



SWEDISH
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

Session: Visual Citizenship: Critical Perspectives on Human Rights, Humanitarian Action, and Development

Session Convener(s): Pierluigi Musarò, University of Bologna

Chair: Pierluigi Musarò, University of Bologna

Comments: -

I) *Cosmopolitan Cinema as Ethico-Political Practice*

Maria Rovisco, York St John University

II) *Spaces Outside Citizenship: Humanitarian Systems and Architecture of Aid*

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, New York University

III) *The Subject of Suffering*

Stuart Connor, University of Birmingham

IV) *Dimensions of Glance*

Francesca Ursula Bitetto, University of Bari

ABSTRACTS

Session description

The intimate connection between human rights, humanitarian action, development, awareness, and visibility was manifested already from the early days of humanitarian assistance: images and emotions have been central in making an audience empathize with the fate of complete strangers.

How do mediated cultural forms make citizenship possible? How is the viewer's experience shaped and aestheticized by audio-visual material?

On the one hand, images of victims have made a real difference in the creation of a human rights consciousness. On the other hand, when employed for fundraising purposes they have reproduced what has been called the “humanitarian narrative”, a social construction that shapes an “emergency imaginary” about the spectacle and commodification of suffering. Within this imaginary, snapshots of helpless victims become the public face of humanitarian aid organizations, as well as of Western donors, appearing as the only heroes who can respond to emergencies.

The panel aims to focus on the visual construction of citizenship. It proposes to reflect on and discuss the impact, effectiveness, limits and risks of the way populations are governed through visual practices.

The goal of the panel is to rethink and to reformulate the boundaries of citizenship, moving debate forward on questions of representation in the context of human rights and development where citizenship appears visually and practically impaired.

In your paper, be sure to answer some of the following questions:

- What are the links between visual arts, public communication, human rights, and humanitarian action?
- What does it mean to be a visual citizen – for those who are seen, for those who witness what is seen, and for those who capture what is seen in public?
- What is the role played by the humanitarian discourse in establishing a moral geography of the world?

Papers

1) *Cosmopolitan Cinema as Ethico-Political Practice*

Maria Rovisco, York St John University

The bulk of academic research on the ethics of representation has paid particular attention to the ethics and politics of visual representation in nonfiction genres: photojournalism, television news and advertising. The focus of this body of work is not on the power of the visual to represent human dignity and its violation, but rather on the impotence of visual representation. Little attention has been paid to fiction genres, in particular, the fiction film as a cultural form capable of enacting continued moral attention and civic forms of engagement with distant others. By looking at the category of cosmopolitan cinema as ethico-political practice, this paper argues that the iconography of cosmopolitan cinema invites structures of feeling (care, compassion, inter-cultural dialogue) that enable new affective and intellectual engagements of the audience with ‘others’ whose access to cultural dialogue is severely limited. Cosmopolitan cinema forces us – as audience - to contemplate seriously ‘what we see’ and bridge the gap between the unimaginable/unknowable suffering other and ourselves. In so doing, cosmopolitan cinema emerges as a mode of production that challenges the iconography of passive victimhood. We will see that the key difficulties in

representing the violation of human dignity in fiction films lie not only in the relationship with their audience, but also in the relationship the filmmaker, scriptwriter, and the actors establish with the people in front of them, the ones whose stories they tell.

II) *Spaces Outside Citizenship: Humanitarian Systems and Architecture of Aid*

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi, New York University

Much as aid organizations mobilize pictures of human suffering to support relief, a global humanitarian-industrial complex deploys an architectural imagery to depict emergency. While tarps, tents, and camps convey an ad hoc reaction to crisis, they belie a spectacular infrastructure frequently at hand in international aid missions—land cruiser convoys, global supply chains, state-of-the-art satellite hardware, and the housing and public buildings that accompany a globally mobile workforce. Architecture for displaced people tends to be ephemeral. However, as displacements become increasingly protracted—the average lasting seventeen years—this semi-permanent impermanence leaves a spatial footprint.

This paper will attempt an “archaeology” of a complex globalized civilization through some of its remnants—architectural artifacts from Ethiopian and Kenyan camp cities as well as Museum of Modern Art exhibits. From the scale of the ration card to that of the global distribution network, it is made up of aesthetic components, much as Michel Agier and others have described, but it is also built on a workhorse infrastructure not addressed adequately in much critical literature on the spatial dimension of this problem. If camps form the most obvious spatial expression of an architecture of aid, they must be considered in terms of their highest demographic group. Women’s vulnerabilities drive most planning approaches, and a social science expertise on gender and empowerment has emerged as a high-demand technical specialty informing all levels of refugee policy, particularly urban design. Displaced women physically build many of the spaces their families inhabit, especially in the East African cases this paper illuminates. Many hold high positions in camp governments.

