

An Iconography of Pity and a Rhetoric of Compassion

War and Humanitarian Crises in the Prism of American and French
Newsmagazines (1967-95)

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Summary

This chapter explores the rhetoric of compassion in media framings of humanitarian crises in a historical and cultural perspective across space and time. It shows the first results of an exploratory analysis of media narratives and images of war between the 1960s and the 1990s. Benefiting from the cover of the mass media, modern humanitarianism has played a controversial role in raising public opinion and influencing politics and has contributed to the appearance of the 'victim' concept and its representation in the media throughout the twentieth century, along with images of pain and death. 'Victimization', or the tendency to induce a hierarchy among victims, offers an immediate reading of such humanitarian crises according to a simplified and Manichean scheme. But since media representations insist on producing figures of innocent suffering such as women and children, their narratives and images often fall back on older collective references and memories. Using 'framing mechanisms' as methodological tools, these results provide representations that favor Christian iconography and historical parallels such as World War II. These representations act as means of qualifying the crises and result ultimately in the moral condemnation of them. While there are clear distinctions in how conflicts are treated when they emerge in western as opposed to Third World countries, on how the ethnic victims' background is presented, and on how the paradigm of distance and proximity is dealt with, these media framings are all aimed at relieving suffering, are based on universally shared values, but are at the same time at risk of resorting to reductive schemes.

The Media and Humanitarian Crises: A Growing Sense of Victimization?

At the beginning of 2009, the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip¹ emblemized a recurrent dilemma in how wars are covered on an international level. While the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) for strategic reasons² had limited media access to Gaza, it had also tried to prevent the international public from seeing too much blood and death.

Nevertheless, the few journalists who managed to get into the Gaza Strip³ started to send videos and pictures of wounded men and women and, in doing so, highlighted the discussion about civilians being taken as targets both by the Israeli army and Hamas militants. This

framing was strengthened even further by the story of Ezzeldin Abu Al-Aish, a Palestinian doctor who worked in Israel. He lost three daughters and a niece when they were killed by an Israeli shell. While he was providing live reports on Channel 10 every night by phone from the Gaza Strip, his tragedy took place right in front of international viewers on January 16, 2009. It was widely broadcast by international news organizations, thus revealing increased media interest in the collective or individual suffering of others. After the rush of foreign journalists into Gaza immediately following the opening of the border, it even seemed that the war reporting on Gaza was unusually condensed and focused mainly on the human costs of the conflict. The resulting stories were focused on individual, family-scale tragedy, such as this article from *Time*:

You can measure the destruction in Gaza by the number of bombs dropped or buildings flattened or the price to rebuild it all, but the real cost lies within people like Abed Rabu, whose pain and sense of loss are apparent from the moment you meet him. [...] Israel has begun investigating some of the more egregious allegations about civilian deaths, which are multiplying as Gaza picks itself up from the rubble. (Tim McGirk and Jebel Al-Kashif, 'Voices from the Rubble', *Time*, January 29, 2009)⁴

What is shown by these war 'anecdotes' elicits sociological consideration: far more than a man's suffering, it is the father figure that is being focused on and the loss of his children. While this is hardly unique to this war, as we read in recent studies on the use of children in international news coverage (Moeller, 2002; Wells, 2007), this type of framing reveals a growing concern for children as 'innocent victims':

A story that uses children is seemingly transparent in its meaning. Dead children [...] have become too familiar icons at the turn of the millennium. Today's disasters, which are hard to follow even with a scorecard, are made more comprehensible and accessible by the media's referencing of children – even if that focus on children is a false or distorted consciousness, a simulacrum of the event. (Moeller, 2002: 37)

The 'media's referencing of children' is not new and is part of the history of modern humanitarianism. Western sensibilities toward the innocent victims of war were already characteristic of the aftermath of World War I.⁵ Benefiting from the cover of the mass media, modern humanitarianism has played a controversial role in arousing public awareness and influencing politics (Minear et al., 1996; Robinson, 2001). It has thus contributed to the appearance of the 'victim' concept and its representation in the media during the twentieth century, together with the associated images of pain and death.

'Victimology' or 'victimization' then offers an immediate reading of the various types of people involved in humanitarian crises by dividing them into a simplistic scheme of 'villains', 'victims' and 'heroes' (this refers to humanitarian actors in the field). This has

raised the concern of Rony Brauman, a former head of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) who produced a series of documents (Brauman, 1993; Brauman and Backmann, 1996) which he discusses the concept of 'the purity of the victim status':

[The media insist on] the symbolic level of the 'victim status' [...], this one being considered as a victim only when he or she is seen as an effigy of unfair suffering, of innocence. Victim of a cruel nature, of an absurd war – others' wars are always absurd – merciless armed gangs, of a bloody dictator, but pure victim, non-participant. (Braun and Backmann, 1996: 24)

Trapped in what may be considered an insensitive iconography, the media representations of humanitarian crises insist on compassion 'clichés' that have in fact been perpetuated over time. Therefore, an effort should be made to gain better historical understanding of the types of framing.

This chapter explores the rhetoric of compassion from a humanitarian perspective across space and time. If recent works have shown the salience of a sensational emotional and compassionate discourse in the media reporting of recent conflict (Moeller, 1999), they still lack a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural perspective (Mesnard, 2002). Indeed, if media representations insist on figures of innocent suffering, such as women and children, their narratives and images often back on older collective references and memories. The media discourses have then helped to sustain the persistence of stereotypes and 'clichés' in social representations of the 'self' and 'the other'.

