

Humanitarian Branding & the Media

The Case of Amnesty International

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Document Version
Final published version

Publication date:
2006

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Citation for published version (APA):
Vestergaard, A. (2006). *Humanitarian Branding & the Media: The Case of Amnesty International*. Department of Intercultural Communication and Management, Copenhagen Business School. Working Paper / Intercultural Communication and Management No. 81

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Humanitarian Branding & the Media. The Case of Amnesty International

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Working paper no 81

Humanitarian Branding & the Media. The Case of Amnesty International

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.

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a professionalisation and commercialisation of the non-profit sector. Modern NGOs today are managed by top executives and draw upon the expertise of consultancy, advertising and communication agencies. One aspect of this commercialisation of NGOs is the increased attention to marketing and the introduction of the concept of branding into the sector. The adoption of commercial strategies such as branding is not unproblematic, however. From an ethical standpoint, the rearticulation of humanitarianism in a discourse of advertising potentially introduces a moral conflict by staging human misery in a field of consumption and entertainment. Furthermore, 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. Most attempts in the literature to define compassion fatigue point to the inaccessibility of action as a prime factor in its development. If the mediated representation of suffering is intrinsically linked to social paralysis, humanitarian organizations are faced with the challenge of fashioning a new strategy by which the media can be used in a morally compelling manner. 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 aim of this paper is to explore how the need for such rebranding is reflected in the branding strategies of Amnesty International (AI) in Denmark. 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. Simultaneously, the affective mode of compassion, 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. It is concluded that the logic of consumerism presents humanitarian organizations with a difficult dilemma because it forces its branding strategies to be oriented toward the consumer's emotionality.

After a brief account of the increasing commercialization of NGOs (section 2), the challenging dilemma facing humanitarian NGOs in creating legitimacy for their cause and mobilizing support from the public is identified (section 3). Then follows a brief outline of the Analytics of Mediation (section 4), which serves as a methodological frame for the analysis of a TV spot from

Amnesty International (section 5). The analysis is followed by a discussion of issues raised by the spot, namely the problem of representation (section 6), the problem of action (section 7) and the problem for the spot's construction of morality connected with the introduction of fear as emotional drive behind the humanitarian appeal (section 8).

2. The Commercialization of NGOs

The world has seen a vast proliferation of Non Governmental Organizations in the past few decades; The global number of NGOs with a social agenda more than quadrupled between the mid 70s and the mid 90s (Keck & Sikkink 1998). In the UK, for example, there were 185,000 registered charities in 1999, and the number continues to rise by as much as 5,000 a year (Sargeant, 1999). In the US, non-profit expenditures grew 77 percent faster than the American economy as a whole between 1977 and 1999 (Foroohar 2005). Of the many and complex causes for this, globalization is commonly acknowledged. Seeking to influence the direction of international public policy, NGOs and humanitarian 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). By holding both private and public sectors accountable, these organizations "are an important part of an explanation for the changes in world politics" (Keck & Sikkink 1998:2). Growing competition in the global market place, most likely, has an equal role to play in a parallel development of the for-profit sector. Not only has the non-profit sector become a billion-dollar business in what Oxfam International executive director, Jeremy Hobbs, calls the 'moral economy'. In recent years, social responsibility is becoming an increasingly important element in the marketing strategies of large business corporations as a means for singling out their products and services in an increasingly competitive global market.

As the number of NGOs grows, their conditions of existence change and their managerial practices are pushed in new directions. The mere number of NGOs that must compete for public attention, donations and government subsidies, bring about new demands for their ability to promote themselves. At the same time, neo-liberal political ideals have put pressure on the public sector and as a consequence, many non-profits have suffered from declining government support (Csaba 2005). Finally, due to numerous scandals in the non-profit sector in the 1990s, as for instance in Rwanda (Polman 2003), NGOs have faced growing demands for accountability and efficiency in their performance. The capacity of organizations to account for their *raison d'etre* and performance is becoming ever more vital in attracting, retaining and meeting expectations of stakeholders. Such factors have lead to a blurring of the distinction between the traditional roles of the for-profit and non-profit sectors and caused a professionalisation and commercialisation of non-profit organizations. Modern NGOs are no longer non-hierarchical grass root structures, but managed by top executives and drawing upon the expertise of consultancy, advertising and communication agencies. One aspect of this commercialisation 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, 2001a:1).

