

## 8 | The spectacle of suffering and humanitarian intervention in Somalia

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### Introduction

Since the liberation of Nazi concentration camps, a central organizing principle of human rights advocacy has been that information is the key to stopping atrocities in progress and preventing those that are imminent: if only the public knew what was going on behind those walls, something could have been done. The photographs that emerged from Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald in 1945 were so startling they led observers to optimistically opine that, should future atrocities become known and visible to the public, the audience would be sufficiently motivated to speak out in defense of the vulnerable. By virtue of their visceral response to grotesque and brutal imagery, ordinary citizens would be stirred from complacency to become politically engaged. But is this actually what happens? Does our ability to see human rights abuse portrayed in visual media increase the likelihood that audiences become politically involved to alleviate suffering?

This dilemma plays itself out on two levels. Witnessing, in the sense that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) including the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF, or Doctors Without Borders) employ it, is a critical act in and of itself because by being present, by bearing witness to crimes, violators are denied impunity. Geopolitically, being labeled as an abusive regime has negative effects on legitimacy and reputation and, therefore, witnessing may discourage abuse. Witnesses thus raise the cost of human rights abuse and expose tyrants to the world. With the initiation of digital technology and satellite communication in the 1990s, the human rights community gained a new arsenal of tools with the potential to transform an entire general audience into an active crowd of witnesses. With the bright lights of globalized media shining into the darkest corners, actors can be held up to international human rights standards, the global public bearing witness to their crimes.

Additionally, seeing human rights abuses on television and online may also motivate a response that goes beyond that act of witnessing:

audience members could decide to become active in campaigns to remedy the situation portrayed before them in the imagery. Human rights and humanitarian engagement can take many forms, from texting a monetary donation to a foreign aid agency and contributing to a canned food drive, to calling elected officials, urging state action, and attending a protest event for the cause. These activities exist on a spectrum of political engagement with witnessing at one end of the spectrum and direct action tactics at the other, and they vary widely based on personal investment, exposure to risk, and effect.

This chapter examines the types and degree of engagement cultivated by the exposure to graphic imagery of suffering. Do audiences maintain their passivity and remain on the couch? Are they moved to give of themselves financially? Is footage of suffering sufficient to mobilize political activism? If so, for how long? The relationship between seeing and acting is neither natural nor linear, but is at times disjointed and operating at cross-purposes. The cautionary tale that follows indicates how the converse of the mantra may well be true: the claim that information deficit is at the root of inaction ignores the possibility that information overload may be equally detrimental.

With the onset of neoliberal globalization and specific advances in information and communications technology, the channels were in place for the transmission of ideas and images in an increasingly open and permissive environment. The medium that exemplifies this period is the television, because, while the Internet was still in the process of maturation in the 1990s, television had reached a critical mass of households and, with the expansion of global media conglomerates, content on television was expanding as well. Yet this rapid shift toward visual media resulted in an excessiveness that eventually gave way to an age of hypersaturation aptly described as an age of spectacle (Debord 1983; Kellner 2003).

Through new media, images stream at the audience with omnipresent and overwhelmingly spectacular displays designed to entice, intrigue, and attract, pummeling our eyes and our minds with information and entertainment. At once, visual media generate amusement and distraction from daily life and provide a necessary, if temporary, escape into the realm of fantasy. At the same time, television serves the public with invaluable access to far-off places that details stories of human struggle and sheds light on matters of great international importance. However, if 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan 2003), or even if 'the medium is the metaphor' (Postman 1985), what is the effect on the audience when serious content is communicated through

