

Humanitarian branding and the media

The case of Amnesty International

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The development of corporate communication in recent years has brought about a fading of the division of labor between commercial and non-commercial organizations. While the practices of commercial organizations are becoming increasingly ethicalized, so the practices of non-profit organizations are becoming increasingly commercialized. This paper explores the use of media discourse for the communication of ethical messages by humanitarian organizations, caught, as they are, in a tension between, on the one hand, the commercial strategies of visibility and still greater dependence on the media, and, on the other hand, the public's skepticism toward mediated morality and what is commonly referred to as compassion fatigue. The issue is investigated through an analysis of a TV spot produced by the Danish section of Amnesty International in 2004. This spot is taken as an example of how the organization's branding strategies testify to a high degree of reflexivity about the conditions of what Luc Boltanski calls a Crisis of Pity. The analysis illustrates how, in the face of compassion fatigue, the organization manages to carve out a new space for itself in the marketized ethical discourse, and leads to a discussion of the consequences of such rebranding for the construction of morality by the organization.

Keywords: media; branding; NGO; non-profit organisations; organisational identity; humanitarianism; suffering; morality

1. Introduction

The world has seen a vast proliferation of Non Governmental Organizations in the past few decades and these organizations play an increasingly important role in monitoring global governance and bringing principles and values to the attention of policy makers (Held & McGrew 2002; Keane 2003; Keck & Sikkink 1998; Sargeant, 1999) The end of the cold war and the emergence of new communication technologies are commonly considered to have a tremendous impact on the growing importance of NGOs (Warketin 2001; Risse, Ropp & Sikkink 1999; Porta et al. 1999). As the number of NGOs grows, their conditions of existence change and

their managerial practices are pushed in new directions. Competition, neo-liberal political ideals, declining government support along side numerous scandals in the non-profit sector in the 1990s have led to a professionalisation and commercialisation in the sector (Martens 2006; Staggenborg 1997; Meyer & Tarrow 1988). One aspect of this commercialization of NGOs is the increased attention to marketing and the introduction of the concept of branding into the sector.

Charities with a strong recognizable brand attract more voluntary donations than those without. [...] Increasingly, charity brand status is being used to communicate meaning through a unique set of values or associations that define the charity not only in terms of what it does (its cause) but more importantly in terms of the values it represents. Transforming charity into brands allows donors to identify more precisely what the charity does and the values it represents. This in turn allows donors to identify and select those charities whose values most closely match their own (Hankinson 2000: 1).

While the proponents of NGO branding consider branding an opportunity for the organization to be reflexive about its values and communicate these values more explicitly, one might see a contradiction between advertising's logic of recognition and the logic of education or awareness-raising which is a central objective for many humanitarian organizations and certainly for those whose purpose is not limited to emergency relief. While the social change, which is the ultimate goal of such an organization, may be aided by donations that allow the organization to go about its business, the arousal and maintenance of public social awareness is its fundamental prerequisite.

Increasingly, the vastness of misfortune and suffering to which the media expose us, is felt to have a domesticating and numbing effect, which leaves the spectator indifferent and causes what is commonly referred to as compassion fatigue (Tester 2001; Moeller 1999; di Giovanni 1994). Compassion fatigue and the public's perception of its social inefficacy compose a challenging dilemma for humanitarian organizations, which have previously used the depiction of suffering both to create legitimacy for the organization and its cause and to mobilize support from the public (Vestergaard 2008; Höijer 2004; Kinnick et al. 1996). It is the claim of this paper that with the mediated representation of suffering intrinsically linked to social paralysis, humanitarian organizations must fashion a new strategy by which the media can be used in a morally compelling manner, which removes social action from the sphere of representation. Thus, not only must the humanitarian organization find new ways of mobilizing the public, in addition, the logic of the market forces the organization to rebrand itself to create a new kind of legitimacy, which is not compassion based. The paper explores how this need for rebranding is reflected in the promotional material of Amnesty International. It investigates how, in the face of compassion fatigue, the organization

manages to carve out a new space for itself in the marketized ethical discourse and discusses the consequences of this rebranding for the construction of morality by the organization. The paper shows that in a recent branding spot from AI, suffering is entirely removed from representation and substituted with a focus on action and agency on the part of the benefactors. In the absence of explicit ideological or political stance, the affective mode of the spot becomes decisive for the establishment of the rationale behind the appeal. In the spot, compassion which is traditionally used in humanitarian appeals is replaced by the affective mode of fear – a force of appeal, which introduces a whole new set of problems.

After a brief outline of the Analytics of Mediation, which serves as the paper's methodological frame, the paper provides a detailed multimodal analysis of a TV spot produced by the Danish section of Amnesty International. The analysis is followed by a discussion of issues raised by the spot, namely the problem of representation, the problem of action and the spot's construction of morality connected with the introduction of fear as emotional drive behind humanitarian appeal.