The aim of this chapter is to propose the first results of an exploratory analysis of media narratives and images of war between the 1960s and the 1990s. Four humanitarian crises resulting from armed conflicts were chosen with the intention of drawing on a historical and geographical perspective: the Biafra Civil War and famine (1967–70);⁶ the Lebanon War (1975–90), which is limited here, however, to the specific period that involved international military intervention (1982–84);⁹ the Bosnian War as part of the general conflict in the Balkans (1992–95);¹⁰ and the Somali Civil War and famine.¹¹

Based on an analysis of 'framing mechanisms' (Ghanem, 1996) taken from a sample composed of major illustrated reports between 1967 and 1993, the analysis will focus on a particular medium that consists of four international and national news magazines: *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Le Nouvel Observateur* and *L'Express*. This empirical comparative study will help us to understand the media representations of civil wars over time (from the late 1960s to 1970s to the 1990s) and space (western and African spheres), especially when it comes to conflicts in the Third World.¹² This study focuses on the concept of framing as its semio-pragmatic applications surrounding the visibility of the 'pain of others' (Sontag, 2002) in order to underline how collective memory is deeply rooted in the media shaping of international conflicts.

Framing Pity in Media Narratives and Pictures

The frames used by journalists cannot be distinguished from social representations, both of them influencing each other symbolically in the way they shape and understand events, especially when they involve distant cultures and worlds: 'Framing is concerned with the way interests, communicators, sources, and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understanding the world, which are developed using all of the available verbal and visual symbolic resources' (Reese, 2003: 11). The symbolic aspect in these media representations of international events, particularly with respect to armed conflicts that generate humanitarian emergencies, can hardly be underestimated.

Humanitarian action is a modern concept that is closely allied with charity, that is, those forms of helpful acts that have appeared in older societies since the rise of Christendom. Christian iconography thus includes countless images illustrating gestures of pity and devotion, from saints to madonnas, scenes of *pietà* persistent throughout the twentieth century. In addition, biblical metaphors of the Apocalypse have since made their way into contemporary media language, thereby participating on a broad linguistic scale in the depiction of horror.

Nowadays, talking about humanitarian action involves in fact summoning up a particular iconic imagery, a sort of factual referent that in words and images summarizes a given situation at a specific time:

Action is not separable from representation, to the point where the latter is decisive for the first. Rescuing a victim (or, more modestly, donating so that lives can be saved), or resorting to media to denounce what civilians are subjected to, ask from me to call at the threshold of action, before its beginning. Then, during its development, a set of representations – also of myself – that support my decision, guide my practice and provide myself and others with the necessary presence for its recognition. (Meunard, 2002: 8)¹³

These factual referents that are specific to collective memories have not only been based on Christian iconography but also on older media events and sensationalist reports that have involved history since then. Sometimes characterized by a politics of the spectacle and denounced as a 'charity business' by some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as MSF, these media representations of humanitarian crises are linked to the history of the live report and the competition between newsmagazines and television. After the first broadcast wars such as that in Vietnam in the 1960s, the living-room war effect emphasized the visible aspect of reality, whether it be still or moving images aimed at summarizing events.

Photojournalism had to respond to the competition from television, first by insisting on content, with newsmagazine reporters having a little more time in the field than other reporters to carry out a more detailed analysis of the situation; second, by using visual and title effects to enhance the scoop, such as the famous slogan of *Paris Match*: 'The weight of words, the impact of pictures'. By working in difficult and stressful situations in the context

of armed conflicts, journalists are tempted to use older schemes of perception in order to try and summarize the ins and outs of a crisis:

News must be immediate, dramatic and novel. Stories are simplified and personalized, with viewers or readers encouraged to identify with characters or to make judgements about them. There is titillation, in the sexual sense, or in the wider sense of arousing excited curiosity, through emphasis on the horrific – blood, injury and violence. Readers' responses are affected by language, tone, style and delivery. (Berrington and Jemphrey, 2003: 227–28)

One way to measure this emphasis on the horrific aspects of humanitarian crises is to analyze the 'framing mechanisms' that have been identified by Salma Ghanem (1996). Pictures, titles, quotes and subheadings reveal a particular *mise-en-scène* that helps to identify the salient aspects of media representations of an event. Hence, framing mechanisms were systematically analyzed in this empirical comparative study of approximately 500 illustrated reports, all published in the two major newsmagazines in the United States (*Time* and *Newsweek*) and two in France (*Le Nouvel Observateur* and *L'Express*).

In an initial step, a classic thematic content analysis done using data analysis software (Atlas.ti) was used to identify the general framings used in newsmagazines, especially those involving the humanitarian side of these conflicts. Then, in a second step, a semio-pragmatic analysis was conducted on those 'framing mechanisms' that reinforce the humanitarian aspects, by examining both pictures and the semantics of titles and quotations: 'through their systematic choices of word and image, the media not only expose audiences to the spectacles of distant suffering but also, in so doing, simultaneously expose them to specific dispositions to feel, think, and act toward each instance of suffering' (Choularaki, 2008: 372).

In their reports of suffering, the media – sometimes unconsciously – rely on the proximity-distance paradigm between spectators and victims, thus playing a role in the way the public perceives events:

The spectator is, compared to the media, in the position [...] of someone to whom a proposition of commitment is being made. [The statements and images from the media combine] a description of the suffering and an expression of a particular way to be concerned about it, they propose to the spectator a precise mode of emotional, linguistic and conative commitment. (Boltanski, 1993: 215)¹⁴

Though we will not insist here on the effect of the media on the public and the implications that media content have for potential action, it is important to underline how these framings involve a graduation, or hierarchy, in the emergency level that is proclaimed and in the characterization of the specific crises. This process is divided by Boltanski into three topics, or schemes of functioning: the topic of denunciation, the topic of sentiment and the esthetic topic (Boltanski, 1993: 91–189).