### What is the 'spectacle of suffering'?

The era of spectacle emerges as a product of globalization, primarily associated with technological developments in the field of information communications. Facilitating this shift was an infrastructure of fiber-optic cables, satellite link-ups, and corporate media outlets that formed an enmeshed global network. Through these channels, content traveled instantaneously across great distances, at low costs. Twenty-four-hour cable news with live video feeds fueled a demand for content and provided the wherewithal to transmit it. However, the spectacle is not only a matter of speed and access; the nature of visual information also marks a transformation in the media landscape. Due to technological capacity and the drive for market share and viewership inherent in corporate-owned media, the spectacle is born of developments in global capitalism, which has social effects on the audience. That global audiences can see imagery of others' suffering is not new; newspapers and magazines have been the preferred platforms in previous eras. What is new is the intensity of moving images compared with still photography, and the coming ubiquity of the imagery itself: the culmination of a historical trajectory that captures circumstances of vulnerability and indignity on film. The spectacle is a thoroughly mediated environment that expresses a promise of globalization: the ability for audiences across large distances to experience each other's lives and be part of a single, transnational moral community that shares care and concern for fellow members.

Yet, this promise went unfulfilled. The 1990s actually saw a relative decline in the coverage of foreign affairs on television newscasts and an inverse rise in stories about scandal, entertainment, and lifestyle, suggesting not only the replacement of the latter for the former but broader qualities of the evolving milieu in which foreign news must compete (Doyle 2007, 190–1). This relationship indicates a trend in television and cable news in favor of content of a light nature, instead of the pressing crises that would unfold throughout the decade. Furthermore, due to its commercial demands, this medium was never intended to cultivate cosmopolitan human rights defenders, but instead consumers and spectators. Information takes the form of breaking news headlines, but it also takes the form of advertising. Television is a vehicle for creating and targeting the demographics of consumers and provides access for corporations to these consumers in their homes. Global capitalism at the beginning of the twenty-first century is increasingly personalized and prepackaged, and the individual is ever more accustomed to constant confrontation with

advertising and commercialism. It has become part of daily life and slips easily into the backdrop of all environments; while not necessarily overt, information as advertising takes on an inconspicuous presence, constantly operating but rarely noticed. Whether these channels can be shaped to serve the interests of the downtrodden is one question that motivates the argument in this chapter and the conceptualization of the spectacle of suffering.

The 'spectacle of suffering' presents a new lens through which to view a familiar, modern phenomenon, namely a tendency in mass media to traffic heavily in images of suffering to the point of becoming rote, repetitive, and predictable. This terminology illustrates a qualitative aspect of the media environment of the post-Cold War era and describes the subject matter of discrete media events, often described as 'pornography of war,' 'pornography of violence,' or 'disaster pornography' (Baudrillard 2008; Mamdani 2007; Omaar and de Waal 1993). The allusion to pornography in this context relates to at least two characteristics: the way imagery of brutality and violence appeals to our prurient interests and the exploitative nature of graphic imagery of suffering victims. Drawing comparisons between atrocity photography and pornography suggests a certain self-indulgence in observing others in vulnerable, intimate, and sensitive positions, while also injecting a power dynamic that connects the subject and object. The current analysis focuses on less conspicuous effects of the visual image on the audience, however, in a distinct way compared with other deployments of the term 'spectacle.' In cases where scholars use the language of spectacle, it is often to signify something spectacular and visually stunning, without necessarily addressing political consequences (Boltanski 1999; Chouliaraki 2006). While my use of 'spectacle' will obviously apply to its visibility, I deploy this term in a specific manner associated with Guy Debord and the Situationist International.

For Debord, 'the society of the spectacle' was a particular description of modern times as obsessed and mystified by appearance.

The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into *having* – human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from *having* to *appearing* ... (Debord 1983, para. 17).

Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and other Frankfurt School scholars originated the critique of the society of mass consumption

among NGOs for air time and donor attention. However, it is also the consequence of a historical trend that manifested itself again during this decade. Public response to media coverage of previous humanitarian crises set the tone for future incidents. Specifically, events in Nigeria in 1968 provide an early case of the effect of visual imagery of suffering on the audience's mobilization in support of human rights by demonstrating the crucial role photography can play in elevating a crisis to the status of *cause célèbre*. Furthermore, this case suggests how 'the image' can become an alternate plane for contestation in which two parties to a conflict, great powers, and civil society can all be drawn in. There is a great deal at stake even in a conflict waged in the realm of the visual.