2. Amnesty International and the analytics of mediation

Amnesty International (AI) is one of the largest, most established global humanitarian organizations with almost 50 years of existence and national subsections in 150 countries. Contrary to aid organizations, whose communication with the public is primarily concerned with raising funds for disaster relief and whose practices are typically based on a principle of impartiality, the purpose of Amnesty International is the protection of human rights, that is, social change, and as a consequence education and awareness raising are crucial components of their practice. Presumably, it is this aspect of AI which causes it to be an organization with an extraordinarily strong grass root tradition and a current global community of 1.8 million members (75,000 in Denmark). AI exercises its power by pressurizing state authorities through international, public exposure and in this sense it is essentially a political, denunciation-oriented organization, and not strictly speaking an impartial one. These characteristics taken together make more exacting the challenges of adaptation to market demands that an organization like AI faces, and recent years have seen a still growing body of literature on the organization (e.g., Buchanan 2004 & 2002; Clark 2001; Power 2001). Most notably, the remarkable study by Stephen Hopgood, based on a full years' field work inside Amnesty's International Secretariat, describes a fierce internal conflict between conservative and progressive forces in the organization, a conflict between moral and political authority as well as a conflict between more traditional activists and modernizers "for whom intensified competition about Amnesty's future in a globalized

world means making the most of its most lucrative commodity, its reputation, as a brand” (Hopgood 2006: 20).

This internal conflict, in strategy as well as morality, has important consequences for the publics that are addressed by the organization, not only in terms of which strategy dominates but also in terms of how this strategy is managed. The nature of humanitarian organizations’ branding strategies may have crucial implications for the construction of humanitarianism and, more generally, morality in the public sphere. In *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, Chouliaraki (2006) provides an analytical framework for the investigation of the construction and legitimation of ethical norms by the media, concerned in particular with the way the semiotic resources of media reports on distant suffering shape the public’s relations and dispositions vis-à-vis distant sufferers. The analytics of mediation is a framework for studying television as a mechanism of representation that construes human suffering within specific semantic fields where emotions and dispositions for action are made possible for the spectator. It takes its point of departure in the ethical norms embedded in reports on suffering and seeks to problematize the meaning-making procedures through which these norms acquire systematicity and legitimacy in and through television.

The assumption behind the ‘analytics of mediation’ is that choices over how suffering is portrayed, where, when and with whom the suffering is shown to occur always entail specific ethical dispositions, independently of our own evaluative judgment on these dispositions as undesirable or desirable. The value of the ‘analytics of mediation’, in this respect, lies in its capacity to re-describe the semiotic constitution of suffering and, in so doing, to explicate the moral implications and political agendas that inform this constitution (Chouliaraki 2005: 148).

It is a crucial aspect of Chouliaraki’s Analytics of Mediation that it encompasses both the semiotics of the text, by looking into the multi-modality of media texts, and the power relations that constitute its social context, by looking at the constructions of the scene of suffering and the connectivities between sufferer and spectator in the texts. This dual focus implies that we cannot study the relations between the social entities, implicitly or explicitly involved in the text (what she calls ‘difference outside the semiotic’) unless we pay attention to the multimodality of mediation, which accommodates consideration of the impact of technological factors on media semiosis (‘difference within the semiotic’).

In the analysis under the section ‘Branding Amnesty International: “See what you can do”’, I have adapted this integrated perspective on mediated suffering, on the one hand, and the conception of media semiosis, on the other, in order to frame the analysis of a branding spot from AI. I broadly refer to the three categories of multi-modal analysis in the ‘Analytics’: mode of presentation; verbal-visual

correspondence and aesthetic effect, but I place particular emphasis on the verbal-visual correspondence because this is the semiotic category that best throws into relief the characteristics and possible effects of the AI spot. Below, the spot's verbal and visual narratives are described and analyzed in turn with a view to showing that it is in the disparity between the two that the essential meaning-making takes place. Subsequently, I discuss the social constructions of the text in the sections 'The Problem of Action: Beyond compassion fatigue' and 'The Problem of Representation: The strategy of the 'meta-appeal'.

3. Branding Amnesty International: "See what you can do"

In 2004, the Danish section of AI released a TV-spot, which was shown in the Danish cinemas and on a number of TV-channels. Under the heading 'See what you can do', the spot was connected to a web campaign; with a website which listed actions the recipient could take in support of human rights. Contrary to much of the promotional material from AI, this branding campaign was a national production developed in collaboration with an advertising agency. The branding spot promotes AI independently of specific initiatives and campaigns and does not call for any specific action from its audience. Rather than using a traditional documentary appeal, where people in need are exemplified and the audience is urged to make a donation, this spot is composed as a collage of fictional moving images drawing on a blend of the genres of advertising, news and horror film, tied together by a voiceover in the style of reporter commentary. The spot is 45 seconds long and includes 9 short scenes each accompanied by a short statement about AI.

3.1 The verbal

The verbal is provided by a male voice in an objective presenter-style. It consists of 9 statements, in the form of short, syntactically simple and homogenous declarative clauses describing in general terms the activities and accomplishments of Amnesty.

