

Beyond suffering, towards justice? Human rights films and the critique of humanitarian culture

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'Are we invited to think of ourselves as distant and fortunate people who... should help the helpless victims of abuses far away...? Or are we invited to recognise some kind of common states and common dilemmas?' Maple Rasza (Director of *The Maribor Uprisings*, 2017, April 1 2018).

'Sometimes I think all the films around the world, they're talking about human rights... [T]hey love the right of freedom... of expression.' Alfoz Tanjour (Director of *a Memory in Khaki*, August 23 2018).

[I] realised the power of film... How you can actually be somewhere without being there, and getting to know people... And then getting to know people with the heart, not only the mind' Julia Dahr (Director of *Thank You for the Rain*, March 27 2018).

Introduction

Humanitarianism and human rights both involve appeals to 'humanity' beyond the imagined community of the nation. However, they were founded on different values: while humanitarianism is premised on the value of 'saving strangers', human rights are

fundamentally concerned with justice. In a ground-breaking history of humanitarianism, *Empire of Humanity*, the IR scholar Michael Barnett distinguished the fields of humanitarianism and human rights on the basis of their historical emergence, organisational logics, sources of funding and tools for action:

Human rights relies on a discourse of rights, humanitarianism a discourse of needs.

Human rights focuses on legal discourse and frameworks, whereas humanitarianism shifts attention to moral codes and sentiments. Human rights typically focuses on the long-term goal of eliminating the causes of suffering, humanitarianism on the urgent goal of keeping people alive (Barnett 2011: 16).

In making such a list, Barnett developed ideal-types, which (he noted himself at the time) is at odds with his theoretical commitment to social constructionism (Barnett 2011: 16). As Samuel Moyn later pointed out, if humanitarianism and human rights are social constructions, and if they are historically in relationship to each other, a definitive list of the essential characteristics of each one is itself a historically located construct (Moyn 2020: 46). Proscribing a definitive list of the differences between humanitarianism and human rights is not, however, the same as abolishing differences between them in practice. In this article I address overlaps and differences between humanitarianism and human rights in the making, narrating and showing of human rights films. What, if anything, is distinctive about human rights films compared to humanitarian media? My aim here is to contribute to the development of the study of mediated human rights as such. While there is no doubt that visual culture is increasingly important in every aspect of contemporary life, the literature on 'representations of suffering' is vastly more developed in media and cultural studies with

respect to humanitarian constructions of humanity compared to images, stories and sentiments that concern human rights.

Might the comparative lack of scholarly attention to mediated human rights be due to the dominance of a humanitarian imaginary in the contemporary era? For Moyn, empathy and the suffering body are now the focus of both humanitarianism and human rights (Moyn 2020). In his view, the imperative to prevent genocide that developed in the 1990s was the culmination of a 'slow amalgamation of humanitarian suffering with human rights as both a utopian ideal and a practical movement' (Moyn 2010: 220). Today, humanitarianism and human rights are 'fused enterprises', according to Moyn (2010: 221). It is Didier Fassin who develops the term 'humanitarian imaginary' in *Humanitarian Reason*, arguing that it is a new conception of the moral order of society that is now dominant in the West. He argues that since the 1970s, and especially the 1990s, the ideal of alleviating suffering has been dominant in Western societies and beyond, displacing politics and political economy. Talk of suffering and compassion legitimates forms of governance that reduce individuals to 'bare life', to bodies and psychic states, while talk of interests and justice that concern 'political life' has become much more suspect. Ultimately, Fassin says, humanitarian reason involves a shift from the 'right of the receiver' to the 'obligation of the giver', which institutes a radically unequal moral order that is structural, regardless of the motivations of actors (Fassin 2012: 253).

With respect to human rights films specifically, Wendy Hesford has also argued that humanitarianism overwhelms human rights. Analysing films after the end of the Cold War, during the 'War on Terror', Hesford argues that humanitarianism colonised human rights in a 'global morality market' that privileges Western citizens. For Hesford too,

humanitarianism reduces people, who are always potentially political actors, to suffering individuals, in need of saving by Westerners who are at the same time defending their own interests in capitalist expansion and state security (Hesford 2011; see also Chaudhuri 2014). Pooja Rangan's more recent, and avowedly polemic, analysis collapses documentary film as such into humanitarianism, characterising it as representing 'emergency thinking', that 'demands action over thinking, ethics over aesthetics, and immediacy over analysis' (Rangan 2017: 3).

In contrast there is another, much more optimistic strand of scholarship on human rights films that is influenced by the work of Meg McLagan. Although McLagan does not thematise the relationship between humanitarianism and human rights, she agrees with critics of the humanitarian imaginary that 'individual bodily suffering is the indivisible unit of symbolic currency in human rights media' (McLagan 2003: 607). However, she is interested in how representations of suffering are deployed strategically in human rights films to bring about social change. What interests McLagan, and what also motivates Leshu Torchin's work on film and genocide, is the possibility that passive, consumerist spectators may be turned into active witnesses, identified with a political cause (McLagan 2006; Torchin 2012). As McLagan sees it, what is important about human rights films is the way they are carried in what she calls an 'infrastructure' of human rights film festivals and NGO campaigns, a 'formatting of issues, mobilisations of actors, preparation of events', all of which may contribute towards the 'formation of a public around a problem' (McLagan 2005: 228).