Indeed, some observers agree that the larger NGOs are becoming model exemplary for the commercial industry: "NGOs have become the new sophisticated communicators and perceived instigators of change in the global market place [...] NGOs are no longer perceived as small bands of activists but

rather as new ‘super brands’ surpassing the stature of major corporations, government bodies and even the media among consumers” (Woolliff & Deri 2001).

The introduction of commercial strategies such as branding is not unproblematic. Branding of NGOs is often seen as conflicting with ideals of altruism, voluntarism, democracy and grass root action. The spread of managerial principles and advancement of capitalist logic and consumerism is by many considered a threat to civil society and democracy (Csaba 2005). Moreover, from an ethical standpoint, the rearticulation of humanitarianism in a discourse of advertising, potentially introduces a moral conflict by staging human misery alongside commodities in a field of desire, seduction and consumption, and simultaneously placing it on the scene of entertainment in a sphere of thrill, pass-time and passivity. As formulated by Baudrillard: “We are the consumers of the ever delightful spectacle of poverty and catastrophe, and of the moving spectacle of our own efforts to alleviate it” (Baudrillard 1994: 67). An additional reservation against NGO marketing derives from the fact that the logic of advertising is based on recognition, the reproduction of values in the audience. While the proponents of NGO branding, like those cited above, 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 the logic of recognition and the logic of education or awareness-raising which is a central objective for an organization 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.

3. Rebranding humanitarianism

As the doctrine that all people are entitled to the same respect and dignity and, crucially that all people are obliged to prevent the violation of these moral rights, humanitarian discourse is critically dependent on the media and their ability to bring the misfortune of people in far away places into our living rooms. Increasingly, however, 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). While this condition of indifference towards distant suffering is widely acknowledged, the question remains whether indeed it resides in the moral life world of the spectator or, rather, in the logic of representation, that is, in the process of mediation itself. It is a central question to this paper, and one to which I return below, whether the indifference is an issue of compassion overload, as most would have it, or, rather, a problem of the media themselves? Numerous studies have shown that far from passively absorbing the spectacles put before them, television viewers put to work important critical capabilities, enabling them to distance themselves from spectacles and make inferences about the intentions behind the production other than those manifestly presented in a program. (Liebes & Katz 1989). This critical relationship introduces suspicion, sometimes latent, at other times explicit about the emotions, desires and intentions which accompany representations of suffering.

The majority of the relatively few attempts in the literature to define compassion fatigue as a sociological category point to the inaccessibility of action as a prime factor in the development of compassion fatigue (e.g. Tester 2001; Moeller 1999; di Giovanni 1994). Witnessing human misery lays a moral demand upon us, which we cannot satisfy through direct action when the misery is distant and mediated. Thus, our moral integrity as witnesses depends on the media’s ability to transmit a perception that action is, nonetheless, possible and that the misery we witness is not inalterable and inevitable. In a culture that harbors an ideal of humanitarianism, without the conviction that action is possible, we are left with the option to maintain empathy and compassion at the cost of our self-esteem and sense of dignity, or to detach ourselves from the reality of suffering and suspend compassion. The character of media reports on suffering since the eighties has been widely criticized for creating the impression that the suffering of the developing world is irremediable (e.g. Kinnick et al 1996; Ignatieff 1998). Market

led journalistic practices are held responsible for creating simplistic and formulaic reports on suffering, which point to no causes or solutions, are ephemeral and compete for spectacularity. The relentless occurrence of new, more or less decontextualized instances of suffering flickering through the media perpetuates the perception that as distant witnesses, we can do nothing to alleviate suffering in far away places.