Scene 1: *De ser på verden med andre øjne* [They look upon the world with different eyes]

Scene 2: *De forhindrer våben i at falde i de forkerte hænder* [They prevent weapons from falling into the wrong hands]

Scene 3: *De skaber tryghed* [They create security]

Scene 4: *De giver en stemme til de tavse* [They provide a voice for the silent]

Scene 5: *Og sørger for at de rette hører det* [And make sure the right people hear it]

Scene 6: *De finder dem, der er forsvundet* [They find those that have disappeared]

Scene 7: *De sætter de uskyldige fri* [They release the innocent]

Scene 8: *De stopper tortur og dødsstraf* [They put a stop to torture and death penalty]

Scene 9: *De beskytter menneskerettighederne* [They protect human rights]

3.2 Verbal analysis

The verbal refers to each item on AI's agenda, but not in terms of *fighting* for the release of political prisoners and *advocating* for weapon control, *lobbying* for human rights, *monitoring* the governments' behavior and *pressurizing* them through public exposure which would arguably be the more accurate depiction of AI's modus operandi. Instead, it makes use of predicates that entail success through their lexically encoded endpoints: *prevent*, *provide*, *stop*. Each verb phrase is constructed with a verb that is lexically telic and as such denotes accomplishment. But the telic verbs are combined with indefinite or generic objects, rendering the predicates activity types. This way, each statement comes to describe an ongoing accomplishment. In addition, all verbs are in the simple present tense denoting the timelessness of the activities. The statements refer to both past, present and future. As a result, the text not only creates an image of solidity, consistency and reliability, it also attaches a high degree of agency to the organization in spite of the fact that the predicates are somewhat abstract and vague.

The verbal statements are organized around a set of themes that serve as the objects of external action exclusively. For these themes, *the innocent*, *the silent*, *those who have disappeared*, the use of generic noun phrases with definite pronouns, not only presupposes the existence of this group but also implies that we can identify this group, while avoiding to actually mark it out. In fact, all of the political content of Amnesty's activities could be argued to be located within these implications.

In all utterances the agent is 3rd person plural *'they'*, referring to, not the organization, but to the people affiliated with the organization, to a collective that takes action. By using the speaker-exclusive pronoun *'they'* rather than a speaker-inclusive *'we'*, that is, rather than have the narrator represent the organization itself, the statements are leant an objective voice. The presenter style and its objective voice is vital in removing the spot from the genre of appeal and at the same time serves as safeguard against questions or critique as to the legitimacy of subjective motives for involvement in AI's activities. In addition, the 3rd person use has the crucial effect, contrary perhaps to immediate expectation, of not excluding the addressees as would have been the case, had the agents been referred to as *'we'*. Crucially, *'we'* would have the effect of creating a disparity between the AI representatives that act and the audience which does not, whereas *'they'* is only exclusive with respect to the speaker. Rather, then, than presenting a moralizing *'we'*, which is contrasted with the addressees, the spot reserves a possibility of inclusion and a potential for agency for the audience.

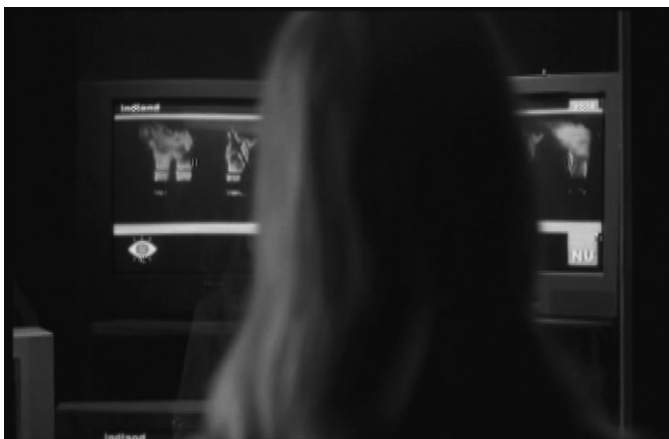
In sum, the verbal of the spot is not preoccupied with sufferers or persecutors, it does not aim for socio-political criticism, nor does it attempt to illustrate or legitimate the ideological foundation of the organization or the morality that underpins it. Instead, the thematic of the spot is limited to a concern with agency and action exclusively.

3.3 The visual

The visual side of the TV-spot consists of 9 scenes corresponding to the 9 statements in the voice over. It is set in a western city, the characters young, white middleclass. Contrary to the verbal, the visual is presented with low modality. It makes use of the aesthetics of the advertising genre, with pleasing imagery detached from natural realism by having little articulation of detail and background and unmodulated, relatively undifferentiated colors, predominantly dark blues and blacks interrupted by sharp contrast of white and golden.

Most of the scenes are unconnected in terms of visual narrative, but tied together through the audio-effects, which carry over from each scene into the next. The audio is composed around a theme of mechanical whiz and clatter connected with the action of the scenes and in addition a background of disharmonic electronic hiss that intensifies in the course of the spot.