To explore the overlap and the differences between humanitarianism and human rights to be found in the making, narrating, and showing of human rights films, I too focus on films shown in human rights festivals. These films are a good source of material for analysis of

the cultural codes of humanitarianism and human rights for several reasons. Firstly, already selected as about human rights in some way, analysing films shown at human rights film festivals solves epistemological and methodological problems as a 'ready-made' corpus of representations, narratives and images. Secondly, human rights films are very diverse (far more than the small number of existing studies of human rights films would suggest (see XXXX)). They include not just documentary, but also fiction; and a variety of genres, from animation through participatory and observational to poetic and experimental. Thirdly, films shown in human rights festivals very often have a much wider distribution: from screenings by NGOs and universities, in other documentary film festivals and sometimes in commercial cinema to broadcasts on national and international TV, they are seen by a far wider range of audiences than just those attending human rights film festivals.

In addition to analysis of the films themselves, the research for this article also draws on 24 interviews with curators of four major annual human rights film festivals (one of which I visited three times) and 25 directors of films shown at the festivals. Curators and directors see these films as negotiations of art and advocacy, truth and story-telling. Curators and directors who work in the Global South are well aware of structural inequalities in the production and circulation of these films. They know how difficult it is to get funding and access to film for certain topics, and they understand how these difficulties affect their narrative choices. In addition, many filmmakers and curators are working hard, trying practically overcome difficulties of reaching and motivating appropriate audiences despite censorship, lack of interest, and lack of opportunities to show their films. Many too, reflect critically on the dangers of confirming rather than challenging assumptions about 'the West and the Rest' in human rights films. In this article, then, interviews with curators and directors are a source of knowledge concerning the differences and overlaps between

cultural codes of humanitarianism and human rights. At the same time, alongside the films, they provide material to be analysed through categories of thought and topics of interest developed in critical analyses of humanitarianism, historical work on the development of humanitarianism and human rights as fields with distinct logics and codes, and existing work on films shown in human rights film festivals.

The article is organised under themes that are prominent in critiques of humanitarian culture and analyses of human rights films, which many curators and directors also spoke about in the interviews. The themes are: victims, temporality, scale, and bearing witness. In the section on each theme, there is a brief consideration of the literature on humanitarianism and human rights through which victim, temporality, scale and witnessing have been theorised. I then consider how filmmakers and curators of human rights film festivals address the themes. What strategies do curators and directors envisage and deploy to engage audiences in a world structured by inequalities? Do the cultural codes of human rights offer aesthetic and emotional alternatives to dominant humanitarianism? Or are these films invariably caught within the limitations of the humanitarian imaginary?

Pathetic and Heroic Victims: Who?

How (brown) victims are represented as in need of (white) saviours is the most prominent theme of critiques of humanitarianism (and it is also a critique of human rights – see Mutua 2002). The iconography of humanitarianism has been much discussed – beginning with Sontag’s famous reflections on photojournalism and voyeurism (Sontag 2003). How victims are pictured in humanitarian appeals is well-established: with ‘emaciated bodies and imploring gaze’ as Fassin puts it (Fassin 2012: 251). Humanitarian NGOs continue to use images of children with ‘flies in their eyes’ in the belief that appeal for help on behalf of

victims so obviously innocent should work smoothly, without snagging on any felt need for complex analysis, judgement or taking sides in political conflicts, and despite doubts over whether such media strategies are ethical, or even effective (Seu 2015; Ticktin 2017).

Representations of human rights campaigns overlap with humanitarianism insofar as both concern appeals for help from people who are not directly affected by the situation in which the sufferer finds themselves (Slaughter 2009). Moreover, Sharon Sliwinski is surely correct that 'atrocious photographs' have been prominent in representations of human rights, including the footage and images of Nazi concentration camps. She argues convincingly that shocking photos of concentration camps like Srebrenica were used to make the case for humanitarian intervention in the Former Yugoslavia in the 1990s (Sliwinski 2011).

Nevertheless, the iconography of human rights is not focussed on victims in the same way as that of humanitarianism. In terms of human rights films, virtually none feature what Diane Meyers has called 'pathetic victims': people in need of our help. They tend rather to be created around what she calls the 'heroic victim', who is 'stunningly agentic' (Meyers 2011). In part this is due to decisions by directors and curators to avoid sensationalising human rights violations. Both directors and curators avoid what John Biaggi, curator of the Human Rights Watch Film Festival, calls the 'pornography of violence' for ethical and aesthetic reasons (interview, March 11 2018). More positively, human rights films centre on 'heroic victims' because directors' favoured form is the character-driven narrative. 'Pathetic victims' do not make good protagonists. A film centred on a victim who can only be rescued is likely to be very dull. As Roksareh Ghammagemi, Director of Sonita (2015), put it: 'the misery is too much: what kind of movie can I make with a broken teenager?' (interview, January 8 2018). A humanitarian film festival is virtually unimaginable. Most human rights

films are about human rights defenders, active in campaigns for justice and accountability, and even when they are not, they are invariably built around a protagonist who drives the narrative of the film forward. In interviews, directors very often spoke about looking for such a person to be the lead character in their film. Mickey Yarmine, co-director of Gaza Surf Club (with Philip Gnadt, 2016), for example, counted both himself and Ibrahim, the 'hero' of his film, very lucky when he finally got permission to leave Gaza for Hawaii, so adding interest to the story that finally appears on screen. The film follows young men and the occasional young woman who, imprisoned in Gaza, find freedom and excitement in surfing. Cut off from the wider world, they lack equipment and knowledge. The narrative of the film develops as one of them, Ibrahim Arafat, tries to leave Gaza to visit Hawaii, to learn about the technology and skills of the sport. As Yarmine (remarkably forthcoming and honest about the creative process of the film), put it: 'Had Ibrahim not gone to Hawaii I don't know if this film would have been as successful as it has because... we were pretty aware of the fact that you know [in Gaza] it's not going to be that much of a change' (interview, July 18 2018). A protagonist who achieves change – especially where is it so unexpected – is essential to a character-driven film; without it, there is no narrative, and effectively, no film.

