Between Morality and the Market:The Circulation of Humanitarian Photography

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What kind of thing, morally speaking, is an image of suffering? Going beyond questions of representation, we here focus on the creation and circulation of such imagery to ask what we can learn about the ethics of images by examining the contexts and norms within which these move around. Using a 2022 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) controversy as its case study, we highlight the quality of humanitarian images as moral practice and trace three moral tensions that emerge as images circulate within and beyond humanitarian spaces. Through this discussion, we make three contributions to our understanding of the circulation of humanitarian images. We contribute to the recognition of the implicit norms governing not just the content of images but also their circulation and use; the identification of a dual economy of image circulation: a moral economy and a market economy that both come to shape these norms; and, the observation that the ongoing rivalry between these two economies renders the norms of image circulation increasingly antagonistic in ways that threaten to undermine the very quality of humanitarian images as moral practice.

Keywords: *humanitarianism, photography, moral economy, marketization, case study, Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF*

What kind of thing, morally speaking, is an image of suffering? Distinct from asking semiotic questions of how images of suffering represent their subjects or the discursive effects of humanitarian imagery, what can we learn about debates over the creation and circulation of the images themselves?

In May of 2022, the humanitarian organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) found themselves the subject of angry debates over a series of images taken at one of their clinics in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Taken by a photographer affiliated to the Magnum photographic collective, Newsha Tavakolian, the series included two identifiable images of a 16-year-old girl described as having been gang raped by three armed men. Tavakolian claimed that the organization did not "highlight the fact that I was never told not to take images of minors. It simply was never discussed" (Batty 2022a, para. 8).

Part of public anger concerned the cliché reproduction of the DRC as a context defined by sexual violence (Autesserre, 2012), but a much larger portion of public ire was directed not at what the images were of, but the ethics of their production and circulation. An open letter to MSF's Board organized by documentarian Benjamin Chesterton calling for a child protection inquiry into MSF began by voicing concern that MSF had "commissioned, published and profited from photos that endanger or exploit children" and was signed by a number of academics and practitioners (MSF Child Protection Inquiry Letter, 2022, para. 2). At the heart of the letter's critique of MSF were three alleged moral failings of the organisation: The *impropriety* of the organisation publishing images of vulnerable patients on its own website and marketing materials, the circulation of humanitarian images on stock photography websites, and *double standards* being applied around the privacy and dignity of vulnerable subjects in "overseas" (majority world) locations.

Anger over the commercialisation of humanitarian images on stock art websites burned especially brightly. The open letter to MSF noted that an image of "a 14-year-old child who turns up at an MSF clinic within hours of being allegedly gang raped, photographed whilst seeking treatment for internal injuries and HIV preventative drugs" (MSF Child Protection Inquiry letter, 2022, para. 10) was available on Getty

Images (a major stock art reseller) for £375. One could also purchase a home wall print of a "boy [crying] while suffering from cholera at an MSF care center in Monrovia"[1] for only £87.

Debates that concern the ethical norms of communicating images of suffering have already enjoyed a long history in the world of humanitarian campaigning (Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015; Wells, 2013; Wilkinson, 2013), touching on major NGOs like MSF (Givoni, 2011, 2011b; Gorin, 2021; Moore, 2015) and also on institutions of photojournalism[2] such as the renowned agency Magnum that Tavakolian was affiliated with. Magnum, for instance, had already been the subject of a similar scandal when it emerged that it had been licensing images from its archive—including images of child survivors of sexual assault—on stock art websites, wherefrom they appeared to have been purchased or copied by paedophiles (Day, 2022). Over 10 years earlier, the photojournalism collective VII and its affiliated photojournalist Ron Haviv faced similar criticism after licensing an image taken in Afghanistan to arms manufacturer Lockheed Martin for the purposes of selling precision guided missiles (duckrabbit, 2012).