The first scene has three frames, the first of which shows a set of buildings on fire, large, flickering yellow and orange flames filling the screen, black silhouettes of buildings within them. The camera subsequently zooms out and shows the back of a head with long red hair, in front of a shop window which displays two TV sets both showing the image of fire with a bright blue header and footer framing it as



Picture 1: Scene 1 - They look upon the world with different eyes

a news broadcast. In the third frame the perspective has shifted to give a slightly diagonal frontal of a handsome, serene-looking girl in her mid-twenties looking at these TV screens. She is the only part of the image, which is in sharp focus, while there is a blur of lights and people moving behind her. The first frame is accompanied by a loud hiss corresponding to that of a powerful fire and this hiss spills into the second and third frames where it is mixed with footsteps and gradually transformed to the sound of a cityscape.

The transition to the second scene is created auditorily, through the metallic click of a gun. The camera now behind the girl, it shows her as she, eyes wide open, slowly turns her head to look behind her and the camera dwells on her as she looks motionless into the blurry darkness.



Picture 2: Scene 2 - They prevent weapons from falling into the wrong hands



Picture 3: Scene 3 - They create security

The next scene shows the torso of a woman as she closes her apartment door and secures it with a chain. As she closes the door, it gives a hollow, metallic slam, which seems to echo in the stairway and more resembles that of a heavy metal door in a prison than the sound of the wooden up-class door as depicted. The following frame shows her from behind, walking away from the door. We hear her footsteps as she walks away and this sound is joined by an unnerving high pitch noise like microphone back-feeding.

The sound of microphone back-feeding serves as transition into the next scene. The first frame shows a full figure, frog's perspective of a man speaking into a megaphone. His voice is not heard, still just the sound of microphone back-feeding.



Picture 4: Scene 4 - They provide a voice for the silent



Picture 5: Scene 5 - And make sure the right people hear it.

He slowly lowers the megaphone and the camera pans out to gradually reveal his surroundings: He is in a big, dark, empty stadium, talking towards endless rows of empty brightly colored seats. The sound of microphone back-feeding is replaced by the, again hollow and metallic, sound of a phone ringing, which serves as transition to the next scene.

The ringing of the telephone continues as we see four severe, middle-aged men in dark suits sitting at what appears to be a press-conference, with an audience in front of them, camera flashes flickering. One of these men picks up his cell phone and we hear his repeated 'hallo,' answered merely by a loud dial tone, which



Picture 6: Scene 6 - They find those who have disappeared



Picture 7: Scene 7 - They release the innocent

is subsequently joined by a sharp squeaky sound both of which are carried over to the next scene.

The next scene shows the door of a dark phone booth slowly closing, while the telephone hanger inside the booth swings slowly back and forth. The squeaky sound which complements the closing door is transformed into a more sonorous but disharmonic sound like that of a horror film sound track.

The horror film sounds intensify and we see a young man, uniformed in dark blue like a private watch guard walking up a dark corridor and, at the bottom of the corridor, entering a code on an alarm on the wall.

Scene 8: They stop torture and death penalty. The watch guard turns a corner into a new dark corridor with a single beam of light flowing out of a single open side door. He walks up to this door and closes it and there is a great slam, the screen turns black, the horror sounds seize and we hear the footsteps of the guard walking away.

The black screen from the previous scene is replaced by the Amnesty logo on a black background. The large white candle flickers to the sound of yet another heavy door that shuts and the bolded text appears next to it: *See what you can do*, which shortly after is replaced by the URL for the campaign's website.

3.4 Visual analysis

The visual is characterized by small shots and derives a somewhat mysterious ambiance from cutting off the surrounds and yet pointing to something that goes on off-screen and letting the camera slide slowly across each scene. This mysteriousness develops into a threatening and eerie mood due to the unsettling audio



Picture 8: Scene 9 - They protect human rights

effects. In the visual there is no 'they', no collective. Each scene has one agent in it and there is no indication that either of these subjects is interacting with anyone. As spectators, we are also not invited to engage with the agents. They are viewed from a frog's perspective, always glancing away from the camera, distant and impenetrable. The compositional properties of the visual give an impression of passivity that corresponds to the a-physical or introvert actions of these individuals. Each but the first image is characterized by static movement and harmony, with symmetry, exclusively simple, straight lines, central vanishing points, a limited color spectrum and a relatively steady camera. To the extent that the agents act, this action is always directed towards a, predominantly electronic, medium. The significance of these electronic media in the spot is accentuated by the non-human, metallic theme in the audio throughout the spot. Three activities are undertaken, corresponding to three discourses in relation to the conditions of mediation: The discourses of observation (scenes 1 & 2), communication (scenes 4, 5 & 6) and exclusion (scenes 3, 7 & 8).