What is most notable in terms of the difference between the cultural codes and the governance validated by logics of humanitarianism and human rights, however, is the part played by perpetrators. Media in the service of humanitarianism has no stake in identifying perpetrators; to do so would only complicate appeals for the immediate alleviation of suffering (1). In contrast, in human rights films perpetrators feature quite prominently. This is surely at least in part because of fascination with the motivations of violent people that is so conspicuous in popular culture. (We might consider here how The Act of Killing (*dir*

Joshua Oppenheimer 2012), perhaps the most famous human rights film of recent years, both reflects on and benefits as a spectacle from this fascination (Ten Brink and Oppenheimer (2012)). In addition, however, because human rights are demands for justice, the accountability of perpetrators is very often central to human rights campaigns. What has been called ‘the atrocity triangle’ of human rights involves victims, perpetrators and witnesses. Even when perpetrators do not feature explicitly in a film (as they do, for example in The Trial of Ratko Mladic (dir Rob Miller and Henry Singer 2018) which I discuss in more detail below, and in many others), they may be named as such, referenced obliquely (with archive footage, for example and/or poetically – both techniques are very evident in A Memory of Khaki (dir Alfoz Tanjour 2018) which we also discuss more below), or represented in an argument as well as through narrative. A good example of a film that presents a complex argument about perpetrators is Devil’s Freedom (dir Everardo González 2017). Told through the personal stories of victims, perpetrators and their families, all of whom wear masks and speak directly to camera (many wetting the masks with their tears as they talk), the film builds a picture of the corruption, poverty and despair that González understands to be the root causes of the extraordinary high murder rate related to the drug trade in Mexico. Ultimately, Gonzalez is trying to show that the perpetrators of violence in this case are politicians and police officials who make killing with impunity possible, and not the young murderers we see on screen (interview January 22 2018).

Temporality: When?

It may be temporality that most distinguishes human rights and humanitarianism. The time of humanitarianism is immediate: suffering must be alleviated and lives saved now. In contrast, the temporality of human rights is much more long-term and open-ended. In fact,

we might say that human rights are always future-oriented. Demands are made when rights are denied, revoked, or ignored. Even where existing rights are being defended in the present, it is the continued realisation of rights in the future that is in question. Moreover, in pragmatic terms, rights are very often demanded in circumstances that make them very hard to realise or to defend as ideals. In fact, it is doubtful whether any human rights campaign ever fully realises its aim; certainly, they very often lead to others. If we consider the campaign against apartheid in South Africa, for example, it began at the very first session of the UN General Assembly in 1946, with India's claim that South African legislation was in violation of human rights provisions of the UN Charter, and arguably it is not finished today (Schifter 1993). Although apartheid has not been official policy in South Africa since the early 1990s, the consequences of that period in terms of violence, poverty and inequalities of all kinds are still there, and there are lively debates over how human rights, now encoded in South Africa's constitution, are best used to combat them today (Black 1999).

No doubt such a sharp distinction between the temporality of humanitarianism and human rights lacks nuance. In reality there are complex humanitarian emergencies that are still going on after decades; they are sometimes themselves linked to violations of human rights – as in they are, for example, in UNCHR refugee camps (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005); human rights has become a language through which humanitarian aid is administered (Krause 2014), and sometimes politicised in campaigns for more just development (Nelson and Dorsey 2008). On the other side of things, Amnesty members write letters for 'urgent actions', and often make appeals for individuals and groups facing state violence now. And in the 1990s human rights and humanitarianism became virtually synonymous, at least where war was concerned: in the case of the Former Yugoslavia, for example, humanitarian

intervention was justified by the need for immediate relief of suffering due to gross violations of human rights in armed conflict. Given that the time of humanitarianism and human rights overlap in practice, are there differences of temporality in humanitarian media and human rights films?

In interviews with directors of human rights films, they very often talked about the films they made, and the impact they hoped for them, as long-term projects. In part, again, this is because of the nature of film. Even a low-budget feature-length film can take up to ten years to make. Filmmaking, moreover, is research. A film-maker generally doesn't know what they will find when they start a project (usually without funding), whether they will find an interesting story, how they will be able to tell it, whether they will need to make use of archive footage to contextualise what they are filming, whether it exists, and so on. The time of making a good film means that although it may be of topical interest depending on the news cycle when it is released – and curators generally aim for premieres at least in the country in which a festival is held – small film-makers invariably do a lot of work to give their films a longer life than they will have on the annual festival circuit. In the case of human rights films, this work is linked to the temporality of human rights campaigns as such.