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. 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 infested 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 aim of the paper is to explore how this need for rebranding is reflected in the promotional material of Amnesty International in Denmark. 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.

4. Methodology

Amnesty International 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 (60,000 in Denmark). Further, AI is essentially a political, denunciation-oriented organization, which exercises its power by pressurizing state authorities through international, public exposure. These characteristics taken together make more exacting the challenge of adaptation to consumerist logic for AI and simultaneously make it a pertinent case for a study of the consequences of rearticulating persuasive ethical communication in an advertising discourse. This is an issue of great consequence because the branding strategies of humanitarian organizations 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-a-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 analytics is founded on the basic conviction that rather than necessarily leading to compassion fatigue, mediation, in fact, holds a potential for the cultivation of a disposition of care for and engagement with the distant other and for the creation of a global public with a sense of social responsibility towards distant others.

"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 judgement 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”

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 IA 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’.

5. 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: essentially making monetary donations or writing protest letters to governments on AI’s black list. Contrary to much of the promotional material from AI, this branding campaign and its TV-spot was a national production developed in collaboration with a Danish advertising agency. The branding spot promotes AI independently of specific initiatives and campaigns and does not call for any specific action from its audience. In addition, instead of 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.

5.1. 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

5.1.1. Verbal analysis

The verbal in abstract terms refers to each of the agendas of AI: Their campaign for a global arms trade treaty, their initiatives to free prisoners of conscience and to prevent torture and death penalty. The spot does not, however, say that AI *fights for* the release of political prisoners and *advocates* for weapon control, *lobbies* for human rights, *monitors* the governments' behavior and *pressurizes* 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, presupposes the existence of this group and renders it unquestionable. It also implies that we can identify this group, but avoids actually marking 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.

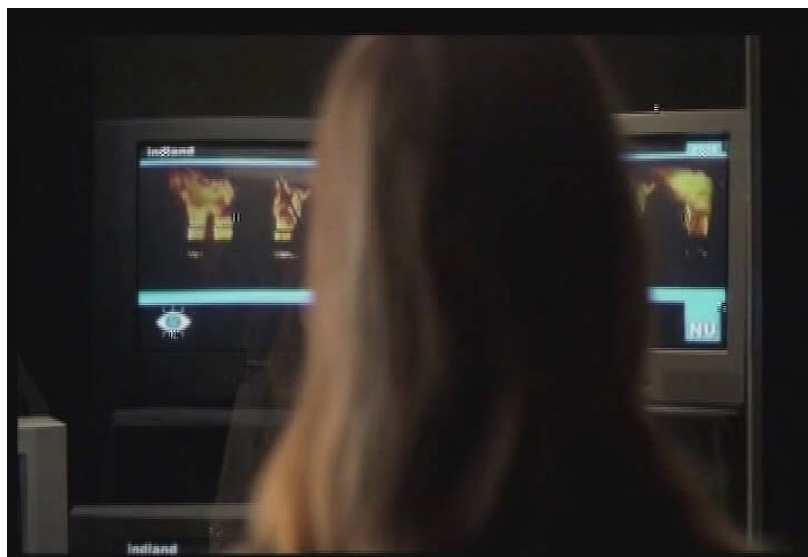
In sum, the verbal of the spot is not preoccupied with sufferers or persecutors, it does not aim for socio-political criticism, nor does it attempt to illustrate or legitimate the ideological foundation of the organization or the morality that underpins it. Instead, the thematic of the spot is limited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

5.2. 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.

Scene 1: They look upon the world with different eyes.



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 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, but 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.

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



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 turning her head to look behind her and the camera dwells on her as she looks motionless into the blurry darkness.

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, double-checking that it is locked. As she closes the door, it gives a hollow, metallic slam, which seems to echo in the stairway. A slam, which 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.

Scene 4: They provide a voice for the silent



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. 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.