What these ongoing debates highlight is the unresolved—and possibly unresolvable—complexities involved in communicating human suffering as a cause for

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[1] MSF Child Protection Inquiry Letter, 2022, para. 2

[2] The emergence of specific codes of conduct in humanitarian photojournalism originated in reactions to depictions of the Ethiopian famine in 1984/85 in print and televised media—see, for instance, Ignatieff (1986). As a result, many NGOs in Europe produced such codes for photographers in the field and developed rules and guidelines for the kinds of imagery that the humanitarian sector and individual NGOs should circulate. See, for instance, Van der Gaag and Nash (1987), adopted by the General Assembly of European NGOs meeting in Brussels in April 1989; see also Lidchi (2015).

action. Whereas, so far, emphasis has fallen on the communicative dimension of *representing* suffering, that is how humanitarian portrayals of suffering de-humanize and "other" the global South (Dean, 2015; Fehrenbach & Rodogno, 2015), there is less work done on the dimension of *disseminating* suffering. This is the dimension of humanitarian communication that interrogates how images of suffering are ethically bound up with the circumstances of their subjects and the environments in which they circulate in ways that can both realize or undermine their potential to function morally and politically (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Gregory, 2006; Moeller, 2002; Nissinen, 2015). And it is this oft-overlooked dimension that we turn our attention to in this paper.

Humanitarian Images, the Civil Contract and Moral Norms

Our own starting point in approaching the dimension of dissemination is Ariella Azoulay's (2008) argument on photography as a "civil contract." Azoulay (2008) claims that photography works as an uninvited form of social commitment, which presents its viewing publics with the obligation to consider a response to the atrocities they witness, even if these publics' response is ultimately to not engage with the atrocity—"the specter of aversion, recoil, and numbness" being always one among many possibilities of response in the photographic encounter (Dean, 2015, p. 239). This unpredictability of response has to do with the network of contexts and actors involved in the making of the photograph, from the photographer and those photographed to their mediating bodies (be these an NGO, the press or a photo-bank agency) to those who consume it in different contexts and for different purposes. If unpredictability, then, highlights that the moral, political effects that humanitarian photography depend on more than the image itself, including the circumstances of its creation, the forms of its circulation and the contexts of its presentation, the idea of the "civil contract" draws attention to the fact that these very effects still create a commitment between the custodians of the image and its subject—a commitment that serves as a justification for the existence of the image as something other than voyeurism or exploitation.

Azoulay's (2008) interest in the contractual capacity of photography lies in the ways in which photography acts in and on the world by confronting us with each other's predicaments of violence, harm and suffering and so helps us nurture our "civil

imagination"—a concept she defines as an active interest in and commitment to the world beyond ourselves. We share Azoulay's (2008) view of photographic images as agentive objects and, as we have argued elsewhere, it is this agentive capacity that renders photography a distinct form of moral practice that has the potential to inform collective dispositions to emotion and action towards the world around it (Chouliaraki, 2006; Stupart, 2020). Nonetheless, we are not here intending to weigh in on prescriptive questions of how these images ought to have been created or circulated. Rather, we are interested in the general interplay of such agentive objects and the moral norms that underlie them—norms embedded not only in the objects themselves but also in the network of actors involved in their production, circulation and use.

Our analysis of the three criticisms presented in the MSF case is meant, in this sense, to excavate and make explicit the existence of these moral norms and to interrogate how they are negotiated in their specific contexts of image production and circulation.[3] Starting from this controversy, we ask: What does each of its three forms of criticism, relating to *the subjects of the photograph*, *the purposes of humanitarian photography* and *the social relations wherein it occurs*, reveal about the norms of humanitarian photography? If these images must be managed in specific ways in order to be accepted by particular publics, what does it mean to create a "good" humanitarian

[3] This is a "phronetic" type of analysis that takes as its starting point one single case study of the "critical" category, that is an outlier case arising out of extraordinary circumstances, such as the relatively rare MSF scandal, which can generate a wealth of information on the phenomenon under examination (Flyvebjerg, 2006, p. 230). The Aristotelian assumption behind "phronetic" research is that each case comprises a set of context-specific practices that, despite appearing in their singularity within the case, nonetheless reflect social norms that exceed the case and describe more generalized or "universal" patterns that govern practices in a variety of other cases. For a detailed discussion of the value of case studies from a "phronetic" perspective, see Flyvbjerg (2001, 2006).

image within institutional humanitarianism? And what (or who) do practices of making morally good images create besides the images themselves?