One, now well-charted strategy for activist human rights filmmakers is to create an impact strategy while they are making the film with the help of funding and mentoring organisations like *Docsociety* and *The Good Pitch* (McLagan 2012). Julia Dahr's [Thank You for the Rain](#) is a classic example here. In Dahr's view, the film was only possible because it took six years to make: it involved close participation with the protagonist Kisulu Musya to tell the story, not only of the effects of climate change on crops and livelihoods, but also – which Dahr says she had not anticipated – the psychological challenges of climate change on

Musya and his the family (interview March 27 2018). First released in 2017, Thank You for the Rain has been widely screened and linked to educational and activist projects. In Europe, the intended impact is to give a face and a personal story to a global environmental issue that can seem abstract, complex or distant, and to win support for policies and practices to end climate change. Also shown widely amongst farmers in East Africa, the intended impact there is to strengthen the movement in which Musya is involved, exploring new techniques of climate change resilient farming. In 2019 and 2020, the impact strategy for the film included a partnership with the Climate Justice Resilience Fund, which is helping build an earth dam to provide water for 300 people in his local area. For Dahr, the film as art cannot be separated from the goals of long-term impact she has always had for it. As she puts it:

Kisulu and Christina sharing so openly, they need to know that they're working with someone who is going to present them in an honest way and do a good narrative, but then also run with it afterwards. So for me the impact part isn't just like, and then first you're making, and then this comes. It's also part of the whole process of how you're, you're working on ... while you're making it [the film]. It wouldn't have been possible to make it, to work together in that way, if we didn't share that vision...

Far from an immediate call to end suffering in an emergency, the medium-term goal of dealing with climate change as it directly affects small farmers and the longer-term goal of ending climate change altogether are built-in to Thank You for the Rain as a human rights film; and the film is itself part of a much wider movement.

Directors of human rights films quite often spoke in interviews about how they had created and/or distributed their film to influence young people and future generations. Rob Miller, co-Director of The Trial of Radko Mladic was very clear about his hopes for the film in this respect. The trial and the film are both part of a very long-term human rights project: the trial took five years and began 20 years after the beginning of the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia; and the film followed lawyers for the prosecution and the defence throughout the very complex judicial process to the verdict in 2017. It was released in 2018. Miller sees the universal principles and values represented by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia as now stalled: with the rise of 'far-right politics... in Europe, particularly in places like Hungary and Poland' and 'with Brexit and Trump, there's deadlock', (interview March 19 2019). In Miller's view, the current circumstances make the message of the film, 'a very stark warning from history', even more necessary. 'Hopefully there will be a better time for human rights', he said. In terms of the distribution of the film – while identifying less as an activist than as a journalist film-maker - Miller was working to try to reach audiences of young people in Eastern Europe because he saw them as more open to what he called 'dialogue' than their parents and grandparents. He is convinced that the structure of the film will help get the message across. The film crew spent a good deal of time with Mladic's defence lawyers and with his family, and onscreen they allow them, as Serbian nationalists, to talk about how they understand their history as justifying violence against other ethnic groups – though Miller is also clear that he did not want the film to fall into relativism, and their accounts are given much less time than the stories of their accusers. In his view, 'You have to account for many different perspectives and factors if you're going to create something constructive' (interview March 19 2019).

Finally, it is also in the nature of the medium that the temporality of human rights is encoded in human rights films. Film registers and records stories for audiences who may come much later. This may be especially important where violators of human rights are apparently triumphant. As Leen Al-Faisal, director of The Borrowed Dress (2018), put it of her intimate film about her family fleeing Syria after participating in the uprising of 2011: ‘you feel this very strong urge that you want to tell this story. You don’t want the dictator regime to win and tell his story and that would be the only story left in the history’ (interview August 2 2018). Similarly, Alfoz Tanjour, whose film A Memory in Khaki is an equally intimate portrayal of life under the Al Assad regime over more than 50 years, saw it as a record of the history that is not widely enough known today: ‘to dig more in the history and to find the real reasons which were beyond the eruption of the Syrian society in 2011’ (interview August 23 2018). These films are on a continuum with projects like the Syrian Archive, which aims to document human rights violations using verified content uploaded onto social media (<https://syrianarchive.org/en/about>). While not contributing to a factual record of human rights violations in the same way as the Syrian archive, they are nevertheless part of a movement to memorialise what has happened, with the hope, ultimately, of contributing to the reconstruction of Syria.

‘The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice’: Barack Obama reputedly had this phrase from a speech of Martin Luther King woven into the carpet of the Oval Office. In the twenty-first century, surely very few have such faith in the inevitable progress of history. Hope for progress is, however, intrinsic to human rights. For human rights campaigners and film-makers hope is very often oriented towards a future that is possible, and necessary, but that exists in the here and now only in the imagination. Far from the immediate relief of suffering associated with humanitarianism, the time of human rights

campaigners and filmmakers is not that of the individual suffering body; it is rather the time of a collective political life that must be to come.

Scale: Where?

Humanitarianism and human rights share common ground in that ultimately the addressee of appeals and demands for both is humanity. Critics of contemporary humanitarianism and human rights have argued that the universality of 'human' in both cases embeds a White saviour mentality in practices of governance and cultural codes. As we have noted, Fassin sees humanitarianism as encoding structural inequality between givers and receivers of aid. He also sees humanitarianism as treating all human lives as sacred while, operating in a world of inequality, it actually prioritises Western lives (Fassin 2012: Chapter 9). Critics of human rights see them as contributing to neo-colonialism, as enabling Western interventions in former colonies that perpetuate existing geo-political and capitalist relationships in the name of the universal equality of freedom (Chandler 2002; Douzinas 2007). In terms of governance, there is no doubt that both humanitarianism and human rights are administered through powerful wealthy Western states at the UN, and organised by NGOs that rely largely on money from donors in the West (Barnett 2011; XXXX). 'The international community', with all that category represents in terms of Western dominance and opportunism, is reproduced by the politics of human rights and humanitarianism.