The civil war in Nigeria, also known as the Biafran War, was introduced into Western homes in the form of photographic evidence of the starvation of civilians among the secessionist Igbo people. War photography by Gilles Caron of France and Don McCullin of the United Kingdom has come to epitomize the ability of an image to frame a conflict and communicate the desperate predicaments of the subjects of the photograph for an unsuspecting audience. Beginning in the spring of 1968, news of the conflict began to flow to Western news outlets through Caron's and McCullin's journalism. On 4 May 1968, Caron's photographs were published in *Paris Match*, and were thereafter syndicated in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Manchete* (Brazil), and *Kwick* (Germany) (Cookman 2008, 227 and 238). On 12 June, similar photographs were plastered on the cover of *Life* magazine and in *The Sun* (Heerten 2009, 5-6). These photographs have been, over time, elevated to iconic status because of their impact on the public and the way in which they have laid the foundation for atrocity coverage to follow.

The images from the region of Biafra portray the debilitating effects of chronic malnutrition on women and children. In a raw fashion they capture the physicality of suffering by focusing the viewer's attention on the extreme toll taken on the body:

In one, a child attempted in vain to suckle his mother's withered breast. In another, a group of naked boys stood intently watching some action ... Caron focused on a boy in the front rank, gently grasping a slender stick; its thinness emphasizes the boy's wasted limbs ... The other photograph shows a girl of indeterminate age, who seems little more than a tissue of skin stretched tautly across ribs and shoulders (Cookman 2008, 238).

Effectively, the photographs break down the experience of suffering into its most visceral and base form in a way that translates well to an audience. Through the process of mediation, the coverage strikes at the sentimental core of the audience: 'Caron humanized his subjects ... gave his subjects dignity despite their suffering ...' (ibid., 239). The relationship that photojournalists hope to establish with viewers is primarily on the level of emotions – a response to the way the images make them feel. Because of the nature of the still photograph, there are many contextual assumptions required of the viewer that cannot be made explicit through the medium. For instance, there is a presumption of victim innocence in the Biafra coverage that has continued across other cases. The use of women and children as subjects communicates the notion that there are powerful, external forces acting upon them, due to traditional narratives of female and child passivity. Starvation itself is illustrated in simple terms, as a natural disaster, more akin to an earthquake than a calculated political strategy. In the case of Biafra, as well as the famed/infamous 1984 Ethiopian famine, this simplicity is in fact a distortion because of the use of food as a weapon of war to punish civilian populations. The combination of childlike victim innocence and denial of subsistence rights, beginning in 1968, cast a shadow on future incidents of visual media representation of suffering.

However, these 'innocent victims' were not merely passive subjects in the frame of the photographs – they were in fact active participants in the global trafficking of their own atrocity images. Under the leadership of Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, the secessionist Biafrans employed the services of MarkPress, a Geneva-based public relations firm, to assist in their marketing and publicity. In addition to 700 press releases sent to 'British MPs, newspaper editors, radio and television correspondents, businessmen and academics,' MarkPress was more generally tasked with casting 'the Biafran case in the most heartrending light' (Harrison and Palmer 1986, 22; Black 1992, 121). In the television coverage of 12 June on British outlet Independent Television News (ITN), the figure of 3,000 deaths per day was quoted, despite having been drawn from 'partisan' sources (Black 1992, 120-1). Ojukwu, aware of the power of the image and of the press, leveraged the 'starvation card' to sway British public opinion and hopefully encourage a cessation of support for the federal government with which the Biafrans were at war (ibid., 121).