This type of analysis is twofold. It is directed at formulating a normative conception of the humanitarian image as *a form of moral practice* that participates in and obeys institutional rules of image circulation—stemming from Azoulay's (2008) *agentive* capacities of the image; and, at the same time, it is directed at making a larger observation about how market-driven transformations in the character of international humanitarianism and photojournalism have led to a potentially irresolvable tension between the normative power of images and their increasingly corporate character. These transformations are by no means new as capitalism and humanitarianism have historically developed in tandem and, since at least the turn of the 20th century, humanitarian organizations (as well as earlier missionary organizations) have been selling their images of suffering to the public and to press for fundraising (Grant, 2015; Skinner & Lester, 2012). Indeed, capitalist relations, fundraising drives, organizational branding, and even marketing departments within philanthropic organizations have existed for well over a century now. Yet, what we argue is that the normative and market imperatives of humanitarianism may have today crystallized into distinct "visual cultures"[4] and that the tensions we observe between the two may go beyond the capacity of institutional humanitarianism to repair.

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[4] In line with cultural analytical and anthropological work, we use the term "visual cultures" to refer to "the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the [visual] world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities" (Cartwright & Sturken, 2009, p. 3). It is in the sense that market and moral economies are informed by distinct "shared practices," respectively interest-driven action (monetary or reputational profit) and disinterested benevolence (helping vulnerable strangers), that we believe the two may have now substantially diverged from one another.

In addressing these questions, we do not aspire to put forward a judgment of the norms by which an image of the sort that Tavakolian or Magnum created ended up as commercial stock photography—though judgment is inevitable in any narrative that grapples with ethics. Instead, we wish to point to the issue of power that connects the norms of humanitarian photography with the past and the present of global geo-political relations, and to argue that we need to be aware of how these power relations inform the norms of image circulation and valuation even as the latter is invested in the rhetoric of benevolence and justice. The more we know about how doing moral work also does power relations, the more we might find ourselves in a position to do this work better, that is in ways that primarily benefit not the most powerful, but rather the most vulnerable actors in the humanitarian space: those who are photographed as subjects of humanitarian emotion and action.

Our argument begins with an account of what we mean when we talk of (humanitarian) images as moral practices entangled in global relations of power and, in light of this account, it proceeds with a reflexive interrogation of the three main criticisms of the MSF image, what we call the criticisms of *dehumanization*, *commodification*, and *neo-colonization*. In conclusion, we formulate our own heuristics of humanitarian photography as moral practice—a tentative proposal for the systematic scrutiny of the values at play with specific networks of image production and circulation within the humanitarian space.

Humanitarian Images as Moral Practices

The thesis we are putting forward is that humanitarian images operate as moral practices on two counts: insofar as they intervene in the world as normative acts of civil imagination inviting dispositions of thinking, feeling and acting towards vulnerable others; and, by this token, insofar as their cycle of production, circulation and consumption is also perceived to be regulated by similar norms of civil conduct oriented towards the protection of the vulnerable. For instance, by cultivating certain attachments to or evaluations of images, we are disposed to say such things as, “this image should not have been created in this way” or “this image should not be shared in this way or within this space.” Regular controversies about the taking of personal

images at Holocaust memorials and their inappropriate use as dating profile pics highlight the difficulty in separating these two levels of normativity, the level of representing and the level of creating/circulating images of suffering—though such controversies may go beyond images of atrocity and encompass the protection of other categories of sharing vulnerable subjects' intimate images, such as children or medical patients (Albury & Crawford, 2012; Hessler, Grant-Kels, & Farshchian, 2021; Rose, 2010).

