CHAPTER 8

Afterword: Humanitarian Visual Practices: Emotions, Experience

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From illustrations in nineteenth-century political pamphlets to projected photographs, films and graphic novels, humanitarian images have regrouped a diverse range of visual practices throughout history. The choice of medium often reflects how aid agencies have eagerly exploited new technologies to create a convincing or immersive spectacle of suffering, from nineteenth-century magic lantern shows to the recent virtual reality 'empathy machines'. We have thus seen how institutional strategies for fundraising, raising public awareness or advocacy can have recourse to more sensationalist media and sensory experiences. Within circuits of production and dissemination, mass media have played a key role in reaching out to diverse communities, from national to international audiences, mobilising affects as well as mirroring new sensitivities towards pain, care,

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atrocities or war. Thus, the images (widely) circulated are performances of human suffering, created to represent a specific context or event (documentary film, photojournalism, virtual reconstructions, graphic novels, posters) and destined for a target audience who is invited to actively project themselves into that context and react to it. For many viewing publics, humanitarian visual practices are the only representations they might see of distant wars, famines or genocides or the consequences thereof (such as with the current Mediterranean 'migrant' crisis).

The essays gathered here have shown how visual practices can be understood as actants in the history of humanitarianism whose affective value varies socially, geographically and temporally. This new approach points to a need for more historical studies of humanitarian images and the visual practices they relate to. Humanitarian images are ideal objects for the history of emotions whose methodology addresses the variability of humanitarian emotional regimes, demonstrating the elasticity of terms such as 'compassion' and 'empathy' over time and within different communities. Analysing their historical emotional context enriches the understanding of humanitarian visual practices beyond what a semiotic analysis of visual messages would yield. It also provides methodological tools by which complex processes of dissemination and reception can be analysed. Today, as mobile phone imagery creates an increasing volume of images of suffering that enters into immediate and viral circulation via social media (Blaagaard 2013; Zucconi 2018), there is a definite need to ground approaches to humanitarian images in the history of emotions. Images of disasters, war, famine, injustice, massacres, individual and collective tragedies are freely posted on web-based media (social, news, institutional, blogosphere) with little or no filtering or editorial control, by a large number of actors and citizens, professional and amateur. Likewise, motivations and intentions vary from genuine witnessing of events to sadistic voyeurism. While viral phenomena have been criticised for being confusing or destructive, they attest to individual and collective emotions constructed around specific historical events. The traces they leave, from Twitter feeds to blogs and online journal articles, constitute an important pool of historical sources for the history of emotions. Digital and traditional circulation of images of suffering also attests to the desire of individuals and groups to globally share their affect in the political sphere. A striking recent example, the image of Alan Kurdi's corpse washed up on Turkish beach in September 2015 was bluntly exposed on Twitter, prompting a wide

spectrum of emotional resonance (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015). The man who initiated the viral spreading was Peter Bouckaert—then emergency director of Human Rights Watch. On the NGO's website, he explained his difficult ethical decision 'to share a brutal image of a drowned child', mainly because he 'care[d] about these children as much as [his] own' (Bouckaert 2015). From this very personal affect, the picture was seen by 20 million people in 12 hours (Vis and Goriunova 2015) and increased donations, petitioning for refugees and political debates about asylum policies. This illustrates the 'transformative' power of emotions in politics, or the power of an image 'to provoke social change' (de Andrés et al. 2016, 30).

Such phenomenon requires analytical tools which go beyond binary oppositions of compassion and empathy *versus* indignation and outrage, or positive *versu*s negative images. These oppositions are too limited to make meaning of the spectrum of emotions experienced by witnessing publics and 'ephemeral communities' (Gitlin 1996), such as those created around the online global concert 'One World: Together at Home'. Livestreamed for more than six hours on YouTube on 18 April 2020, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it was organised on the impetus of an international community of artists to gather virtually to celebrate and raise funds against the pandemic. Not without precedent, 'One World' recalled the Live Aid concert organised in the wake of the 1984–1985 Ethiopian famine, which embodied a new era of live-broadcast music-based charity shows. With satellite television, global experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling and celebrating together became more commonly associated with humanitarian *entertainment* spectacles. Labelled as 'ceremonial media events', these monopolistic performances interrupt our daily lives through the screen in our living rooms, displaying a grandiose spectacle to an ephemeral audience: 'festive viewers […] allow themselves great emotion: to cheer, to weep, to feel pride' (Dayan and Katz 1994, 129). Rather than taking these representations of collective emotions at face value, the history of emotions asks what they signify in their specific historical context. What does it mean to collectively and publicly weep in 2020 as opposed to other eras? What is the meaning and impetus for pride in the COVID-19 pandemic and what does that say of societal values? Similarly, the case of Kurdi raises questions regarding the emotions attending children and childhood in the early twenty-first century.

The pertinence of the history of emotions for humanitarianism can be seen in the recently emerged field of research on humanitarian experience,

which examines history 'from below' through sources such as personal accounts and testimonies of humanitarian practitioners (Taithe and Borton 2016; Ross 2019). It thus takes into consideration individual actors who not only experienced and shaped humanitarian responses and contexts, but also 'felt' them and recorded their feelings. This work also demonstrates the richness of the history of emotions when layered with other strata of analysis into an interdisciplinary approach. Indeed, the history of emotions is a relatively new field that calls for new interdisciplinary frameworks and methodologies that draw on social sciences and Cultural Studies in order to understand the performativity of images in an emotional environment. In the case of humanitarian images, which solicit emotional registers that relate to sensations of suffering such as pain, hunger, cold and fatigue, the recent appeal of historians to reunite history of emotions with history of the senses would seem apropos (Boddice and Smith 2020, 6).

In teasing out the complexity of emotions attending humanitarian visual practices, this book aims to contribute to both the emerging field of history of humanitarian experience and the evolution of the field of history of emotions as it expands towards broader horizons. The diversity of practices examined here and their inscription in a long historical perspective of humanitarianism demonstrates how individual feelings are also shaped by emotional regimes that situate the individual affective experience in larger visual, cultural, political and social environments.

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