Human rights films are invariably made for 'international' audiences, and generally funded in the West (2). A number of filmmakers noted that what is of 'international' interest affects the topics and the stories for which they can hope to get funding. As Roksareh Ghammeghemi put it: '[T]here is a formula that works. Middle East plus women or LGBT plus some problems and then good luck. You really go ahead'. Her film Sonita about a

young Afghan refugee rapper in Iran who fights against being sold by her family into marriage won multiple awards in Europe and North America. Ghammeghemi felt very strongly that she would have preferred to make the film differently for an Iranian audience – and that that was the audience that should have seen the film. Sonita could not be shown in Iran because of censorship, but Ghammeghemi had shown it in North Africa, and in refugee camps in the Middle East, and these were the screenings she had found most significant. She described how, in one refugee camp, men had thrown shoes at the screen while women shouted at them to stop (interview January 8 2018). Several directors mentioned that they thought it was generally difficult to get funding for films about poverty, homelessness and disability.

The extent to which addressing international audiences replicates or challenges inequalities is complex. Filmmakers had diverse reasons for making and showing their films to international audiences in the West that were closely related to the human rights issues dealt with by their films.

Firstly, filmmakers wanted to reach audiences in the West because it is Western states that are violating rights. Reaching Western audiences is a way of addressing the states of which they are citizens. Both Leen Al-Faisal (The Borrowed Dress) and Alfoz Tanjour (A Memory in Khaki) emphasised that, as refugees from Syria, they wanted to tell their own personal stories. However, they also saw their films as contributing towards greater understanding and sympathy for Syrian refugees in Europe (as well as in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon too, where most are now living). Al-Faisal felt that people in Europe see refugees as just a number at best, a security threat at worst. She wanted to make audiences ‘feel the same basic feelings that these Syrian families have... I wanted them to feel close to these

characters... To know, or maybe to feel more towards their Syrian neighbours' (interview August 2 2018). Julia Dahr intended Thank You for the Rain for Western audiences because while, as she shows in the film, the greatest effects of climate change are felt by small farmers in the Global South, like Kisulu Musya's community, it is only by changing hearts and minds over production and consumption in Western states as well as making regulation and policy internationally that it can successfully be ended (interview March 27 2018). Similarly, with Blood in the Mobile (dir Frank Poulsen 2010), the director showed how the minerals used in the production of mobile phones are mined in appalling conditions of exploitation and violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Poulsen's aim was to hold Nokia as a supposed 'ethical' company accountable for their use of the minerals, and also to ask the audience to think about how we, as consumers of mobile phones, are directly responsible for others' misery (interview November 28 2017).

Undoubtedly the most difficult topics addressed by human rights filmmakers with respect to scale concern human rights and Western military intervention. Nowhere are these complexities more evident than in films about Afghanistan. The US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which was not authorised by the UN, was partly justified as necessary to the defence of women's human rights. To what extent do filmmakers, often closely connected to the country, replicate or challenge neo-colonialism in human rights films about Afghanistan? Both Sedika Mojadidi, director of Facing the Dragon (2018), and Elizabeth Mirzaie, co-director with her husband Gulistan Mirzaie of Laila at the Bridge (2018), saw their films as addressing a kind of wilful ignorance about the rights of people in Afghanistan on the part of Western audiences. As Sedika Mojadidi put it, 'people in the United States are not interested in Afghanistan... There is a kind of collective amnesia about our 17 years in that country...' (interview March 2019). Facing the Dragon follows two

women over several years: Nilofar Ibrahimi who was running for re-election as an MP, standing on a platform of representing women, and Shakila Ibrahaimkhel, an investigative journalist who worked especially on issues of gender and abuse. Both women faced death threats, and bombs went off nearby while Mojadidi was filming. Ibrahimi sent her children to Australia as refugees to escape the danger to their lives, and eventually Ibrahaimkhel too left the country with her children. Through their personal stories, Mojadidi challenged what she saw as assumptions in the US: 'Well you've got women... doing all these things, so we've kind of done our job right.' Of Laila at the Bridge, which shows the extent of opium addiction in Kabul and its links to corruption - including the misappropriation of foreign aid - through the story of Laila Haidiri and the addicts she tries to help come off the drugs, Mirzaie said that her ideal audience would be policy-makers: '[S]takeholders in the war in Afghanistan to really feel like, to get a better idea of what's happening on the ground... And then for people outside of the country who don't have any knowledge of Afghanistan to really like get a sense of what this war has done...' (interview March 25 2017). Both films directly address the lack of security for human rights defenders in Afghanistan in the context of the rise in violence of the Taliban, and President Trump's determination to bring US troops home. Without prescribing a particular course of action, both films represent the immense challenges to human rights in Afghanistan through the stories of individuals trying to deal with those challenges, and raise demanding questions about the responsibilities of the West, which occupied the country for nearly 20 years, and which left it so peremptorily to a Taliban takeover in 2021.

Secondly, filmmakers sometimes try to influence national policy debates elsewhere through audiences in the West. This is the strategy director Mohammed Naqvi pursued with his film Inshallah Democracy (2017). A controversial film at the London Human Rights Watch

Festival in 2018, Inshallah Democracy tells the story of Naqvi's support for General Musharaff in Pakistan, as a strong leader he hoped would protect his family from sectarian violence, which turned to opposition in the course of making the film as he learned the true extent of Musharaff's complicity with Islamic fundamentalists and with the administration of President George W Bush in the US. Controversy erupted at the screening in London because protestors complained that by befriending Musharaff in order to tell the story of his own betrayal, Naqvi trivialised the torture, disappearances and murders for which the General was responsible. Naqvi defended his approach, arguing that his aim was to persuade people like himself who had supported Musharaff that military rule is not the answer to their problems. In particular, and given that the only way the film will be seen in Pakistan is through pirate copies and video streaming services, he wanted to persuade diaspora groups in London who are eligible to vote in Pakistan that they should take the hope of democracy seriously. Naqvi's strategy of addressing citizens of Pakistan in London made sense: audiences in the West do not only include the citizens of Western states (interview November 3 2018).