If esthetics are particularly significant in evoking images of pity, the two other topics function as means of labeling persecutors, provoking moral condemnation, encouraging military intervention (the topic of denunciation) and depicting victims and emotions (the topic of sentiment), as has been stated by Chouliaraki:

Two dimensions of the spectator-sufferer relationship are relevant to the analysis of the 'eloquence' of pity, its production in meaning. These are the dimensions of proximity-distance and watching-acting. How close or how far away does the news story place the spectator vis-à-vis the sufferer? How is the spectator 'invited' by the news story to react vis-à-vis the sufferer's misfortune – look at it, feel for it, act on it? (Chouliaraki, 2008: 374)

Consequently, the following questions derived from these concepts are related to the identification of these specific humanitarian framings:

1. Is there any significance given to the suffering of innocents?
2. Are there any specific visual framings?
3. What about the rhetoric used?
4. Are there any differences between US and French newsmagazines?

The 'Topic of Denunciation': Crises Qualifications and Moral Condemnation

Labeling a conflict with the term 'massacre' or 'genocide' is scarcely insignificant and often recalls a past event that is still present in people's memory. As we have pointed out before, historical parallels play an important role in the way journalists characterize conflicts, parallels that are in fact an essential part of the history of humanitarian action. In his study of the representation of victims in collective memory, the French historian Philippe Mesnard (2002) has identified two memorable and disruptive periods in the history of conflicts during the twentieth century.

The first one is related to World War II and the genocide of European Jews. Absolute symbols of 'total war' and the failure of western democracies to confront barbarism, the large-scale bombings of cities and civilians, the endless sieges and battles, and the massive human losses have been a turning point in the war reporting. Above all, pictures of Nazi concentration and extermination camps and the scale of the Jewish genocide represented a unique moment in history (Zelizer, 1998). As a result of the horror and incredulity this event provoked, any comparison with a previous conflict was made impossible, marking this genocide as the ultimate reference point of atrocity.

The second turning point identified by Mesnard occurred in the late 1960s, somewhere between the Biafra Civil War and the Vietnam War. Both of these conflicts took place at a time when newsmagazines were competing with television, thus marking this period as the

golden era' of photojournalism. Characteristic of these distant wars was that reports of civilian slaughter formed a memorable point at a time of an impressive social and political activism in western societies.¹⁵ It was emblematic of the appearance of war casualties involving innocent with iconic images of the starving African child and the Napalm girl in Vietnam.¹⁶

References to World War II and the Jewish genocide are frequent in the reports analyze in this study, both implicitly and explicitly. As the Biafra crisis exploded in media coverage during the summer of 1968, that is, at the height of the famine, the parallels drawn between the situation of Ibo rebels and the Jews were frequent. They were considered 'the Jews of Africa' (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, February 14, 1968: 14) and have been called the victims of 'the largest pogrom in contemporary African history' ('Martyrdom and Birth of a Nation *Le Nouvel Observateur*, August 26, 1968: 18–9). At the same time, a discussion of the definition of genocide arose in political circles in France, mainly due to the activism of young French doctors such as Bernard Kouchner (who will later found MSF). Many pictures, however, focusing on close-ups of starving children gathered along the walls of huts, played on the limits of the parallels, as this caption in *Time* indicates: 'In this land, the choice seems to be between starvation and slaughter' ('A Bitter African Harvest', July 12, 1968: 20). The question of genocide will regularly appear later on, especially in the case of Bosnia and the issue of ethnic cleansing.

When it comes to urban and guerrilla fighting, such as in Beirut during the Lebanese War the parallels were obvious between the situation in Beirut and the famous city sieges and the brutality of World War II. Indeed, at the beginning of the Israeli surprise offensive on Beirut in the summer of 1982, the city was seen as 'the new Stalingrad' ('Beirut: The Palestinian Agony', *L'Express*, June 25, 1982: 62–3). At the time of the slaughter in Sabra and Chatila in September 1982, parallels with the atrocities of 1939–45 were re-enforced, and the Palestinian refugee camps were compared with 'ghettos', the 'indiscriminate massacre of women, old people and children' with a 'pogrom' ('For the Honor of Israel ...', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, September 25, 1982: 38), and persecutors even tried to erase evidence of the events: 'And when it was over, they attempted, in a manner reminiscent of World War II, to destroy the evidence by bulldozing the bodies into makeshift common graves' ('The New Lebanon Crisis', *Time*, September 27, 1982: 8–12).

It seems that this explosion of violence is not understandable in the late twentieth century, which has also seen the rise of human rights and the end of long-lasting conflicts in western societies. For European readers, this violence cannot be explained and brings humanity back to its primitive origins, such as it appears again in the massacres and ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian War: 'Many of Sarajevo's 300,000 remaining residents are wondering why outside powers are permitting such primitive violence to unfold on the very doorstep of a postmodern Europe that has supposedly outgrown it' ('The Siege of Sarajevo', *Newsweek*, July 6, 1992: 22–3).

Witnesses, particularly aid workers who are sometimes witnesses of daily killings in the field, are not sparing with the parallels, sometimes unbelievable, they draw to the past, when barbarism was common in the practice of war, long before any law of war had been

established. Thus, a Red Cross worker talks of 'going back to the Middle Ages' when speaking of the rescue of civilians, while Rony Brauman questions western passivity in the face of 'butchery [...] at the doors of Europe' (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 4, 1992: 64–6).