Observation. The two observation scenes comment on the condition of mediated misfortune that it may render a spectator out of the witness rather than connect and engage him with the sufferer. First, the scene does not show suffering or people in need. Rather, it shows a material symbol and metonymic expression of misfortune and then points to the fact that this is not part of our own physical reality, but something we witness through the media as unconnected, individual spectators. Second, the effect of the gradual revelation of the additional layers between us as viewers of the spot and the scene of misfortune in the image of the burning buildings is to point to the manipulations that the media expose us to when they create the illusion of immediacy. While the media create the impression that they bring the misfortune of distant others into our reality, mediation, in fact, inevitably involves these layers of interpretation, perspective and invested interest. As audience to the spot, we are brought to realize that not only are we watching the fire as mediated by TV, we are, in fact, watching misfortune hyper-commodified, displayed in a shop window, as a comment on the fact that suffering is a commodity sold by media agencies, but, crucially, also by humanitarian organizations as AI themselves. The second observation scene takes the metonymic expression of misfortune, this time in the form of a gun shot, out of the world of mediation and into the girl's physical environment. The crucial distinction between the mediated and unmediated world is that we can only immediately act in the latter, but, crucially, when the misfortune is brought inside the scope of the girl's ability to act, she still does not. She merely turns her head as if to check whether she herself is at risk, thus transforming the potential misfortune into a potential threat, while at the same time transferring her spectator identity to the unmediated world.

Communication. There are three communication scenes: Those of the stadium (4), the press conference (5), and the phone booth (6). They all address the problem of the anonymity of mediated communication. In the first scene, the man who initially appears to be addressing a crowd turns out to not have an audience. As such, the scene points to the difficulty of getting the public's attention for humanitarian messages, but, also, by symbolic extension, to the problem of the anonymity of the audience in mediated communication. It is impossible to predict whether you have an audience, what the constitution of this audience is and, crucially, what response is achieved. For humanitarian organizations, specifically, the problem of anonymity applies also to the relationship between members of the audience. Not knowing who else receives the mediated message displaces responsibility since it is not known with whom it is shared and whether or not other members of the audience may be more qualified or otherwise more liable to act in response to the message. Further, the anonymity issue is commented on from the recipient perspective. In mediated communication we cannot know the identity of the addresser, as pointed out in the empty telephone booth scene, and so we also cannot know the intentions, motivations and desires behind the address. The press conference scene ties together these problems of communication into a full circle of representation. As recipient of the message, the man's realm of action is that of re-representation.

Each of these communication scenes shows failed communication. In fact, no message is ever transferred. In each scene, all we hear is the sound of the technology itself. The back-feeding sound associated with the megaphone and the busy signal of the telephone. This reference to McLuhan's classic phrase 'the medium is the message' suggests that not only does the technology influence the nature of communication, it amputates the communicator to the extent where the awareness of the problems of mediation, both on the part of sender and recipient, is such that the message is emptied of all reliable content.

Exclusion. The two remaining scenes both show doors being locked (7 & 8), in a home and in an institution. This points to a depiction of security as something that is achieved through exclusion and implies that the outside world is viewed as a threat that one must protect oneself against, as an individual and as a community, rather than act upon. It takes the threat of the outside world from a distant reality directly to our doorstep, much like the media bring distant misfortune directly into our living rooms, but rather than creating association between these two realities and the individuals that inhabit them, this proximity causes an increased need for protection through exclusion.

To summarize, the visual side of the spot seems to reflect upon the problem of mediation in the context of humanitarian appeal. It portrays the passive spectators it produces, in the theme of observation, the authenticity questions it raises, in

the theme of communication, and, in the theme of exclusion, the 'othering' effect it may have upon the distant sufferer. These visual themes together form one distinct discourse, which is adjunct to that of the verbal, but it is in the junction, or, rather, in the disparity, between the two semiotic codes that the essential meaning-making takes place.

3.5 Verbal visual correspondence

As audience to the TV-spot, our spontaneous reaction is to interpret the visual montage as illustrations of the verbal statements. All scenes have a degree of thematic correspondence between verbal and visual and so, as audience, we are naturally inclined to try to create coherence. Thus, initially the 'they' of the verbal is interpreted as congruent with the agents of the visual. However, throughout the spot the relationship between verbal and visual is puzzling because, in spite of the thematic consistency, there seems to be a qualitative discrepancy. The condensed action of the verbal statements contrasts the passivity of the visual. When the connection between the agents in the visual and the verbal is lost it becomes clear that the agent in the visual refers not to Amnesty International ('they' in the voiceover) but to us, the western spectators and potential benefactors. It comments on the relation between us, the humanitarian organizations that try to address us, and peripherally, the unfortunates that are the topic of this relation. The spot, however, goes beyond just commenting on the problematic of mediation when, through the interplay between the visual, verbal and audio mode, it engages us in actively solving a puzzle of coherence that gives us an almost physical experience of the manipulative force of the media; our readiness to go along with implied connections.