Thirdly, although showing their films in the West is strategic for many filmmakers, they often also work to screen them elsewhere too. As we have noted, Julia Dahr's impact strategy involved showing Thank You for the Rain in villages in East Africa, to contribute to the movement for climate change resilient farming. The directors of The Trial of Ratko Mladic went so far as to produce three versions of the film: one for the US, the longest, with most explanation of the context; one for Western Europe, with somewhat less background; and one for people living in the Former Yugoslavia, whose families had lived through the conflict and for whom the stories it portrayed were emotional on a personal level (interview March 27 2018).

Finally, human rights film festivals are not only held in the West. The Human Rights Film Network - which enables sharing of experiences as well as of films amongst its partners - includes Karama-Beirut and the Western Sahara International Film Festival amongst its members. The aim of the network is to show human rights films around the world, where they will undoubtedly be interpreted differently in different places. In Lebanon and Jordan, as well as the Human Rights Film Network, curators also drew on the Arab Network for Human Rights Film Festivals to select their films. One of the aims of the Karama-Beirut is to create public debate over issues that are being ignored in the Arab world. Controversy is the aim of the festival, but it also makes funding more difficult, and risks unwelcome government attention in a region in which there is already little taste for film beyond entertainment (interviews with festival organisers, Haytham Chamass, July 2018 and March 2019, Najwa Kondajiki, July 2018 and July 2019, Sawsan Darwaza, March 2019). The directors of human rights film festivals in the Global South battle massive obstacles to explore the relevance of human rights films with audiences outside the West.

Humanitarianism and human rights share dilemmas that come from constructing humanity as the addressee of appeals and demands in a world that is geopolitically unequal in terms of power and resources. In the case of human rights films these inequalities are reproduced in the funding and selection of films for 'international' audiences. Human rights films risk confirming the humanitarian division between 'receivers' and 'givers' in international markets for images and stories through which humanity is constructed. However, festival organisers and filmmakers reach audiences in ways that do not simply reproduce the humanitarian imaginary. Very often, the stories told in these films show Western audiences how they are structurally connected to people elsewhere by markets, geo-politics, colonial histories. In this respect the intimate, character-driven, complex storytelling favoured by

human rights films is something like putting clothes on ‘the abstract nakedness of being human’ (Arendt 1979: 299). Suffering individuals are clothed in history and politics in human rights films. And it is a history and politics in which, far from always being the solution, the saviour, Western audiences are very often positioned centre-stage as part of the problem.

Spectators into Witnesses: How?

What does it mean to transform spectators of suffering into what Torchin calls ‘witnesses’ – people who take responsibility for the suffering of others and who act to try to put a stop to it (Torchin 2012: 3)? A good deal has been written on how, under certain historical conditions, mediated images and stories of distant suffering may produce empathy as the precondition of acting in the name of humanity (Hunt 2007; Laqueur 2009; Rorty 1993). In contrast to optimistic readings of this possibility, Lillie Chouliaraki is critical of media that creates what she calls the ‘spectatorship of suffering’, a hierarchy based on the narcissistic assessment of how different constructions of events and identifications make viewers feel (Chouliaraki 2006). Chouliaraki’s critique does not specifically distinguish humanitarianism and human rights, but she works with Luc Boltanski’s ideal types of ‘politics of pity’ and ‘politics of justice’, which maps to some extent onto the difference between them. According to Boltanski, while ‘politics of pity’ is focussed on the difference between the unfortunates who suffer and the lucky ones who do not, and on the spectacle of suffering, ‘politics of justice’ concerns the authoritative resolution of disputes in which each party should get what they deserve (Boltanski 2009: 3-5). Chouliaraki calls for ‘detached reflection’ on why a particular instance of suffering is important and public discussion and

assessment of its causes in order to know what can be done about it, rather than measuring our response in terms of private emotion (Chouliaraki 2006: 13).

The cultural codes of human rights are very often worked through a 'politics of justice' because of the prominence of international law and authorised knowledge in the field. Ron Dudai is critical of human rights reports on the grounds that they do not produce appropriate feelings because they mimic objectivity; letting the facts speak for themselves and categorising violations only in conformity with existing international law, they are unable to generate empathy and action (Dudai 2009: 254). One of the curators of Oneworld Prague (perhaps the biggest human rights festival in Europe), Ondrej Moravec, noted that, if the human rights experts in the NGO People in Need that part-sponsors the festival were in charge, the programme would be entirely made up of reportage – what he considered a rather old-fashioned style of 'talking heads' documentary that privileges the 'sober knowledge' of verified facts (interview, March 16 2019).

Human rights films do not work with pity as humanitarian media does in that, as we have noted, the victims of abuses they portray are invariably protagonists, 'hero victims' rather than 'pathetic victims' who can only appeal to viewers for help. It is, however, audiences' capacities to connect to the suffering of specific, concrete individual human beings onscreen that makes feature-length film so valuable to the politics of human rights. Human rights film festivals associated with Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International are appreciated by these NGOs because, in a world in which visual imagery and story-telling is increasingly important, films enliven the factual reports on which they rely for their expert authority. As Mara Linnekamp, who co-ordinates activist-related programming and activities between Amnesty and Movies that Matter in the Netherlands put it:

Human rights, basically it's a legal concept. And for a lot of people it's abstract. But if you see a movie, and you see a woman or a man and the personal stories, and how human rights affected their lives, in whatever way, it is alive and understandable.