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



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

Scene 6: They find those who have disappeared.



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.

Scene 7: They release the innocent



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.

Scene 9: They protect human rights



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.

5.2.1. 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 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. Apart from the image of the burning buildings, each scene 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: observation, communication and locking of doors. Each of these can be argued to comment on different conditions of mediation and make out three discourses in the spot: The discourses of observation (scenes 1 & 2), communication (scenes 4, 5 & 6) and exclusion (scenes 3, 7 & 8).

5.2.1.1. 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.

5.2.1.2. 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 when 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.

5.2.1.3. Exclusion

The two remaining scenes both show doors being locked (7 & 8).. The first shows a woman locking the door of what appears to be her home, the second a guard in an institution, setting an alarm and closing a door before he leaves. This depiction of security as something that is achieved through exclusion 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.

5.3. 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, in the periphery, 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. This works as a gesture of acknowledgement of the conditions of mass communication that tend to frustrate the audience and, by

extension, to the conditions under which humanitarian organizations must operate. Thus, 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.

<p>The Verbal: ACTION Activeness of AI Invitation to act.</p>
<p>The Visual: REPRESENTATION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the observation discourse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -passivity & individuality -commodification of suffering - the communication discourse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -the anonymity of recipient and indeterminacy of attention -the anonymity of addresser and indeterminacy of intention - the exclusion discourse <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the othering effect of mediation

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 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 the syntax they use for describing it.

6. The Problem of Representation: The strategy of the ‘meta-appeal’

In his book “Distant suffering. Morality, Media and Politics” (1999), Luc Boltanski 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 grow 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". 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 the 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 to 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. 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. Moreover, since the spot suppresses the circumstances of misery, that are essentially the dealings of AI, it does not in any explicit way draw these circumstances onto the scene of seduction and entertainment. We have already seen that by means of the objective voice, which speaks for AI in the voiceover, the spot seeks to evade the problematic of Boltanski's '*opacity of desire*'. The meta-appeal, at the same time, enables the spot to manage the skepticism related to Boltanski's '*conflict of belief*' and '*avoidance of reference*'. By excluding the representation of the sufferer, the problematic of selecting the most deserving unfortunates is circumvented. By also avoiding reference to persecutors it avoids triggering the resistance mechanism associated with the audience's awareness that these cannot be objectively and impartially identified. The ideology, which forms the system, on the basis of which such roles are casted, is suppressed and, thus, in this respect, the spot remains ahistorical and apolitical.

7. 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 not even have 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, 1985). 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 and particularly 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 AIs cause is taken for granted, and it is assumed that as long as the public know that it is possible to act and how this can be done, they will. 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'

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 these options is a link to a page describing what form of help is offered. The ‘support amnesty’ option offers the opportunity to make a donation, if one does not have time to work as a volunteer, for moral and financial support. The other options offer to do volunteer work, write letters to governments (the recipients are named and letters drafted, so one only needs to sign and mail the letter) and provide signatures. Thus, the opportunities to help are conventional and uncontroversial. Interestingly, however, the concept of signature has developed a new variant. For the ‘stop violence against women campaign’, we are offered the option to give our hand-print, for the ‘control arms’ campaign to provide a photo of ourselves. These manifestations of support are not only indications that the signature is worn out and voided of content. They are also invitations to make a manifestation, which is to a greater extent embodied, using our bodies not only to 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 is 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.

8. 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. In combination, the setting and the mood of the spot raise questions as to which 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 in part 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 explain 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 stands 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 after the attacks on the WTC and the subsequent

declaration of War 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 the us and the other, potentially cultivating the perception of the other as a threat to western civilization and legitimating cultural antagonism.

9. Conclusion

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, still, humanitarian organizations cannot function without relying on the media for the promotion of their cause. Humanitarian organizations must, then, 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. Instead, humanitarian organizations may perpetuate a tendency for us to let emotionality set the frame for how we conceive of the world.

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