The contrast created between the verbal and the visual corresponds to a separation of action from representation. The verbal presents a simple and straight discourse of social action and achievement. The visual, on the other hand, presents an intricate reflection on problems inherent to mass communication: The indeterminacy of the composition and dispositions of the audience from the point of view of the addresser, the passivity and seclusion attached to the spectator role, the imposed perspective in mediation, the opaqueness of motivations behind the mediated address and the impossibility to act at a distance which leads to a closing off of the reality of the unfortunates.

By thematizing the problem of mediation, the spot sides, so to speak, with the public that suffers the frustration of relying on mass communication and the spot achieves recognizability and identification by echoing and reproducing this skepticism. At the same time, however, by playing out the separation of action from representation, the spot insists that it is indeed possible to act. AI, somewhat paradoxically, place themselves outside of the circle of representation by declaring

<p>Verbal: ACTION</p> <p>Activeness & effectiveness of AI</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‣ Agency of benefactor <p>Invitation to act</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‣ Agency of audience
<p>Visual: REPRESENTATION</p> <p>Observation discourse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‣ Passivity & individuality ‣ Commodification of suffering <p>Communication discourse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‣ Anonymity of recipient and indeterminacy of attention ‣ Anonymity of addresser and indeterminacy of intention <p>Exclusion discourse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ‣ Othering effect of mediation

Figure 1. Separating Action from Representation

that they act and that their action is effective, singling out specifically (albeit abstractly) what their aims are. There are no ifs and buts. Their mission is as simple and straightforward as their syntax.

4. The Problem of representation: The strategy of the ‘meta-appeal’

Yves Daccord, Director of Communication for the International Committee to the Red Cross, describes the communicative conditions of humanitarian organizations as fundamentally changed due to advances in communication technology and increased interaction between global and local levels.

The need to try to understand, to decode, to make sense of that information is greater than ever, all the more so because its sheer quantity and omnipresence cannot explain a world that is generally perceived as being more complex, more dangerous and beset by increasingly acute differences of identity [...] The growing volume of information facilitated by the new communication technologies paradoxically renders communication more difficult and is tending to deepen the distrust of various audiences. (Daccord, 2001: 698)

In a very similar vein, Luc Boltanski in his book “Distant suffering. Morality, Media and Politics” (1999), points to distrust resulting from a skepticism of representation. He diagnoses contemporary culture with what he calls a Crisis of Pity. His argument is based on the observation that for it to be morally acceptable to witness suffering through the media, the emotion it evokes must be separated from the fictional. He points out that since only action can separate the real from the fictional, in order to be moral, the spectator must be oriented toward action, towards what he calls effective speech. The Crisis of Pity, he says, is a crisis of effective speech, a skepticism of representation, which to a great extent is media induced.

The media situation, by not only distancing the spectator from the unfortunate but also from the person who presents the unfortunate’s suffering to him (without himself having necessarily experienced them) makes more exacting the necessary conditions of trust which, as many experimental studies have shown, are broadly dependent upon an effect of presence. The media situation thereby increases the uncertainty inherent to communication which, when it is a question of communicating misfortune, is made fragile by the existence of a number of conflicting ways to be affected when faced with suffering. (1999: 151)

The skepticism of representation essentially pertains to the truth, authenticity and appropriateness of communication. When witnessing suffering through the media, we are aware that out of the vast amounts of sufferers in the world, only a fraction can be picked out for representation and even fewer for action. The mere problem of the selection of unfortunates to be represented brings into question the possibility of true universalism (what Boltanski refers to as *conflict of beliefs*). Further, uncertainty grows out of the concern that the roles of unfortunate, persecutor and benefactor can never be impartially assigned (what Boltanski refers to as *avoidance of reference*). From these underlying reservations grows the public’s suspicion as to the authenticity of altruistic and disinterested desires to help (Boltanski’s *opacity of desire*) and doubts as to the possibility to act on reality and actually transform it (Boltanski’s *vanity of intentions*). According to Boltanski, “these uncertainties, which have become platitudes, now serve to bolster, if not the renewal, at least the reinforcement of anti-humanitarian arguments” (ibid). The uncertainties relieve the anxiety, loss of self-esteem and sense of indignity often said to be provoked by witnessing suffering without being able to alleviate it, because criticism of representation can suspend the indignation to the benefit of doubt. In this manner, Boltanski can be understood as placing the source of compassion fatigue not in the moral constitution of the public as such, but in the nature of representation. This interpretation has the crucial implication of preserving a space of possibility for humanitarian action. With its focus on action and agency, contrasted with representation, the AI spot seems to reflect a similar understanding of the organization’s

conditions of existence and appears to not only tap into this space of possibility but to quite explicitly mark out its boundaries.

