

**Heide Fehrenbach/Daive Rodogno (eds.), *Humanitarian Photography. A History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York etc. 2015, xx + 345 pp., paperback, 22.99 £, also available as an e-book.**

Today, visual products of humanitarianism are omnipresent – victims of war, natural calamities, famine, poverty and other atrocities are featured in, among other things, newspapers, books, leaflets, and billboards. Nonetheless, Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno's anthology »Humanitarian Photography« is the »first to investigate how humanitarian photography emerged and how it operated in diverse political, institutional, and social contexts«, examining »the historical genealogies, evolution, and epistemologies of what today we call ›humanitarian photography« (p. 1).

While the term »humanitarian photography« has only been in use since the 1990s – that is about a century after the earliest confirmed yet incidental photographic documentation of a person by Louis Daguerre – pictorial depiction of human suffering and adversity dates back much further. The intentional, artistic representation of unrighteousness against human beings had already been fully developed during the abolitionism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, i.a., in the works of James Gillray and Josiah Wedgwood. This tradition was continued and updated in similar contexts, not least in the documentation of the mistreatment of African-American slaves during the Civil American War.

In its early years, an aura of immediateness, truthfulness and credibility accompanied photographic depictions. Its informative potential was used by early ›muckraker‹ excursions of photographers, like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, who shed light on stories of human suffering within the boundaries of their own society. Subsequently, »social documentary photography« found an institutionalized peak in the Depression era when the Farm Security Administration initiated a photography programme about the poverty-stricken Northern American Great Plains and employed (now) famous photographers – amongst them Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange – who produced visual material for public education and press information. Already in these cases, photography was used as a means not only to document but also raise awareness of issues that were beyond the common range of experience. Unfortunately, in this volume, these early photographic ›activists‹ are granted no more than a cursory mention; their involvement in the development of a (programmatically) critical and explorative photography remains notably unfathomed.

By way of introduction, the editors Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno situate their volume as an intellectual combination of studies of visual culture and humanitarianism. Beyond the ›Western spectator‹, implicit in the current discussion of photography, the editors path the way for a perspective deconstruction of the still Eurocentric approach to humanitarian photography.

Heather D. Curtis investigates the controversy and ethical debates surrounding the depiction of famine in 19<sup>th</sup> century India in the internationalization of Christian humanitarianism, concluding that the »aid industry« today still has not resolved questions of the »ethics of representation« (p. 44).

Christina Twomey discusses two case studies at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the British relief campaign concerning Indian famine and the Congo Reform Association. Analyzing the shaping of the atrocity discourse by the application of visual or textual material, she demonstrates how this process of educating the public via pictorial representation resulted in the stimulation of empathy and sympathy as well as a necessary distance to those suffering.

Kevin Grant sheds light on the negotiation of social mores in the public presentation of the »Congo atrocities«. Utilizing photographic evidence to expose misdeeds in particular of the Belgian regime, improvements brought about by the Congo Reform Movement and evangelical missionaries were emphasized. This not only reproduced gender roles relating to both indigenous and ›whites‹ involved in the production of the images but also the social diversification of the British spectators.

Peter Balakian compares the visual culture of amateur war photographers and humanitarian photographers, documenting the aftermath of the First World War in the Near East. Pictorial representations drew on religious tropes and turned emaciated and destitute women into »pop culture figures« (p. 105) that catered to mass market audiences in Western cultures.

Caroline Reeves follows the history of the Chinese Red Cross movement in the context of a long-standing tradition of illustrating catastrophes and the thousand-year-old tradition of »mutual aid societies« (p. 118), whose campaign – other than the Western focus on suffering – centred on identification with the aid-givers.

Francesca Piana also examines the use of photography and film in the Chinese Red Cross movement. She identifies a shift, increasing after 1945, towards the depiction of children as »targets of humanitarian organizations' visual campaigns« (p. 156) and the transformation of humanitarianism into a »mass marketing venture« (p. 158) supplying an international audience.

In the same vein, Heide Fehrenbach presents a long-term historical perspective on child-centred humanitarian photography and »atrocious images« as both »evidence« and »emotional provocation« (p. 175). She substantiates the genderization of the humanitarian view in the form of a gradual concentration on the mother-child image and a narrative that privileged the war experiences of women and children during and after the First World War.

Silvia Salvatici discusses the media campaigns of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration that were shaped by the employment of professional photographers and strategies of the organization's self-representation. The rather impersonal approach resulted in »standardized and depersonalized« portrayals of the aid-recipients and a general »disempowerment of the men, women, and children« involved (p. 218).

Davide Rodogno and Thomas David investigate campaigns by the World Health Organization after the Second World War and question how their adaption of visual politics employed by similar organizations helped to enhance the WHO's global authority and legitimacy.

Lasse Herten challenges the visual narratives of genocide in the context of the Nigerian Civil War. Reminding of the visual documentation of Nazi concentration camp prisoners, the depiction in European and American media, photographs of the starving »Biafran Babies« symbolize inherent power relations. Moreover, the denial of agency to the persons depicted creates a »shared collective identity, an »emotional community« of Western observers« (p. 256).

Henrietta Lidchi shows how the Ethiopian famine campaigns of the 1980s constitute a turn in the discourse on the ethical implications connected to the visual representation of human suffering. The »subjects of the photographs are transformed into objects by virtue of being »shot«, »colonized and powerless« become »fixed realities« (p. 277). Criticism against such tendencies resulted in an abandoning of discriminating visual language and a turn towards a more positive imaging that centred on »strength, dignity, and self-determination« of those depicted.

Sanna Nissinen, likewise, writes about ethical implications and traces the debates between humanitarian workers and professional photographers in the field. By way of an impressive participatory observation, she gives voice to indigenous photographers. She shows how the relationship between an allegedly »all-powerful photographer and a subject without agency or power« is negotiated on the everyday individual level, and »challenges to [the] assumed power dynamic arise frequently« (p. 314).

»Humanitarian Photography« provides a comprehensive reflection on humanitarian photography from its emergence to the present days. However, as a contribution to the (historical) study of visual representation, the volume leaves unheeded the relation of depictions of human suffering to, amongst other things, the contemporaneously emerging advertisement culture and »commodity racism«. Drawing on colonial scenarios and depictions of indigenous »others«, this branch of visual culture not only popularized the alleged inferiority of the colonized nations but also – under the purportedly humanitarian cloak of the »white man's burden« – considered it the duty of European nations to accelerate the »civilizing« of allegedly backward indigenous peoples, thus advocating and legitimating imperialism as a noble endeavour. Expanding on the relations and demarcations between these imperialist and the

humanist discourses could have contributed to the thematic strand concerning the balancing of agency between the photographer and the photographed – not least because humanitarianism, its visual representations, and the campaigns and actions springing therefrom continue to be scrutinized in the context of (postcolonial) paternalism and racist discrimination.

Nonetheless, in showing how pivotal depictive representations continue to be for the public consciousness-raising in terms of suffering and global atrocities, »Humanitarian Photography« definitely constitutes an instructive and crucial contribution to the discourse of visual culture and humanitarianism.

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**Zitierempfehlung:**

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