This proved to be an overwhelmingly successful strategy as the images of starving Biafrans galvanized British civil society and awoke

in prompting a civil society response and a growing intensity in the response. It is my contention that this trajectory is attributed to changes in the technological capacity for communication, as well as in the cultural associations that are nurtured over time through the repetition of crisis. However, until the end of the Cold War, starvation was treated as remediable through donation and provision of aid. As we will see in the case of Somalia, coverage of child malnourishment on the Horn of Africa did not produce a telethon or pledge drive; instead, military intervention was initiated that expanded into a nation-building exercise. Distinguishing this episode from those that preceded it are the heightened media context and the means used to alleviate suffering of others. If Biafra was mediated through black-and-white photographs, Somalia is the African famine that occurred live and in full color before the public for all to experience simultaneously. The frenzied and frenetic pace at which events occurred in this case is a metaphor for the rapidly shifting public opinion that shaped and was shaped by the media coverage.

### **Emergence of the spectacle: Somalia 1991**

Much has been written about the humanitarian intervention in Somalia in the twenty years since it took place. The state remains essentially failed and plagued by violent turf wars. Two decades of incapable governance have provided a safe haven for terrorists affiliated with al Qaeda, as well as the home-grown organization, al Shabab. Piracy, the scourge of centuries past, has returned in the Gulf of Aden as local opportunists attempt to make a life for themselves in the midst of an otherwise stagnant economy. All the while, Somali civilians remain squeezed between hardcore Islamist ideologies and geopolitical battles waged intermittently on its shores. The country remains an incredibly dangerous place, a policymaker's worst nightmare, and the situation is as ripe today for chronic famine as it was before the fall of the country's last government in 1991.

'Operation Restore Hope,' as the US intervention was termed, is a crucial landmark in the checkered history of humanitarian intervention in the post-Cold War era. The debate surrounding Somalia generally consists of two central questions: what was the media's role in motivating the intervention, and what was the subsequent effect on the West's response to mass atrocity? With advancements in information and communications technology and the innovation of the twenty-four-hour cable news network, viewers witnessed these events in real time, and foreign policy appeared to shift in lockstep with media coverage

and public opinion. As images of famine-stricken children appeared, the public called for intervention; as these images were replaced by those of dead American soldiers the following year, the public swung to favor withdrawal. The blowback from Somalia negatively affected the ability of human rights advocates to lobby governments for humanitarian intervention for fear of making a repeated spectacle out of the deaths of their own soldiers. The CNN Effect, as it was termed, was an attempt by commentators to describe the role played by media coverage of the event in driving foreign policy. However, when social science caught up with the commentators, the CNN Effect was largely debunked (Robinson 2002; Western 2005).

The most convincing evidence of its inaccuracy is the simple sequencing of events. As this narrative describes, the mobilization for intervention in Somalia had more to do with controlling the spin of the spectacle than it did with national interest or humanitarian relief. In late 1991, news of the famine in Somalia came into view on Western television screens, mostly as part of a larger story about famine on the Horn of Africa. *Africa Watch* reported 'wanton and indiscriminate' violence in the fallout from the government collapse (quoted in Western 2005, 139). Major news coverage would not return until late summer 1992, even though international organizations (IOs) and human rights groups would continue their alarm-sounding advocacy. In July 1992, ICRC cited the figures of 300,000 casualties from famine since 1989, and 'reiterated its six-month-old estimates that 95 per cent of the population of Somalia was malnourished' (ibid., 135). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 'estimated that as many as 4.5 million of the country's 6 million civilians would be subject to death by starvation without some form of immediate assistance' (ibid., 139). While reporting from IOs does not often reach the average news consumer, inside the US administration there were officials such as Andrew Natsios who were also advocating forcefully for intervention. Natsios, then assistant administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), sought to make the crisis more public with a series of press conferences on the topic of the 'humanitarian catastrophe' (ibid., 135). Yet, with all this discussion, there was very little graphic coverage of the famine in Somalia. Most news outlets had pulled out due to insecurity and it was not until the Bush administration chose to make the famine an issue that media sources began covering it.