Constructing a branding spot in the form of a meta-appeal, a communication about the circumstances or conditions of humanitarian appeal, makes it possible for the spot to entirely escape the problems associated with representations of suffering. The audience is not confronted with spectacles of suffering that lay a moral demand on their witnesses, nor is suffering presented on a scene of entertainment and seduction. The spot steers clear of the traditional pity figures and eludes the affective mode typically educed to strengthen the persuasive force of a humanitarian appeal; compassion, and its first descendent, guilt. This maneuver not only brings the spot out of reach of compassion fatigue, but also rejects the sentimentalism and accusations of self-absorption attached to compassion. As we have already seen, the spot evades all of Boltanski's uncertainties and by suppressing the ideology, which forms the system, on the basis of which the roles of victim, persecutor and benefactor are cast, the spot remains ahistorical and apolitical.

5. The problem of action: Beyond compassion fatigue

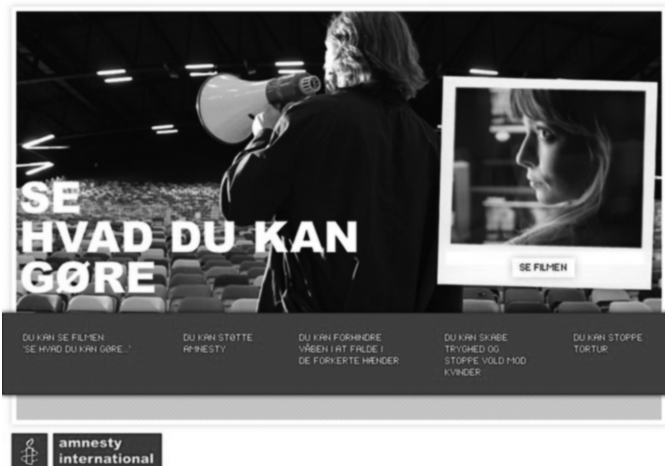
The insistence upon the agency of the individual is essential for an organization such as AI. As described above, action may be viewed as the only means by which the suffering of distant others can be removed from the realm of the fictional and as the sole possibility for circumventing compassion fatigue. As a response to humanitarian appeal, according to Boltanski, the witness has two options for action, paying and speaking. While financial support is clearly necessary for the survival and functioning of humanitarian organizations, from the point of view of the donor, it is a problematic response to suffering. A symbolic exchange of money will in most cases make a very limited difference in the reality of the donor (who these days will in fact not need to physically pull the money out of his purse, but instead signs up for a barely noticeable automatic monthly transferal from his bank account) and so the action can be argued to be on the edge of the real (e.g., Baudrillard 1988). Thus, for the spectator to be offered no other option in response to suffering than paying, could be argued to impede his moral response. The alternative action, speech, has the advantage of constituting public action and, thus, carrying political potential. For speech to be a valid alternative to paying, however, it must be effective speech - that is, speech that is oriented toward action with the intention to alleviate misfortune. It must be embodied, involve the sacrifice of other actions, and testify to a commitment. This view of action is recognizable in the AI spot's invitation for action beyond donation and its attempts to get the audience to draw the cause of the organization out of the sphere of representation and into the life world of the public. This is best exemplified in the clash between

the verbal and the visual as already discussed and in the offer that the spot makes to its audience. The title of the film and its concluding line,

See
what you can
do

which is printed across the screen, plays on the same contrast between seeing and doing, between representation and action. If the audience chooses to follow the invitation to the website, the URL of which is printed on the screen, they are offered the possibility to step out of the spectator role and act.

The invitation to act does not take the form of a request or appeal, but precisely of an invitation. The desire in the audience to support AI's cause is taken for granted, and it is assumed that as long as the public is aware of the possibility and means for action, they will indeed act. In this sense, the spot interpellates the audience as humanitarians. The options for action are not presented in the spot itself. The spot refers to Amnesty's website and so it is up to the individual to decide whether or not to visit the site and make this investment of effort within the space of their own reality. By using the interactive affordances of this medium, AI do not push themselves upon the audience, cry for help or even indicate that they need support. What essentially is an appeal, of course, is presented as an offer. There is no shame, guilt or bad conscience involved. On the website a set of options is presented under the heading 'See what you can do', again with all actions encoded telically, stressing achievement, and rather than using deontic modality, includes the modal 'can', stressing ability and possibility on the part of the audience.



Picture 9: See what you can do webpage

You can watch the film 'See what you can do'
 You can support Amnesty
 You can create security and stop violence against women
 You can stop weapons from falling into the wrong hands
 You can stop torture.

Each of the listed options is a link to a page describing what form of help is offered – all conventional actions as making a donation, volunteering, writing letters to governments (the recipients are named and letters drafted, so one only needs to sign and mail the letter) and signing petitions. Interestingly, however, the concept of signature has developed a new variant. For one campaign, we are offered the option to give our hand-print, for another to provide a photo of ourselves. As well as indicating that the signature is worn out as signifier, they are also invitations to make a manifestation, which is to a greater extent embodied, using our bodies not only as a medium for communication but as communication itself, as the sign itself. Thus, when the audience is invited to write protest letters or provide photos and handprints, this may be done not only as grass root action with the direct aim of preventing the human rights violations, that are the issue of the protest, but also, and perhaps even more so, with the aim of offering the public an opportunity to respond morally, in Boltanski's sense, to their knowledge of suffering and thus provide them with the means to defy compassion fatigue.