We can relate to it on a personal level (interview, March 28 2018).

Film has been called an 'empathy machine': through the use of such techniques as close ups on faces to read deep emotion and long observational shots that contextualise peoples' lives in specific locations, narrative movies help viewers to feel connected to individuals who are strangers. As well as 'sober knowledge' of facts and figures, which are very often carried by text and voiceover, they create 'immersive knowledge', that is intuitive, emotional, embodied through filmic techniques designed to enable empathy (Nichols 2017).

Human rights films are varied in how they work as empathy machines. While virtually all but the most experimental try to win audience connection to personal stories of suffering, some also aim to create a space for reflection, and some are a call to action. Sometimes the main aim of a human rights film is to foster sympathy for a protagonist who stands in for a group and a type of experience in order to win greater support for existing human rights. Leen's Al-Faisals' film, A Borrowed Dress, which was shown in Karama-Beirut, is first of all a very personal film, but she also intended it to gain sympathy for Syrian refugees in Europe and the Middle-East; as she said, so that people will treat them as more than a number or a threat. It tells the story of how Al-Faisal's family have all had to leave Syria to escape repression by the Assad regime. Al-Faisal uses a poetic, melancholic voiceover and sad music, as well as filming emotional exchanges between family members, face-to-face and on the phone, to tell the story. The film centres on the grandmother of the family, who misses her home in Damascus so much that eventually she returns there alone with Al-Faisal –

though, as she tells us in the film, she expects that she will never again see her children. The film ends with the grandmother getting into bed, slowly and with difficulty, alone in her house in Damascus, while her voice considers fate and death. It is not accidental that Al-Faisal focussed on her grandmother, who is 80 years old: she felt that because she was elderly, and ‘the elderly never want to be taken out of the environment they’ve lived in for their entire lives’, her grandmother’s experience was the most graphic representation of the family’s pain at having to go into exile (interview, August 2 2018).

In contrast, Sedika Mojadidi was very clear that the aim of her film was to get audiences to begin to understand and reflect on the situation of women human rights defenders in Afghanistan. At the same time, she felt that knowledge and reflection were only possible if people were moved: ‘you want people to feel the difficulty that your character is feeling. At the same time you don’t want the salaciousness to take over... Not just like “Oh these poor people, what a mess.”’. In an interview, Mojadidi talked about two scenes especially, which she felt were closely related to the MP Nilafor Ibrahimi’s character, her way of thinking and dealing with her own feelings. In the first, we see Ibrahimi’s son, Mohammed, crying inconsolably and clinging to his mother as she gets into a car to leave the family in Australia and go back to Afghanistan. In the second, Ibrahimi enters a home in which an extended family is loudly and expressively grieving the death of their son. Mojadidi feared both scenes might alienate audiences: the decision of a mother to leave her children might forfeit sympathy for Ibrahimi; the scene of the family might be culturally difficult for Western audiences to read as a very different style of mourning, and to bear emotionally. However, she decided that both scenes were crucial to understanding Ibrahimi’s situation. As Mojadidi put it: ‘[I]t’s not really my job to like not make them feel, you know to feel comfortable about it. That family’s pain was very palpable in that room that day. And I

certainly wasn't going to censor it...' Moreover, she felt that the scenes were connected: '[I]t was like the family's pain for people, to Mohammed's pain... [W]e really had to also understand that people really needed her there. And that kind of weight of that on her. And that's what makes her stay' (interview, March 18 2019). Mojadidi makes us feel the weight of Ibrahimi's life-decision: as Ibrahimi says in a scene at the end of the film, 'Much as I love my children, I love my country'.

Facing the Dragon promotes reflection through emotional connection. As we have already noted, Mojadidi wanted US audiences especially to reflect on how their country was entangled in the affairs of Afghanistan. To this end, she framed the film very explicitly with text at the beginning: '2014 US troops withdraw, and women's rights and democracy come under threat'. Throughout the film a range of views are expressed on the presence of NATO troops in Afghanistan, and on the situation generally, by village elders, families, teachers, and through archive footage of the Afghan President – including the declaration of one old man who seems to come towards the camera spontaneously to say simply that the US troops must leave. The way Ibrahimi's dilemma is framed in the film, the connection the audience is asked to make with her and with people she meets, is constructed to encourage reflection: because Ibrahimi's existential dilemma – should she leave to be safe with her children or stay to fight for the rights of her people – depends so closely on the reality of possible futures for Afghanistan, entering into her world inevitably involves considering international policy for the country as an extension of her thoughts and feelings. However, it is more 'passionate' rather than 'detached' reflection that Mojadidi's film aims to produce – the desire to understand more about what is happening in Afghanistan, as well as to judge what can be done.

Finally, there are films that aim to get audiences to act work with empathy, but also with the emotion that Boltanski sees as typical of the politics of justice: indignation. A good example of an activist human rights film is Blood in the Mobile. Blood in the Mobile does contain scenes that fit the humanitarian ideal type of the 'politics of pity'. In several scenes shot in the DRC we see footage of young children, terrorised, working in muddy, dark mines in the jungle to extract the minerals needed for mobile phones (and Poulsen told me in an interview that he thinks it was in large part because of this footage that he was able to get funding from a Danish TV broadcaster to finish the film (interview November, 28 2017)). But the film is framed above all in terms of the 'politics of justice'. It is as a dialogue between Nokia, as a company that has a reputation for corporate responsibility, and Poulsen, as an investigative filmmaker, about what the company knows, and how much it cares (and by implication what Western audiences know, and how much they care) about the exploitation and misery on which the mobile phone business is founded. Blood in the Mobile is constructed to excite indignation: there is a theory of power built-in to the narrative so that watching it viewers cannot avoid knowing who is causing the suffering they see on screen. The action Blood in the Mobile requires of Western audiences is not the humanitarian relief of suffering, but rather recognition of their complicity in its causes, and of their capacity to make it stop.