Such war crimes, whether they be the slaughter of civilians or ethnic cleansing, demand punishment at a higher level, and hence reenact the memories of World War II and the prosecution for crimes against humanity, which *L'Express* calls 'the impossible new Nuremberg' (*L'Express*, February 4, 1993: 18–9) of war crimes in Bosnia. This was already the case after the massacre of Sabra and Chatila, all newsmagazines having covered the investigation and its conclusion in 1983. 'The Verdict is guilty' (*Time*, February 2, 1983: 6–14) indicates a clear universal condemnation as pictures of disemboweled bodies remind readers of the intolerable, blind violence against innocents.

Later on, parallels with the pictures of Nazi camps are clearly obvious in the case of the so-called 'death camps' in Bosnia in August 1992: 'Life and death in the camps' (*Newsweek*, August 17, 1992: 13–4), 'The spectre of the camps ...' (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, August 6, 1992: 40–1), 'Must it go on?' (*Time*, August 17, 1992: cover). These metaphors are clearly amplified by iconic images of emaciated bodies behind wire fences, reminding one of Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz.

Such graphic and semantic violence demands intervention, which is the second step in media discourses. The question of western intervention in such conflicts is fundamental. It did not happen in the case of Biafra: at the time, action was mainly limited to medical and food supplies being provided by humanitarian associations such as the Red Cross. Indeed, western intervention in the form of military-humanitarian operations has occurred more frequently in the 1990s, although they were mainly discussed in political and diplomatic spheres (Price and Thompson, 2002). An increasingly central actor on the international scene, the United Nations (UN), had already sent a coalition of foreign powers to Lebanon in 1978.¹⁷ For Bosnia, it was asked, 'Why Europe is paralysed?' (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 4, 1992: editorial), or 'Should the West go to Sarajevo?', while the Serbian outrages were compared with Nazi atrocities: 'We don't even have the strength to look at those pictures of "ethnic cleansing", that in the past the whole world – or almost – would have fought' (*L'Express*, December 18, 1992: editorial).¹⁸

Partly influenced by the involvement of Bernard Kouchner, then Secretary of Humanitarian Action in the French government, western nations helped to provide emergency aid through 'humanitarian corridors'.¹⁹ Although a UN coalition had intervened beginning in March 1992, difficult stories of the martyrdom of civilians shot in cross fire and pictures of dead bodies in the streets of Sarajevo during the summer of 1992 made the UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) look ineffective in a place where 'there's no peace to keep' ('Bosnia: The US Does Little for the War's Victims', *Newsweek*, August 23, 1993: 16).

By contrast, while the UNOSOM (United Nations Operation in Somalia) coalition was disregarded because of its useless actions in Somalia at the same time, the continual violence against civilians and the rising famine called for a humanitarian operation that led to the media-glorified US intervention in December 1992.²⁰ Instead of relief aid workers, figures

of soldiers replaced the humanitarian delegates in the field, and big cover pages celebrated the new modern hero: 'As Operation Restore Hope begins, Somalis want the US to stay long enough to fix not just their diet but also their society' ('Great Expectations', *Time* special report, December 21, 1992: 32–5).

Such stories of US soldiers acting as new aid providers were often accompanied by pictures framing a crowd of young, smiling Somalis, shaking hands with foreigners in fatigues. A silent crowd, one could say, as they waited for food. They were almost never offered a chance to express themselves in the lines of the foreign press, although this was not true of the victims in Sarajevo. This reinforces a perceptible colonialist stereotype in the western media, as Chang et al. (1987) have stressed. According to this stereotype, African conflicts are still considered the result of tribalism.

While it already appeared in the coverage of the Biafra crisis, Africans have since then been regarded as a massive crowd of silent and passive sufferers. They are presented as eternal victims who cannot live without foreign support, as if their fate deserved less attention, thus questioning the way the media report on suffering according to the ethnic victims' background:

[T]here has been only a limited amount of news space and time devoted to the coverage of Third World countries in the Western media, especially in the United States. Of the limited amount of news coverage, critics charged, the Western news media tend to treat Third World nations in a negative manner, thus reinforcing stereotypes against those countries. (Chang et al., 1987: 397)

Such a framing was widespread in the 1960s, during a period of big conflicts relating to decolonialization. During the Biafra crisis, the explosion of violence between the Ibos and Nigerians would trigger discussion on the prerogative of fury among African tribes, as *Time* underlines by title 'On Tribalism as the Black Mans Burden' (August 23, 1968: 1819). 25 years later, this postcolonialist perspective is still not completely absent when *Newsweek* publishes a special issue on 'Africa: The Curse of Tribal Wars', linking 'Africa's wild profusion of languages, religions and ethnic groups' to an 'unparalleled cultural diversity' that 'brings with it a constant risk of conflict and bloodshed' (June 21, 1993: cover). From the French doctors acting as lonely heroes in the Biafra famine to Marines providing shelters and rice bags to those in the beaches of Mogadishu, it seems that Africa is trapped in passivity and plagued with a history of tribal rivalry, in contrast to Europe, where violence was thought to have been erased.

The 'Topic of Sentiment': Toward a Typology of Victims and Emotions

In her study on the 'discourse of global compassion', Birgitta Höijer points out the existence of a certain 'ideal victim', whereby 'some victims are "better" than others' (Höijer, 2004: 516). As we have outlined early on, there is a clear difference in the geographical origin of victims;

the closer they are to Europe, the better chances they have to solicit a response from the western publics and its pity. There is also a defined hierarchy in the sociology of the victim; age and gender play an important role. Men are usually taken as potential combatants and are rarely used in pictures used to illustrate civilian casualties. Women have less opportunity to fight and therefore embody the female incarnation of softness, motherhood and fragility. Weakness is also an attribute of old people, their tired bodies appealing to the cameras. But as Brauman (1993) comments, purity is deeply connected with victimology. Thus, who can be purer or more innocent than a child? 'This iconicity means that in war reporting, images of children are critical sites on which narratives about the legitimacy, justification and outcomes of war are inscribed' (Wells, 2007: 55).