6. The problem of rebranding humanitarianism: Fear and morality

The setting of the spot is the privileged, western world, the spectators' neighborhood. Thus, the spot does not ask us to identify with or feel a sense of responsibility for circumstances outside of our own life world. At the same time, although to a certain extent the spot can be said to work in an intellectual mode, it is far from devoid of emotion. As mentioned above, the visual carries an eerie mysteriousness derived from the darkness, from a general sensation of absence, from an invisible threat that seems to be lurking just off screen. This is complemented by the disturbing horror-film audio effects, to produce an overall ill-omened, apprehensive mood. In this manner, the affective mode of the spot is, in fact, fear and it is fear that lends its sense of urgency to the spot. This in and of itself is problematic because fear is by definition self-concerned. Further, the Western setting and the mood combined raise questions as to which type of moral disposition is, indeed, aimed at. It seems clear that there is an intention behind the spot to present the protection of human rights as something relevant outside of the underprivileged communities with which we are accustomed to associate humanitarian action, driven perhaps by a motivation not to cultivate a division between us and 'the others'.

But there is a problematic ambiguity or under-specification in the spot with respect to the basis of the relevance of human rights protection in privileged democratic countries, where they are, after all, relatively rarely violated. The immediate interpretation may understand this by simple reference to the universality of these rights, but the affective mode of the spot introduces an allusion to human rights being under threat in western societies. While the threat alluded to could be interpreted as the threat of the Crisis of Pity, crucially, the spot does not preclude the interpretation that the importance of the protection of human rights derives from *our* human rights, as we enjoy them in the democratic world, being threatened by outside forces. In this interpretation, the protection of human rights, even if it aims at the global scale, is motivated by a desire to protect the structure of our own social order. In this manner, the spot lends itself to, and perhaps even invites, a consequentialist or utilitarian derived sense of human rights, which is based on utility and could be argued to stand in sharp contrast to the moral rights ethics, which is the ideological foundation of Amnesty International.

The ambiguity may reasonably give rise to a concern that what is felt mirrored in the spot is, in effect, the fear that has captured the western public due to recent years' focus on terror, and that the reproduction of this fear is vital in lending the spot emotional appeal. This would mean not only that AI may gain support under false pretences, but also, and most importantly, the spot may simultaneously legitimate such a utilitarian morality through the ethos of Amnesty International. This problem adds another dimension to the avoidance of compassion strategy for humanitarian organizations. While it may be fair to argue that a generalized concern for the other must be produced through some measure of emotional identification (Bellah et al. 1985; MacIntyre 1985), by removing the suffering other from the scene of representation and replacing it with an 'it could happen to you' discourse, the organizations may fall into the trap of articulating humanitarianism in a discourse of egocentricity. When self-concern becomes vehicular for the promotion of human rights, this happens at the risk of widening the gap between us and the other, potentially cultivating the perception of the other as a threat to western civilization and legitimating cultural antagonism.

7. Conclusions

Humanitarian organizations are caught in the dilemma that the development of media discourse on suffering has to some extent undermined the public's sense of social purpose but humanitarian organizations cannot function without relying on the media for the promotion of their cause. Humanitarian organizations must find new ways of using the media to create visibility and compel the public

to act. The unconventional branding spot from Amnesty International testifies to this need, and the strategy behind the spot lets itself understand by reference to Luc Boltanski's notion of a Crisis of Pity in western culture. Rather than addressing the problematic as one of compassion fatigue, thus placing responsibility, guilt and shame on the potential benefactors, AI points to the problem of representation itself and sympathizes with its skeptics. Presupposing both the necessity of social action and the desire in the public to take on responsibility, the focus of the spot is on 'possibility', insisting that there is a reality outside the circle of representation in which social action is possible.

The absence of an explicit ideological stance in the spot renders immensely significant its affective mode because the affective mode carries a presupposition of the appeal's rationale. Inevitably, this emotionality serves not only to draw the attention of the audience, but also to justify the cause in question. The strategies employed to avoid triggering compassion fatigue bring about a need to engage some other affective register than compassion in order for an address to gain persuasive appeal. While compassion is clearly problematic and its substitution justifiable, the introduction of fear as affective drive for the humanitarian appeal introduces a new set of problems.

It seems clear that by participating in consumer culture, as inevitably they must, humanitarian organizations are presented with an enormous challenge. First, if it is inherent to the logic of marketing that consumers must feel their values and ideal identity mirrored in the advertisement, it follows that these advertisements will be more likely to consolidate existing values than offer reasons to modify them. Second, if consumerist logic demands for the advertisement to acknowledge the feelings of the consumer, this 'intimization' of the appeal makes it difficult for a humanitarian organization to place the rationale behind its cause outside of the consumer's desires.

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