At the heart of such controversies lies the question of power. The humanitarian photograph, after all, is not simply a product of an egalitarian set of relationships in which the photographer, their photographic subject and a humanitarian communications officer are equally credited. Rather, all of these are embedded in the geopolitical and institutional relations of global governance systems. From the professional photographer and the agency they work for to the NGO that commissions and authorizes the image to the media platforms through which it reaches their publics, the institutional networks of image production, authorization and circulation are largely located in the global North and tend to distribute the rewards and praise of the work unequally in ways that foreground the work of NGOs and their photographers at the expense of those photographed—who often remain unnamed and voiceless (Chouliaraki, 2006; Malkki, 1996).

This inequality has roots in the ambivalent legacy of humanitarian photography not only as a practice of civil imagination, as we have already argued, but also as a tool of social domination. As a practice of civil imagination, the humanitarian image has historically emerged as a radical genre of awareness-raising whose portrayals of suffering "constitute a claim," as Thomas Laqueur and Francine Masiello (2007) put it, "to be regarded, to be noticed, to be seen as images of someone to whom one has ethical obligations" (p. 9). As a tool of social domination, humanitarian photography has simultaneously been complicit with practices of western colonialism either in the ways that it represented non-western populations as exotic objects of contemplation and powerless victims in-need of rescue (Haskell, 1985) or in the ways in which it has introduced new techniques of closely monitoring and surveying dominated populations (Hight & Sampson, 2013). In other words, its moral commitment to witnessing

suffering with the aim to alleviate human pain in battlefields, refugee camps, famine-ridden communities and disaster zones has its own effects of symbolic violence in that humanitarian photography often objectifies, "others" and orientalizes those who it claims to care for.

It is not only the past, however, but also the present of humanitarian photography that sustains these relations of power. Specifically, power is inextricably linked with the rapid professionalization of the humanitarian field, which, in the past thirty years, turned a relatively medium-size charity and activist sector into a global industry of international organizations with their own market-driven priorities of NGO branding and cause-based marketing—what Alexander Cooley and James Ron (2002) call the neoliberal "marketization" of the sector. Together with the growth of stock image banks, where photographers now compete with one another over economic benefits and professional branding (Gürsel, 2016), increasingly commercialized networks of humanitarian photography may still contribute to boosting moral practices of civil imagination, but they also subject participants to their own business calculations over who should benefit and how from such photography. Photojournalists increasingly move between humanitarian and "news" roles for economic reasons (Wright, 2016a), and commercial newsrooms find themselves depending on humanitarian media for economic reasons as much as principled ones (McPherson, 2016; Wright, 2016b). And while there are clear mutual benefits for these two stakeholders, with photographers "highly value[ing] the deep knowledge that NGOs have of the environments […] they are interested in shooting" and NGOs gaining "'from the cultural capital accrued from the authorial or brand-name recognition of the photographer or [photo]agency'" (Dencik & Allan, 2017, p. 5), it is less clear how exactly those who are photographed benefit from these increasingly marketized transactions.

Moving up a level of abstraction, if we think of humanitarian photography as moral practice that intervenes in the social world by bringing together different contexts, actors and norms (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 2004) then photography cannot be seen to serve a single purpose; for instance, used to exclusively engage publics with witnessing pain or only employed as a branding tool for an NGO or a professional photographer. Instead, it should be seen as an ambivalent practice that fuses its various