Because of this, Biafra offers an interesting case study. As the first massively covered African famine, it is because of the appearance of iconic images of starving African children and their associated attributes, such as swollen bellies, blond hair due to kwashiorkor and skeletal bodies. They embody the slow 'agony' of the innocents and the 'living-dead' at the height of the famine in August 1968 ('Martyrdom and Birth of a Nation', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, August 26, 1968: 18–9). Depicted as a 'children's war' ('Agony in Biafra', *Time*, August 2, 1968: 19), the conflict in Biafra called upon the will of western citizens to endure this tragedy and maybe act to put an end to the injustice. As Wells (2007) argued,

Representations of children have a very specific place in the iconography of war. Unlike images of adults that are inscribed into discourses of moral blame and political calculation, images of children may be fitted into a universalizing discourse. In such a discourse, 'the world's children' should be protected from the conflicts of adults (extending from parental conflict through to international conflict), and deserve the care and concern of any adult, regardless of their national or political allegiances. (Wells, 2007: 66)

A similar media representation is decisive for conflicts in Europe. At the beginning of 1982, *Time* had published a special issue on the case of 'Children of War' (January 11, 1982: 16–39), its correspondents having visited war-torn countries such as Cambodia, Ireland and Lebanon to meet more than 30 children and their living conditions. Perfect apolitical incarnations, these children at the same time embody the future of a nation: 'Children are a synecdoche for a country's future, for the political and social well-being of a culture' (Moeller, 2002: 39).

As a consequence, when Operation Peace of the Galilee started in June 1982, *Time* was tempted to track down those Lebanese children who were used in its first report in January to illustrate their lives under a siege: 'The hope was to find these children alive after three weeks of war; if not to meet them face to face, then at least to learn of their whereabouts' ('Seven Days in a Small War', July 19, 1982: 14–9).

The result was a six-page report, written as a diary, which on a daily basis followed the lives of four children in a ruined city, boys and girls, some grieving their dead parents, others playing soldier, one of them being wounded. Through this individualization, their

tragedies in fact personify the future of every child trapped in a situation of violence and access to western viewers at an emotional level. In order to do so, the media choose 'to position children's injuries as an exceptional, unforeseen and certainly unintended outcome of war. While the agents of "our sides" military violence are routinely erased in representations of war, "our" agency in rescuing the child from these unintended consequences is highlighted in more or less dramatic ways' (Wells, 2007: 66).

The choice to write this war report as a diary is quite interesting; more than simply an external account by a journalist-witness, it offers a very specific focus on individualization thus enhancing the readers' capacity to get to the very heart of the story and questioning the moral justification of a war: 'the human presence of the sufferer [...] ranges from an undifferentiated mass of "miserable", [...] to an individual with a personal biography and a cultural history' (Chouliaraki, 2008: 383).

The same result was produced by the story of the 'Child of Srebrenica' in May 1993. The boy, called Sead Bekric, was photographed as blinded, covered in blood, lying on a stretcher. The picture was widely broadcast and made the front cover in publications such as *Newsweek* (May 10, 1993: cover). The boy became a sort of icon, an innocent target of adults' savagery. In discussing his story, *L'Express* explained the necessity of showing such pictures (May 6, 1993: 5) by remarking the whole circle from the 'bombed child, the blinded child, the saved child' to 'the exhibited child', as if the focus on an individual's tragedy would be the perfect alibi for refusing such tragedies on a larger scale: 'Some people fear that this image will trivialize the unbearable. On the contrary, it shows it, and writes it into collective memory. And, without the picture of the wounded child, Srebrenica would have risked being erased.'²¹

Yet such an increasing focus on the figures of innocence embodied by children must not suppress the fact that civilians, no matter how old they are, are regular targets in armed conflicts:

The de facto hierarchy is expressed in how the media report on war crimes, for example. Crowned by the most innocent, the hierarchy begins with infants and then includes, in descending order, children up to the age of 12, pregnant women, teenage girls, elderly women, all other women, teenage boys, and all other men. (Moeller, 2002: 49)

Lebanon consecrated the framing of civilians as the first casualties in war, trapped in a city siege under bombardment and taken as the 'spoils of war' (*Time*, June 28, 1982: cover) or 'a hostages' ('The Dark Days of Yasser Arafat', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, July 3, 1982: 34–6). This *mise-en-scène* was even strengthened by pictures of complete destruction, old women crying in the midst of the ruins of the buildings. The story of Beirut later influenced the story of the Sarajevo siege during the Bosnian War, something quite obvious when one compares the covers from French and US newsmagazines in 1982–83 and with those in 1992–95.²² A corresponding recurrence can be seen in the use of language, with the increase in religious semantics during the Bosnian War and the famine in Somalia: civilians are being 'crucified

and 'sacrificed' ('With the Sacrificed in Sarajevo', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, June 25, 1992: 52-8) or 'possessed' ('The Possessed in Mogadishu', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, September 3, 1992: 48-9), mutilated in an 'inferno' ('A Taste of the Inferno', *Newsweek*, September 14, 1992: 14-5), carrying their dead children such as this 'Pieta of Baidoa' ('Landscape of Death', *Time*, December 14, 1992: 30-3).