Still, the fact that there was an ongoing debate between IOs, State Department officials, the Pentagon, and the executive branch is not

of the intervention was extremely favorable, with 81 per cent supporting the mission from a moral position and 70 per cent willing to sacrifice American blood and treasure for the cause (ibid., 145). The spectacle of Somalia had been transformed from that of suffering to that of militaristic heroism in a way that resonated with the audience and generated support for the administration's humanitarian, political, and geopolitical goals. Messaging through visualization was being controlled in a masterful way. Media outlets were reaping profits through an increase in television viewership and in print sales. All parties were content to continue behind the mission in Somalia because all of their interests were being well served. However, the unfolding events tested the limits of spin and demonstrated the difficulty of managing image in an age of spectacle. As public opinion turned against the mission, the US government learned the lesson of the fickle nature of the audience for humanitarian expeditions.

By early 1993, with the end of drought and resumption of the rainy season, the famine was effectively over, making it a 'straightforward task to declare victory over starvation' (ibid., 145; de Waal 1997, 185). While the original impetus for intervention had been removed, the mission evolved rapidly to respond to facts on the ground. In the summer of 1993, aid delivery was no longer the force's *raison d'être*. Due to an escalation in violence, prompted by attacks against the Pakistani peacekeepers, the militarized humanitarian expedition took on a singularly military function. Infamously, in the fall of that year, American forces faced significant opposition from troops under the command of General Mohamed Farrah Aidid, the president of Somalia. On 25 September, a US helicopter was downed in Mogadishu and on 3 October two more helicopters were shot down over the capital. The second attack resulted in eighteen US Army Rangers killed, one taken captive, and one of the bodies of the deceased dragged through the streets by children (Moeller 1999, 146). Fallout from the transmission of photographs of the fierce battle and brutal treatment of American casualties was immediate and dramatic. President Clinton pledged a withdrawal of American troops from the UN mission in direct response. Graphic imagery of suffering had provoked a change in foreign policy, but the suffering subjects in this case were not African children – they were American servicemen acting on humanitarian grounds. While thousands of Somalis were dead or wounded when the dust settled in Mogadishu, their suffering had been cast aside in favor of the American narrative. This narrative was driven by lingering symptoms of the Vietnam syndrome, in which the nation's military gets bogged down

in a quagmire. Of course, the Vietnam syndrome would give way to a 'Somalia syndrome' that framed the West's approach to Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo (Brooks 2006).

### **Conclusion: bearing witness to distant suffering in an age of spectacle**

The spectacle of suffering that emerged in the 1990s continued trends in visual media receptivity, but in a heightened state. Technology made it possible for distant suffering to be a regular feature of nightly news broadcasts and introduced average viewers to extraordinary situations. Images of suffering civilians influenced debate and framed the crisis in a certain way. For Western audiences, to witness suffering at a distance is to be involved in a central human rights process traditionally reserved for relief workers, medical personnel, and staff on the ground in conflict zones. From a human rights perspective, witnessing is a political act because it disables the abuser from operating in secrecy; accountability for gross violations can occur only when the veil of obscurity has been lifted. This is 'a fundamental axiom of the human rights movement in an age of publicity: that the exposure of violence is feared by its perpetrators, and hence that the act of witness is not simply an ethical gesture but an active intervention' (Keenan 2004, 446). To reiterate Amnesty International's founding motto: 'Better to light a candle than curse the darkness.' It is no coincidence that in 1992 the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights began its Witness program, which distributes video cameras throughout the world to capture human rights abuse for documentary purposes (Cohen 2001, 186).

The spectacle is equivalent to the lighting of a million candles, but transforming ordinary people into witnesses through television does not have the effect ICRC and MSF intend in their conceptions of witnessing, nor does it simply transform viewers into human rights activists. The episodes detailed above evidence the potential for the spectacle to be a force for the expansion of moral community, but only on the basis of emotional appeal.