contexts together and so serves multiple purposes, each with their own competing norms; as, for instance, is the case in consumerist humanitarianism or post-humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2013) and commodity activism (Banet-Weiser & Mukerjee, 2012). Put otherwise, the humanitarian image is entangled in a dual economy of image production, circulation and consumption: on the one hand, a *moral economy* (Sayer, 2007; Wright, 2016b) that trades on the *epistemic value* of the image, that is its capacity to *make instances of suffering known* to publics of the global North so as to nurture civil imaginations of emotion and action, what we earlier called the value of *witnessing*; and, on the other hand, a *market economy* that trades on the *economic value* of photography as a commodity generating large profits for the key stakeholders of the global humanitarian system: the NGO sector, the photographer and the agency through which their work is sold. Whether this is financial profit or enhanced branding for those actors, the economic value of the humanitarian image potentially sits uncomfortably with its moral value, and it is the tensions between the two that the MSF controversy illuminates. We next discuss these tensions and the norms that inform them with reference to the three criticisms addressed to the organization.

The Three Criticisms of MSF's Photography

The first criticism addresses the ways in which two photographs of a teenage rape survivor at an MSF clinic in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) appeared on its website without parental consent or concern for her safety, despite ongoing risks in the region. While the manner of representation, "posed lying on her back, staring blankly up at the ceiling" (MSF Child Protection Inquiry Letter, 2022, para. 4) in an MSF clinic, compromised the dignity of the survivor, the act of representing a child survivor without due process betrayed both her right to anonymity and to protection from reprisal. In doing this, the MSF imagery undermined the survivor's status as a rights-bearing human being, and it is in this sense that we speak of *dehumanization*[5] in the first criticism of the case. While the NGO eventually took down the pictures,

[5] We use the term "dehumanization" here in something like Kate Manne's (2017) sense of being less morally entitled (in this case to things like dignity or privacy; p. 133) and, as a result, less (morally) "like us."

recognizing that it was “a misjudgement … to publish identifiable pictures of a minor who had been through this experience” (Batty 2022c, para. 3), dehumanization points to two adjacent harms that the humanitarian image can inflict on the vulnerable actors it depicts. On the one hand, it reproduces orientalist stereotypes of the vulnerable actor as a powerless victim passively lying down in a clinic bed—a stereotype that has long been problematized in the social sciences (e.g., Cohen, 2001); and, on the other, it disrespects the right of vulnerable actors (or in this case their legal guardians) to sovereign decision-making regarding the publication of the images—a disrespect that, in the context of war, further highlights a failure to uphold the NGO’s own constitutional commitment to care for the safety of their patients.

Even if this dual criticism of dehumanization makes sense from the perspective of the moral economy of humanitarianism, where dignity and consent are cornerstones of their practice, the market economy of humanitarianism can nonetheless legitimize, if not encourage, these choices on the basis of its own set of interests and priorities. Photographs of children-in-need, often in emaciated or distressed states, may be heavily criticized among advocacy practitioners, but fund-raising departments within NGOs still prefer to use them over other types of photographs because of their capacity to inspire empathy, increase donations and benefit the finances of the agency: “Fundraising and marketing professionals,” as Orgad’s (2013) research has shown,

> tend towards stressing the gravity of the need and favor the so called ‘negative imagery’ of ‘emaciated children’ and ‘flies-in the-eyes’ (catchphrases used repeatedly by interviewees when referring to this representational paradigm)” and “to support this visual preference, [they] often cite data from both in-house research and external sources (e.g., market and academic research). (p. 300)

Nonetheless, while resistance to dehumanizing subjects remains a core part of the moral commitment NGOs make to the vulnerable actors and communities they work with, Dencik and Allan (2017) note that “the pressure to generate images for fundraising can sometimes risk jeopardizing considerations for the communities in question, even threatening to undermine [NGO’s] customary ethical commitments” (p. 12). The criticism of dehumanization, to summarize, throws into relief the first tension

of humanitarian photography within the contemporary NGO sector, namely how fund-raising and marketing pressures on the content and circulation of such photography can potentially end up compromising the dignity and consent of vulnerable subjects.

