *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

2010   *About to Die: How News Images Move the Public*. New York: Oxford University Press.

How Does Humanitarian Visuality Work?

A Conceptual Toolkit for a Sociology of Iconic Suffering

Abstract: Over the last decade or so, the rise to prominence of the study of images, and of visuality more generally, has given birth to three principal strands of research in the human sciences: the rediscovery of the capacity of pictures to document various dimensions of social life, in a manner that complements or can be substituted for other ethnographically-based qualitative methods (e.g., visual sociology and anthropology;) the status and power of the image as a cultural and political icon, and to extent to which iconicity is affected by the transition from analog and print technologies to their digital and internet-based equivalents; and normative debates about representational politics (how an event or group should be represented, etc.,) notably the impact of dominant representational regimes depicting historically stigmatized or subordinate groups on Western audiences. While these questions are essential, relatively little attention recently has been devoted to the question of understanding how images work in the social world – that is to say, how they are organized as semiotic (and therefore signifying) objects, where they come from and by whom they are created, as well as how they appear in public spheres. Therefore, in order to further explore the socio-cultural life of images, this paper focuses on iconic suffering via the topic of humanitarian visuality, that is to say, the historically constituted Euro-American visual economy created and reproduced in and through iconic still and moving images of suffering persons and groups during humanitarian crises. To properly investigate the topic, the following pages propose a conceptual model designed around the sociological notions of structure, convention, network, and field. The first component of this model, then, is the notion of the semiotic structure of the image of iconic suffering, namely, the structural relations between signs mediating the relations among subjects, objects, and context that generate this image's initial meaning. The idea of iconographic convention is the second concept of interest, since it assists in the identification of the socio-historical formation and repetition of a set of patterns and tropes in the semiotic structure of pictures of iconic suffering. Thirdly, the notion of circulatory network can be used to trace the non-chronological "stages" of production, selection, distribution, and reception through which these images circulate in public spaces and the complex organizational relations between institutional actors and technologies that participate in processes of circulation. Finally, we can turn to the idea of an iconological field, for the Bourdieusian principles of relationality and hierarchical differentiation enable us to trace the positions of institutional actors involved in the ideological coding of iconic images of suffering and their representational styles.

Fuyuki Kurasawa is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at York University in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* [Minnesota, 2004] and of *The Work of Global Justice: Human Rights as Practices* [Cambridge, 2007], and is currently completing a book on the history of Western humanitarianism's visual imaginary.