This is the power [of television] to make spectators witnesses of human pain by bringing home disturbing images and experiences from far-away places ... The tension between a knowing yet incapable witness at a distance is the most profound moral demand that television makes on Western spectators today (Chouliaraki 2006, 18).

Visually, television has a unique impact on its audience that radio

into action – a step that the spectacle of suffering does not sustain. The emotional reaction experienced by the audience does not translate into the commitment and investment necessary for a persistent effort with a long-term positive effect on the conflict.

This effort may have taken many forms in the case of Somalia. Had the audience been committed to the alleviation of the suffering of Somalis, we might have seen continued support for the intervention force until a proper government had been re-established that was better suited to serve the needs of civilians. We may have seen popular forms of protest emerge, urging President Clinton to keep US troops in Somalia until the causes of the famine were corrected and prevented from reappearing. Instead, the audience turned away from its previous posturing in support of intervention as soon as the Black Hawk Down incident was broadcast. This indicates that the spectacle of suffering Somalis had very concrete limits and that suffering Americans trump suffering Somalis. Therefore, this example refutes the suggestion that global media can help individuals overcome national bias and be a platform for the broadening of moral communities, fulfilling a promise of globalization.

Instead of witnesses, in the traditional sense, the spectacle of suffering produces spectators: those audiences who watch without engaging, willfully detached from reality. Television proves it is no panacea. Human rights and humanitarian crises are treated as newsworthy, and even given serious coverage over an extended period of time, but the mediated version beamed into the homes of the viewers maintains moral and geographical distance. There is an acknowledgment of the suffering of others and an emotional response is provoked, but the emotional experience does not translate into sustained political participation. While forces of globalization demonstrate an ability to expand moral capacity across boundaries, facilitating for new communities the recognition of others, that feeling tends to be limited to empathy, devoid of full consciousness.

Without political consciousness, an emotional mass outpouring is vulnerable to manipulation, evidenced notably in Somalia. While human rights organizations seek to capitalize on sensational reporting of human rights abuse, power elites and media outlets also wrestle for control of the message:

The stakes of this mediatic scenario are high; we cannot understand, nor have a properly political relation to, invasions and war crimes, military operation and paramilitary atrocities – both of maximal

importance for human rights campaigners – in the present and future if we do not attend to the centrality of image production and management in them. We will be at an even greater loss if we do not admit that the high-speed electronic news media have created news opportunities not just for activism and awareness, but also for performance, presentation, advertising, propaganda, and for political work of all kinds (Keenan 2004, 442–4).

Foreign policymakers attempt to secure domestic legitimacy for international operations through the deployment of the spectacle. Corporate media conglomerates seek to bolster ratings and advertising revenue with the use of imagery of suffering. The emotional appeal of a humanitarian narrative serves both sets of interests. And, while it could also serve human rights interests, the spectacle consolidates the gaps between the moral, the emotional, and the political, complicating the prospects for a sustained response. Since witnessing and other forms of human rights interventions are necessarily political acts, the spectacle of suffering does not provide an obvious venue for efforts of this kind. Instead, the spectacle spews content over which no actor has ownership: neither the human rights movement, nor the government.

From the perspective of the human rights community, in its perpetual quest to bolster its base, the risk inherent in the use of graphic imagery to attract audience members is providing an unintended substitute for activism: *the spectacle effectively replaces political action with the act of looking*. Viewers feel empathy and compassion for those suffering on television and participate through their voyeurism. However, driven by the imperative that knowledge of atrocity fosters cessation of atrocity, the steps in between are taken for granted. The experience of the audience is limited to an emotional response to imagery that curtails further commitment, either personal or political. Television circumscribes the extent of political engagement by the very virtue of its nature, and human rights organizations do not demonstrate the aptitude to supplement the coverage with actionable operations. The age of spectacle proves to be a challenging media environment to navigate, providing the tools for compassionate cosmopolitan engagement in human rights crises, yet built on foundations fraught with obstacles to overcome and contradictions to transcend.