The second criticism, that of *commodification*, relates to the circulation of MSF imagery of suffering children beyond the strictly humanitarian contexts of the NGO's websites or appeals and into general-purpose stock image libraries: "A boy cries while suffering from cholera at an MSF care center in Monrovia," states the caption. "Yours to buy as a fine art canvas wall print. £87" (MSF Child Protection Inquiry Letter, 2022, para. 10) as the open letter to MSF put it. This relocation of the imagery of a child-in-need from the domain of humanitarian witnessing to that of commodified art places under scrutiny another, albeit converging, set of moral norms of humanitarian photography. At the heart of this scrutiny lies the unwarranted exposure of the child's body stripped as it is of any context and purpose beyond its function as an object of artistic contemplation. By turning the body into a means to an end rather than treating it as an end in itself, by "objectifying" it in Nussbaum's (1995) words, commodification points to two further harms that the humanitarian image inflicts on vulnerable bodies. On the one hand, it indicates a disrespect of the intrinsic value of bodies-in-need as entities to be cared for in line with medical ethics (Le Morvan & Stock 2005) in favour of the financial norm of extracting economic value from them: "MSF says it offers free medical care for all," as the MSF open letter succinctly puts it, "but the price these children paid was for their trauma to be sold in stock libraries over which MSF has no control" (MSF Child Protection Inquiry Letter, 2022, para. 13). On the other hand, it positions the publics of the humanitarian image no longer as witnesses but as "voyeurs," that is as consumers of a spectacle oriented towards aesthetic appreciation rather than an empathetic understanding of the person-in-need (Boltanski, 1999; Dean, 2015).

Central to this second tension of humanitarian photography then is a conflict between the moral economy of humanitarianism, where the redeeming of human suffering figures as the sector's ultimate purpose, and its market economy, where a competing logic of profit and of photographs as commodities is becoming increasingly dominant; in the words of Dencik and Allan (2017) again, "where previously major photo agencies […] 'mythologized photojournalism as a means of informing the public

and bearing witness to injustices and atrocities,' their recent corporatisation into global 'visual content providers' has signalled a marked shift in priorities" (p. 1). This process of corporatization involves, among others, complex negotiations between the stakeholders of humanitarian photography, including NGOs, photographers and their agencies over the terms in which images of suffering can be re-purposed and re-circulated for profit. Licensing agreements are key to these negotiations, for instance, in that they recognize images as the intellectual property of the photographer and permit various companies to legally re-use their photographs in their own databases, websites, social media, campaigning materials etc. While this is not always the case, as for instance, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFCR, 2012) guidelines clearly states that "images may NOT be used for: general advertising and marketing of your organization; annual reports; advocacy campaigns" (p. 21), in fact, typing MSF

> "into any of the world's major stock libraries" means that "you will discover tens of thousands of images for sale (Getty Images and Alamy alone claim over 19000). Many are of children taken in clinics that can be bought, repurposed and attached to any cause by any organization. (MSF Child protection Inquiry, 2022, para 7.)

The criticism of commodification, in this sense, threw into relief this profit-driven political economy of photography and, within it, the normative instability of humanitarian photographs—suspended as these are between their moral commitment to respect and protect vulnerable humanity and the industry's drive to aestheticize and extract value from suffering bodies.

The third and final criticism, that of *neo-colonization*, brings the previous two criticisms together in a comparative frame to ask whether "MSF's western staff apply a different set of ethical standards and legal protections to the patients they treat overseas than the patients they treat at home?" Implicit in this comparison between "home" and "overseas" is the geo-political legacy of inequality between global North and South that reflects and, to an extent, reproduces historical relations of domination between the two—the term neo-colonization referring precisely to those structures and practices of continuing, albeit always mutating, appropriation, exploitation and othering