Contemplating other people's suffering implies a distance separating those regarding and those regarded, 'us' and 'them':

The display of a politics of pity then supposes two classes of men, unequal, not with respect to merit, like in a justice issue, but only with respect to happiness. These two classes must be, on the other hand, in touch enough so that happy people can contemplate, directly or indirectly, the suffering of the unfortunate, however distant or unconcerned enough, so that their experiences and their actions can remain clearly separated. (Boltanski, 1993: 18)²³

There is a clear difference in the media coverage of victims in a western country compared with that of victims in the Third World, as we have already emphasized. The paradigm of distance and proximity is particularly relevant here and could be seen from our analysis. If the wars in Lebanon and Bosnia were more extensively covered in our sample, the media discourses also called for an immediate denunciation and ending of the slaughter of civilians. This was less in evidence in the Biafra or the Somalia Wars:

The more remote or exotic the place, the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying. [...] These sights carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. They confirm that this is the sort of thing which happens in that place. (Sontag, 2002: 63f)

But the focus on local victims rapidly comes to an end as soon as western countries intervene in a conflict and suffer their first losses, as was the case in Lebanon and Somalia. Right after the suicide attacks on buildings sheltering US and French troops in October 1983, which resulted in the death of 256 Marines and 58 French soldiers, the reports concentrated entirely on the dead soldiers and the call for retaliation.²⁴ Pictures of sobbing civilians in the ruins and wounded children in hospitals were replaced by soldiers carrying the bodies of their dead buddies, on shocking covers all framed in red and black.

The coverage was even more extreme in Somalia following the crash of two US helicopters in October 1993. The usual situation of Americans watching Africans starve was suddenly reversed; Americans were then contemplating one of their soldiers, the lynched body of a white male being tortured by a savage crowd. Somali militiamen held one of the survivors, the pilot Michael Durant, as a prisoner and broadcast videos of his detention. The new victims became 'our' own dead, and the main focus, particularly in the US media, was on putting an end both to the detention of Durant and the military intervention in Somalia.

It seemed as if all of a sudden the glorious humanitarian intervention had turned into a military fiasco, raising doubts about the US ability to maintain peace.

'Trapped in Somalia', 'Bloodbath: What Went Wrong?', 'The Making of a Fiasco', 'Confronting Chaos', 'Anatomy of a Disaster': such is the litany of titles in *Newsweek's* and *Time's* reports on the aftermath (October 18, 1993). Victims were no longer taken as moral justification for humanitarian or military actions; only the safe return of our troops, framed with several polls that questioned the rightfulness of the intervention in Somalia ('Do you approve of having US troops in Somalia?', 'What should be the main goal of the US in Somalia?'), was now considered in the media discourse, as if the slaughter of civilians had never really taken place.

Discussion

In this empirical, comparative study of the media representation of humanitarian crises in two different cultural spheres, we noticed similarities and some differences in how the international news is covered and framed. We must underline, however, that this was only an exploratory analysis that would require a more systematic application of more extensive data, for example, by multiplying the comparison of wars over time and space. Moreover, while this study was made using 'framing mechanisms', it limited itself to the most obvious semiotic signs in media representations (i.e., pictures, titles, headlines and quotations).

A further investigation could be conducted with in-depth discourse analyses. This would help to identify at a more precise level whether the effects that have been observed at a first framing level, that is, one imposed by the impact of images, by titles written in huge letters, and by highlighted quotations, may also be found in the argumentation used in the articles.

The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past. Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan. (Sontag, 2002: 76)

Nonetheless, this analysis does raise a series of thought-provoking issues. The use of a historical perspective in media analysis allows us to consider the persistence of schemes of representation in different discourses. The majority of studies on the coverage of contemporary international conflicts is limited in time and space, thus, for example, the studies on the wars of the 1990s (Pieterse, 1997; Moeller, 1999). Despite this, we need to broaden our media understanding to encompass a longer period, one corresponding to the history of conflicts in the twentieth century. Media representations are, more than anything else, those of the journalists, and they cannot be separated from the more general context of social representations that are promoted on the basis of how they describe and perceive the

world. These social representations often evolve over an extended period of time, some events suddenly crystallizing as absolute reference points in collective memory, as Mesnard (2002) has shown for World War II, Biafra and Vietnam.

Consequently, in the four newsmagazines chosen for this study, we have found a recurrence of cultural, traditional codes for western societies, both in pictures and in terms of semantics. These codes function at several levels; first, they act as classification categories, in particular by defining what is a 'massacre' or what is 'genocide'. Second, they indicate a gradation in the distinctiveness and scale of the event and do so by the extensive use of a connoted vocabulary, which makes use of references to the Judeo-Christian roots of western societies and the religious semantics (charity) of modern humanitarianism. Finally, they label a crisis by choosing quick shortcuts to past events, thus acting as simplifying summaries: 'Formulaic coverage of similar types of crises makes us feel that we really have seen this story before. We've seen the same pictures, heard about the same victims, heroes and villains, read the same morality play' (Moeller, 1999: 13). As Moeller has emphasized, this simplifying scheme often functions by using an archaic triangular relation between the victim ('the good one'), the persecutor ('the bad one') and the hero ('the savior').

The limit of sensibility in the West has developed strongly since the beginning of the twentieth century, revealing new concerns for justice and the well-being of mankind. It is related to what the English sociologist Geoffrey Gorer (1955) has called 'the pornography of death' or the unbearable witness of 'the pornography of pain' (Halttunen, 1995). The rise of 'victim status' can also be explained by the fact that civilians have become the principal casualties in conflicts since World War II, though a trivialization with regard to certain situations has led to 'compassion fatigue' (Moeller, 1999).