This paper aims to reconcile these aspects of the exterior and the interior of the camp, in the process, articulating a conversation that has emerged between architects and humanitarians since the Cold War, which has exceeded mere technocratic problem-solving and extended to the construction of a humanitarian geography. If camps have precipitated urbanization—emergency being co-opted to accelerate social change, as Alex de Waal has argued—practices and objects that operate in an aesthetic register have spurred them. This research examines how an aesthetic domain has helped to realize “humanitarian space” (the industry’s term for the conceptual location of its activity) even if, as Rony Brauman has noted, the goal of city planning was accidental. This paper also asks how the poetic, rather than merely the functional, aspects of this architecture of aid convey humanitarian messages to a global public.

III) *The Subject of Suffering*

Stuart Connor, University of Birmingham

This paper examines the means by which Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have sought to represent the 'subject of suffering' as part of attempts to seek support for humanitarian campaigns (Fairclough, 2003, van Dijk, 1993; 1998; van Leeuwen 2005 & 2007). Major changes in the production and consumption of images in news production, politics, entertainment, advertising and everyday forms of communication have led to the development of an increasingly complex iconosphere, where information has become more and more ‘iconic’. As NGOs have

sought to operate within such a context, it is argued that imagery has become an increasingly important part of attempts to legitimate humanitarian campaigns.

In an attempt to chart such developments, a critical social semiotic approach is taken to provide an exposition of the resources used in the fabrication of texts seeking to represent humanitarian projects. First, the paper will provide an outline of an ongoing study that has sought to collect, document and catalogue the range of semiotic resources that have been used to represent poverty and the poor. Second, the paper will examine how a selection of these semiotic resources have been used in a number of contemporary humanitarian campaigns by NGOs and to examine the role of these texts in a hegemonic struggle over the meaning and practice of human rights, humanitarian action and development (Caldas-Coulthard and van Leeuwen, 2003; Fairclough, 2003; Jessop, 2004; Marston, 2000 & 2004; van Dijk, 1993, 1998). The profile accorded to such humanitarian campaigns means that NGOs, together with the media, have helped construct the (western) public's vision of the 'developing world', the nature of poverty and the poor. It is argued that the 'subject of suffering' that has been used in successive campaigns, may have helped play a part in closing the distance between donor publics and the recipients of aid, in what is arguably a necessary condition for a humanitarian response, but the use of such campaigns and images also raises a number of significant practical and ethical issues. This has left some of those seeking to develop communication strategies for NGOs dealing with the questions of if and how images can be used to mobilize the public, but also ensure integrity.

This leads to the third and final section of the paper, where an attempt will be made to contribute to the discovery and development of new semiotic resources to be used by NGOs and those they seek to represent. It is argued that this may require NGOs to consider the use of imagery and forms of legitimacy that go beyond the 'subject of suffering'. As such, the use of the term critical, as part of a social semiotic approach, is used, not to denote a particular method or technique, but to signal that the work is undertaken as part of a project that is rooted in a radical critique of social relations (Billig, 2003). In this respect it is argued that a critical examination of the 'iconosphere' needs to play a far more prominent role in the analysis of how existing social orders seek to legitimate their predominance. Conversely the role of the images should not just be considered as part of attempts to represent the world differently, but also to help ensure that another world is possible.

IV) *Dimensions of Glance*

Francesca Ursula Bitetto, University of Bari

In a culture dominated by the visual dimension, the participation in seeing and creating images can be seen as a form of citizenship, but always determines agreement and satisfaction without modifying or enabling a critic observation of power underpinning the dominant images.

The free disposition of technological means that allow to produce and exchange pictures, not only lets us show violences done but also join groups of citizens, reactivate participative networks, open up again discussions, make visible themes excluded from prevalent communication.

Western hegemony produced a dominant tale able to attract all eyes, transforming citizens in audiences through fascination. Only the freedom of glance (Escobar 2006) can allow a critical observation of powers that usually prevent enforcement of rights.

Public opinion is created and nourished by different glances and narratives, able to let development and self-determination of observers and image makers.