of the South by the North (e.g., Ciocchini & Greener, 2021; Stoler, 2016). Questions around the dignity, consent and protection of those photographed highlight discrepancies in the photographic representation of vulnerable bodies between the two and point to the dehumanization of non-western and non-White "others" as a major consequence of these double standards. MSF has since announced that it "had tightened its guidelines on photographing vulnerable minors" and that it introduced "new rules" on "informed consent" for anyone below 18 years old (Batty, 2022c, para. 2), thereby adhering with the norms already in operation across the NGO sector. Yet, as recent controversies suggest, this flexible application of such norms reveals a structural continuity between earlier colonial and neo-colonial regimes of power that still today work to sustain hierarchies of place and human life (Chouliaraki, 2024). The existence of such hierarchies was further thrown into relief in the second criticism of the MSF case, namely the selling of photographs of human vulnerability on a stock art site. Casting the shift of humanitarian photography from a pedagogic act of civil imagination to an instrumental act of profiteering from human suffering, this criticism highlighted that the fundamental asymmetry at the heart of the photographic encounter is as much an interpersonal one between the photographer and the photographic subject as it is a geo-political one.

For if, in the moral economy of humanitarianism, geo-political hierarchies manifest in the form of a photographic encounter where the depiction of a subject-in-need by a photographer is meant to contribute to alleviating the suffering of the class of people to whom the subject belongs—without offering dividends from the profit economy of humanitarianism to the subject itself—this photographic encounter is unsettled by the questions of "Who profits? Who donates?" Through this lens, the encounter no longer resembles a collaboration of photographer and subject that may generate political or economic resources for others in need but a transaction that works mostly in favor of accruing financial and reputational benefits to a constellation of market actors. Specifically, those connected to the networks of image production and circulation: the photographer, the humanitarian agency, the gallery, etc. Missing from this list of those to whom the humanitarian image provides value is its subject. And it is this absence that most clearly throws into relief the synergy between the geo-political hierarchies and the profit economy of the sector. This is a synergy wherein the photographic

encounter is more of a donation *by the subject of the image* (of their time and their suffering) for the benefit of others, many of whom benefit purely by virtue of occupying more powerful positions than the subject not only in the market but also in the geo-political economies that lie behind the lens. Cynically speaking, the only person in this encounter whose involvement is purely an uncompensated donation to the betterment of others is the photographed subject. “We will also seek to limit the commercial sale of [these] media assets and ensure appropriate access restrictions on their usage” (Batty 2022b, para. 17), MSF has since said. This is an important step forward, but one that needs to occur while keeping in mind that the restrictions regulating the circulation of the humanitarian image are not only legal or technical but also moral. Indeed, what the criticism of neo-colonialization brings into view is perhaps the most fundamental normative tension of humanitarian photography: Even the caring image comes to exploit and enrich along familiar lines of power.

Conclusion: Moral Practices, Commercial Practices

The purpose of this discussion is not to criticize the media ethics of MSF, or other humanitarian organizations and media workers who do the kind of work we discuss here. Rather, to reiterate, we’re interested in what the fact of a public debate over MSF’s image use can tell us about the norms and power relations by which the creation and circulation of humanitarian images is governed. That is, in the spirit of phronetic research, the fact that there *was* a public outcry points to the transgression of a normative framework, and it is this framework, now revealed, whose structures and tensions we have attempted to sketch out more clearly.

We proposed thinking of humanitarian photographs as *moral practices*—practices whose creation and circulation are held to a normative framework that, it its heart, is humanitarian in nature. That is, it values adherence to a universal, cosmopolitan idea of human dignity, the treatment of people as ends rather than means, and a principled commitment to resisting domination and exploitation. Alongside this idea of humanitarian images as moral practices, we pointed out that these images have lives within commercial practices, situated in an altogether different and potentially incompatible moral universe. As commercial practices, they participate in circuits of

financial exchange without (non-economic) moral conditions and, as such, they can be treated as private intellectual property that may (indeed, ought) to generate economic and other value for market actors involved in their exchange. In our discussion, we have largely focused on the role of stock art sites as marketplaces for humanitarian images as commercial practices on the basis that this was a central concern for the MSF case, yet the arguments we have developed here may transfer to other contexts—the art gallery, the social media timeline, for example. In these other domains, the rules of exchange and the forms of value obtained in transactions may shift in particular ways, but the broader normative logic of the image as commercial object would—we suspect—remain largely accepted.