Nonetheless, the victim remains an undefined element. It changes depending on the type of crisis involved: while the focus was largely on children during the Biafra crisis, they appear alongside old women in Lebanon and Bosnia and combine with a crowd of all ages in Somalia.

How can we explain a particular focus on a certain kind of victim at a given time? There are still few answers to this question, although some hypotheses can be put forward. Focusing on an individual's career, instead of on an anonymous crowd, emphasizes the 'propositions of commitment' made by the reader (Boltanski, 1993: 215). Thus, they allow identification with, or even indignation concerning, their poor condition. We can see this, for example, in an article of *Newsweek* published during the Bosnian War in which a multitude of refugees are drowned in the same anonymous voice: 'All we can do is suffer: the plight of Yugoslavians 1.5 million refugees' (May 25, 1992: 10-1).

How do I make the suffering of a people mine? How do I confront an individual's tragedy with which I can identify? This approach differs radically from the *Time* article 'Children of War' or the story of the 'Child from Srebrenica'. This seems to be a privileged angle in the media representations of very recent conflicts, as we saw in the case of the war in Gaza, at that moment in the media coverage when the conflict had ended, when it seemed there was only place for laments of the innocent and for rebuilding lives that had been torn apart.

In spite of the ethnic differences and their impact on the visibility of victims, this type of framing is quite often chosen in media representations of humanitarian crises as soon as the lives of civilians are at stake, when the international community is called upon because of trampling of fundamental human rights: meanwhile, the fate of the victim (or victims) hangs in the balance. The categorical status of the victim, as Brauman (1993: 150-7) points out, is instrumental in the construction of an 'international event' that would command the attention of a mediated public. The ideal, authentic victim is pure inasmuch as he or she has been deprived of their basic rights and meaningful agency.

Moreover, the victim is public insofar as the conditions of his or her existence have become an object of discourse (DeChaine, 2002: 362). The more victims are deprived of their rights, the more their innocence is affected, the more they call out for an injustice to be corrected. By headlining 'Belgrade's injured innocence' (June 22, 1992: 12-3), *Newsweek* chose a metaphor that includes a city and all of its inhabitants, who were trapped in a fury beyond understanding, while the story was illustrated with the picture of a woman ripped open, as all of the ethnic cleansing, local nationalisms and atrocities on all sides²⁵ could be embodied in this hopeless victim.

Such stories focus on a feeling that the international community had neglected the civilians and its own ideals of liberty, democracy, security and peace: 'How Dare You Leave Us Alone to Die!' (*Le Nouvel Observateur*, December 9, 1993: 76-8). This feeling is even heightened when children are depicted, victims of men's fury and adults' abandonment:

Key themes of the discourse of childhood, including the family as the ideal site of childhood, converge so that the image of the lone child symbolizes abandonment. Cutting out of the frame the adults and other children who surround the child places the viewer of the image in the role of these missing carers. Children on their own are abstracted from their culture and society. [...] Rather, if lone children are not rescued then they will be abandoned to their fate. (Wells, 2007: 63-4)

The focus of victims' representations involves imbalances, but it reveals a social imagery concerned with the relief of suffering, based on universally shared values, at the risk of falling into reductive schemes. NGOs have been attacking some of the media, accusing them of sensationalism and trivialization. Such criticism was largely initiated by MSF, though it had itself used media hype in its spectacular humanitarian operations at the end of the 1970s.²⁶ Despite this, MSF has recently been appealing to the Seven Agency, a renowned photographic agency of famous war photographers, in order to inform people about the forgotten crisis in Congo.²⁷ One result of this was a photo exhibition called 'Democratic Republic of the Congo: forgotten war', with endless pitiful scenes in black and white, close-ups of skeletal bodies and mothers watching over their dying children.

It shows that the imagery of the victim, which can act both as a mobilizing tool and as a reductive one, is far from being outdated and demands that we redefine how we view and categorize others.

Key Points

- Framing mechanisms
- Victimization
- War
- Compassion
- Spectacle of suffering
- Social representations
- Collective memory
- Newsmagazines

Study Questions

1. Victimization has been defined as a tendency to induce a hierarchy in the typology of victims. Choose a case study (e.g., a two-week sample of media coverage of a given conflict) and then define the types of victims represented. What is the preferred gender/age of the victims? Are these victims given the right to speak, and if so, who among them? Is there a tendency to use personification in media discourses (i.e., to focus on individuals in a story)?
2. Media framings of humanitarian crises are made understandable for the public by reference to collective memories. Try to spot these historical parallels in media discourses: Is there any mention of past events? Do the journalists use a particular semantics such as a biblical one?
3. Framing mechanisms often function using the 'double' language of pictures and words. Using a small sample (such as an illustrated report from a newsmagazine) taken from a humanitarian emergency that resulted from an armed conflict, evaluate the use of pictures compared with words. Do you notice a similar framing in the photographs, titles and captions? Do you observe a narrative based on pictures? If so, do these pictures insist on a particular type of framing (emotional, denunciatory etc.)?