The way in which human rights abuses come to the attention of Western audiences, and whether or not the mediated forms through which they are represented bring awareness of what can be done to end them, is just as hierarchically organised as the topics of humanitarianism. In the absence of global consensus on norms, and without a final authoritative law-maker and enforcer at the global scale, it is difficult to see how the situation could be otherwise. Human rights causes, like humanitarianism, depend on

publicity that largely fits in with, and only rarely is able to break through into news cycles and existing NGO priorities (see Bob 2005). Human rights films do, however, work to lead the imaginative response of audiences beyond the logic of humanitarianism. A diverse set of interventions into existing frames of visibility and invisibility, they do far more than call for an end to the suffering of innocents. As we have noted in the selection of films I have analysed here, turning spectators into witnesses can involve fostering compassion towards people who may be new neighbours, 'passionate reflection' on the responsibility of Western states to people who have long lived under their military force, or recognition of Western audiences' direct responsibility for the suffering of people they may previously have known nothing about. Human rights films generally represent suffering individuals on screen, but they offer the possibility of a range of responses to suffering that is precluded by the logic of humanitarianism.

Conclusion

There can be no definitive list of the essential differences between humanitarianism and human rights, and humanitarianism may well now be dominant culturally in the West. It is clear, however, from this analysis of making, narrating and showing human rights films that they differ from, as well as overlap with, humanitarian media. The ideal, innocent, pathetic victim of mediated humanitarianism is different from the heroic victim and from the perpetrator whose rights must be respected who are represented in human rights films.

While the time of humanitarianism is immediate, the time of human rights films tends to be the future – even, in many cases, the long-distant future. In terms of geopolitical scale, humanitarianism and human rights do both tend to construct 'humanity' for a Western gaze, but while humanitarianism works with, and tries to stimulate, Western desires to save

lives and alleviate suffering, human rights films present a much more complex situation in which Western states and audiences may be directly responsible for the suffering of others. Finally, in transforming spectators into active witnesses, human rights films work through empathy, which is not so far from the pity stimulated by humanitarian media, but again human rights films are oriented towards producing a range of responses in audiences; rather than support for the relief of suffering, they may try to create a passionate desire for more knowledge of a context in which grave injustices are being done, or denunciation of a human rights wrong that can only be ended by taking action on its causes.

This article is a brief overview of differences between the cultural codes of humanitarianism and human rights in human rights films. I have analysed human rights films as one form of mediated human rights. The article is intended to open up themes for further investigation. There is relatively little research specifically on media and human rights (especially when we consider the massive literature on human rights in politics and IR). And what there is tends to focus on news, on the verification of social media reports of human rights abuses, and sometimes on NGO campaigns (eg Balabovna 2015; McPherson 2014; Borer 2012). But constructions of human rights as ideals of humanity, who they are for, where, when, and how they engage, and should engage us as spectators are far more widely spread across mediated and artistic fields.

It may be that, as Wendy Hesford suggests, human rights offer hope for a more radical politics at the edges of humanitarianism. As she puts it,

The human rights imaginary may be taxed by global capital and the discourses of national security, but we need not trade away our capacity to articulate both the injustices and justice that its vision for the world has created (Hesford 2011: 60).

Perhaps greater attention to mediated human rights might indicate that the humanitarian imaginary is not as dominant as critics suggest? Perhaps human rights films and other cultural forms contribute to constructing ideals of humanity with deeper and wider resonance, beyond the news stories and NGO campaigns that are the main topics of study in mediated human rights?

It may also be, as critics of human rights maintain, that human rights offer insufficient resources to challenge deep-rooted structural global inequalities. Certainly, as we have noted here, the artistic production and the circulation of human rights films can only take place within existing geopolitical realities. As we have also seen, however, curators and directors of these films are creative and strategic in treating topics in ways that avoid stereotypes, that demand a range of responses from Western audiences, and sometimes, that reach relevant audiences in the Global South. Human rights films by no means simply confirm the humanitarian imaginary. This article is intended as a contribution to, and an argument for, more research on the cultural codes of human rights. It is surely important to be clear about the ways in which human rights are being encoded that are different from humanitarianism, to understand more about the alternatives to humanitarianism that exist today?

Thanks: NW + LC + directors and curators...

1. Trying perpetrators for war crimes and crimes against humanity does bring human rights together with humanitarian law as it developed from the 1990s in tribunals in the Former Yugoslavia and subsequently in the International Criminal Court (Alexander 2015). Outside legal settings, however, it seems that the accountability of perpetrators is more associated with human rights (presumably because they are seen as more bound up with legal codes) than with humanitarianism as such.
2. It is undoubtedly very difficult to get funding to make films outside the West, and even in Scandinavia, where filmmaking is supported by generous public funding, it is extremely competitive and by no means guaranteed even for directors with an established reputation. Directors invariably have to piece funding together from different sources (including TV and funding foundations) at different stages of the shooting and post-production. Of the films mentioned here, only A Memory in Khaki was funded outside the West, by Al-Jazeera.

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