Where the humanitarian image finds itself participating in these two economies simultaneously, its dual status as both a moral practice and an economic practice produces, as we have shown, at least three points of tension. In the first, what it may be rational (or indeed, normatively "good") to do with an image for commercial, fundraising purposes may be morally unacceptable for humanitarian moral purposes, due to the *dehumanizing* practices of production it entails. In the second, a humanitarian ethics understands suffering others as *ends rather than means*, insofar as individual suffering ought to be prevented or ended, not made use of for other purposes. From the point of view of market logic, however, the image of a sufferer may unproblematically be put to work as a means to other ends, whether humanitarian (a campaign fundraising advert), aesthetic (the framed print at an exhibition) or economic (photographer royalties). For humanitarian ethics, it matters who, specifically, is suffering and why. In the market this is irrelevant—it matters only whether an image is functional. Will it generate clicks and likes? Is it beautiful? Will it sell? In the third tension, we have argued that asking to whom the value of the humanitarian image accrues reveals practices of humanitarian photography as all too often *neocolonial*, in the sense that they are enacted under conditions of inequality and domination that largely serve to create value for actors and organizations involved in image-making and circulation. This value is generated at the expense of the subjects of images through processes of image making that essentially give the subject no claim to the image of their own pain.

These tensions between (humanitarian) moral and market economies of images are of a kind that may not be easy to reconcile—not least because the norms of the image as a commercial object may inevitably tend towards facilitating exploitation (from the point of view of humanitarian ethics) and be unable to accommodate commitments to photographic subjects as ends. Put otherwise, the normative "goodness," "appropriateness," or "usefulness" of the image depends on the moral economy in which it is circulating and, in this sense, judgement on these values is as much about asserting the normative force of a particular moral economy as it is about determining some quality of the image.[6]

Given the increasing incompatibility of thinking humanitarian images as moral and commercial practices, we would close with two final observations. In the first, it is not clear that these diverging normative frameworks can be reconciled without one or the other undergoing a radical shift, and it is unclear that the existing arrangement of international humanitarianism could survive this. A major shift in humanitarian ethics that would accommodate a commercial logic would undermine the basic moral claims

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[6] In her colonial critique of how the Andean world has been received in European visual cultures, Deborah Poole (1997) similarly discusses points of incompatibility between different "visual cultures," albeit not institutional, as in our case, but historical and anthropological. Poole makes the methodological point that, in order to understand the value of the image within each culture, say the family portrait (intimate photography) vs the postcard (market photography), we need to pay attention to the often incompatible "economies of vision" at work in each culture; that is, we need to look into "the forms of ownership, exchange, accumulation and collection that characterize particular image forms as material objects" (p. 12). It is in this sense, we similarly argue, that professional humanitarianism is currently operating across two distinct visual cultures, whose economies of vision attached the humanitarian image to incompatible normative sensibilities.

on which international humanitarianism was founded and continues to legitimize itself. A major shift in the rules around the commercial logic of media forms might threaten the economic structures that allowed humanitarian organizations to become international in the first place. Our second observation would be to point out that, despite a pessimism about the possibility of fully and finally reconciling images as moral and commercial objects, describing the tensions and their potential outcomes is itself a kind of progress. As the discussion around the MSF case made, clear, questions around practices of image making and circulation can lead to specific, practical discussions. For example, who has a right to the value created by the humanitarian image? Where and how ought it to be circulated and who should determine this process? And is the structure of contemporary humanitarian media work in fact possible if it were to be bound more tightly by norms of witnessing? These questions do not have easy answers, but it is progress of a kind to make the asking of them a part of the conversation.

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