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Notes

- 1 Called Operation Cast Lead, the Gaza War started on December 27, 2008 and ended on January 18, 2009, with a unilateral cease-fire.
- 2 Egypt and Israel have had limited access to Gaza since November 2008. Even if the Israeli Supreme Court ruled on December 29, 2008 that foreign journalists should be granted access to Gaza when the border was opened by the military, the IDF refused to comply.
- 3 These were journalists who were in Gaza before the military operation started. They were mainly reporters for international broadcast television stations, such as Al Jazeera and the

- 4 BBC, and for international news organizations. General access for foreign correspondents was only granted on January 18, 2009, when the cease-fire was declared.
- 5 The article relies mainly on the story of Abed Rabu, a father who had two daughters who were wounded and a third one who was shot dead during the war.
- 6 For example, several charity organizations involved in helping war orphans were founded immediately after 1918, such as the Save the Children Fund (1919).
- 7 Also called Doctors without Borders.
- 8 Translated by the author from the original French text: '[Les médias insistent sur] le niveau symbolique du "statut de la victime" [...], celle-ci ne prenant véritablement corps qu'à la condition de pouvoir être vue comme une effigie de la souffrance injuste, de l'innocence meurtrie. Victime d'une nature cruelle, d'une guerre absurde - les guerres des autres sont toujours absurdes -, de bandes armées impitoyables, ou d'un dictateur sanguinaire, mais victime pure, non participante.'
- 9 Also known as the Nigerian Civil War, this conflict was the result of an attempted secession of the southern provinces of Nigeria, which are mainly inhabited by the Ibos tribe.
- 10 Also known as the First Lebanon War, it started with the IDF invasion of southern Lebanon after violence erupted between the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Israel.
- 11 It started after the breakup of the former Yugoslavia into independent republics, the rise of nationalisms in the former country and the increase in ethnic tensions.
- 12 It started after the ousting of President Siad Barre, resulting in instability among local warlords.
- 13 In this chapter, we choose to consider Lebanon as a westernized country. Although it is situated in Middle East, its history, culture and civilization have deep ties with the West, especially the country that colonized it; France (a large percentage of the population speak French). Moreover, the results of this study have shown that Lebanese society and its citizens are included in the same media framings as people of European background. As a result, the media seem to disfavor geographical perspective when it is a matter of establishing a connection between the cities and white citizens of the Middle East who live according to western standards and European societies and their citizens.
- 14 Translated by the author from the original French text: 'L'action n'est pas dissociable de la représentation, au point que celle-ci est un des déterminants de celle-là. Secourir une victime, ou, plus modestement, donner pour que des vies soient sauvées, ou bien recourir aux médias pour dénoncer ce que des civils subissent, me demandent de convoquer au seul de l'action, avant de l'entamer, puis durant son déroulement, un ensemble de représentations - y compris de représentations de moi-même - qui étayent ma décision, guident ma pratique et fournissent à celle-ci la présence nécessaire à sa reconnaissance, à mes yeux comme à ceux des autres.'
- 15 Translated by the author from the original French text: 'Le spectateur est, par rapport aux médias, dans la position [...] de celui à qui est faite une proposition d'engagement. Un autre spectateur, qui lui rapporte une histoire et peut se présenter comme un reporter [...] transmet des énoncés et des images [...]. Ces énoncés et ces images ne sont pas n'importe quoi. [Ils mêlent] une description de la souffrance et l'expression d'une façon particulière d'en être concerné, ils proposent au spectateur un mode défini d'engagement émotionnel, langagier et conatif.'

- 15 This is particularly the case for the United States, where the protest movements against the Vietnam War were at their highest level between 1967 and 1969. As for France, May 1968 saw the mobilization of French youth's conscience concerning Third World issues and imperialism.
- 16 The picture was taken by Nick Ut (AP) in Saigon in 1972.
- 17 Under the term of UNIFIL, this coalition was placed under the command of the French army. The US army reenforced the coalition in 1982.
- 18 Translated by the author from the original French text: 'Nous n'avons même plus la force de regarder en face les images d'une purification ethnique' qu'en d'autres temps le monde entier – ou presque – combattit.'
- 19 This was mainly covered in French news magazines; see 'With Mitterand in Sarajewo', *Le Nouvel Observateur* special report, July 2, 1992 and 'Yugoslavia: The Limits of Humanitarian Action', *L'Express* special report, August 28, 1992.
- 20 Called Operation Restore Hope, it was conducted by the United Task Force until May 1993.
- 21 Translated by the author from the original French text: 'Daucuns craignent que l'image ne banalise l'insoutenable. A l'inverse, elle le montre, et l'inscrit dans les mémoires collectives. Et, sans l'image de l'enfant blessé, Srebrenica risquait d'être massacre.'
- 22 For example, see 'Lebanon's Legacy', *Time* special report, August 23, 1982; 'Lebanon's Partition', *L'Express* special report, May 5, 1983; 'Hate Thy Neighbor', *Newsweek* special report on Bosnia, January 4, 1993.
- 23 Translated by the author from the original French text: 'Le déploiement d'une politique de la pitié suppose donc deux classes d'hommes, inégaux, non sous le rapport du mérite, comme dans une problématique de la justice, mais uniquement sous celui du bonheur. Ces deux classes doivent être, d'autre part, suffisamment en contact pour que les gens heureux puissent observer, directement ou indirectement, la misère des malheureux, mais pourtant suffisamment distantes ou détachées pour que leurs expériences et leurs actions puissent demeurer nettement séparées.'
- 24 For example, see 'Carnage in Beirut', *Time*, October 31, 1983; or 'Beirut: Who?', *L'Express*, November 4, 1983.
- 25 Although media coverage largely focused on Serbian atrocities during the conflict, later on they also reported on atrocities being committed by the Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian sides.
- 26 One of them was the launch of an operation to save boat people in 1978.
- 27 The photographers involved were James Nachtway, Ron Haviy, Gary Knight, Antonin Kratochvil and Joachim Ladetoged. A glimpse of it can be seen on the Seven Agency website www.vipphoto.com.

Women, the Media and War

The Representation of Women in German Broadsheets between 1980 and 2000

Romy Fröhlich