Innocent Victim: Representations of the Child in Humanitarian Ad Campaigns

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In 2014, international NGO Save the Children released a short film in collaboration with Don't Panic, a UK based advertising agency. The video, titled "The Most Shocking Second a Day," has a simple yet powerful premise: the Syrian civil war has been reset in the city of London. Through single second frames, the plot follows a young, white, British girl as her life begins to erode under rising conflict. The child's story begins on her birthday, the camera focusing on her face as she smiles into a cake full of candles. Quickly, the narrative gains momentum and we watch as the girl eats an ice cream cone, puts on lipstick, cuddles with a stuffed animal, plays the recorder. She jumps from playground to playroom and we witness the unfurling of an idealized, Western childhood, one rife with tender touches and loving hands. After thirty seconds, however, the mood shifts. The face of the child is no longer carefree, but frightened. We see strangers hurriedly packing their belongings into cars and begin to hear ominous noises from the sky. Power outages become frequent and walls start to crumble. The girl gets sick. Bombs explode in the street. Her face becomes increasingly dirty and her hair begins to fall out. We now watch the rupture of this perfect childhood, contextualized by the emergence of armed conflict and forced evacuation. We arrive at another birthday. This one is drastically different, however, as it occurs in what appears to be a refugee camp, with only her mother present, and only one candle atop the makeshift cake. The montage ends. "Just because it isn't happening here doesn't mean it isn't happening" appears on the white screen, followed by a bolded #SAVESYRIASCHILDREN.

Within five days of its posting, "The Most Shocking Second a Day" had been viewed over 21 million times. This number continued to rise, and quickly the film became the platform's most successful promotional video. Since this release, in conjunction with Save the Children's "Save Syria's Children" campaign in 2014, "The Most Shocking Second a Day" has received multiple awards from advertising and media organizations alike, garnered an additional 40 million views, and been replicated in an equally lucrative sequel. In part, the success of this video may be accredited to its departure from traditional modes of NGO messaging. The rhetorical and aesthetic devices employed by Don't Panic have been heralded as counteracting the West's "emotional numbing toward the ongoing war in Syria," through scenes that viscerally jolt viewers out of their "First-World" complacency (Eder 2016). I accredit this so-called jolt to both the Western setting and white, child protagonist.

Through the framework provided by anthropologist and scholar Liisa Malkki, I will explore the ritual and affective work accomplished by the figure of the child in "The Most Shocking Second a Day." I will enter this analysis by examining childhood as a category writ large, before further focusing on the effects that come from gendering and racializing this image. In doing so, I seek to highlight the larger narrative implications of centralizing childhood in humanitarian ad campaigns. Of these implications, I will focus on how childhood representations have come to shape the discourse of international conflict and benevolence, ultimately deflecting attention from the precarity of children in the West.

Positionality

My family has long prided themselves as embodying the "spirit of giving" – a cliché often employed around the holidays to imply heightened generosity and consideration of others. Each year at Christmas, multiple generations gather around my grandparent's hearth and, rather than material gifts, exchange cards that chronicle the charitable donations we have each made on another's behalf. Though each year the organizations vary, trends have emerged over time that often center international aid agencies and, as small bodies continue to join the family tree, efforts dedicated to "save the children."

By performing this analysis, I do not intend to vilify organizations seeking to provide aid to refugees or other individuals harmed by conflict in Syria. Nor am I attempting to minimize the work they do. Rather, I aim to question the modes of representation that underlie their messages of humanitarianism. Through this work, I hope to illuminate the danger in depicting children as embodiments of certain tropes related to victimization, and call attention to the greater discourse of Western humanitarian aid, one eagerly consumed by untrained minds and families such as my own. I believe this practice is critical for myself as a Western subject, as I work to unpack my own ingrained assumptions about "global community" and foreign intervention, re-examining what notions are upheld by the "spirit of giving."

Discourse of the Child

Children have long been central to the discourse of innocence. Unmarked by the experiences that so often mar adult lives, we view youth as a blank slate. Society recognizes a potential in children – due to the relative little time they have spent on this planet – that lends itself to conceptions of neutrality and teach-ability. Within the larger collection, *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care* edited by Miriam Tickin and Ilana Feldman, child researcher and scholar Liisa Malki closely examines the ritual and affective work done by representations of "the child" in transnational discourses. In her chapter, "Children, Humanity and the Infantilization of Peace," Malkki explores the construction of children in five specific, yet interrelated registers: as symbols of goodness and innocence, as sufferers, as seers of truth, as "teachers" of peace, and as embodiments of "our future." Through the specificity of these tropes, Malkki seeks to question the depoliticization and dehistoricization of both actual children, as opposed to idealized children, and of peace. To this end, she argues that viewing children merely as the pure expressions of humanity and "original innocence" we (adults) place them outside the boundaries of history, race, culture and nation (Malkki 1994, 65).

I will seek to show, throughout the remainder of this essay, that the young female protagonist in the "Most Shocking Second a Day" effectively embodies each of these tropes at various points throughout the film, often simultaneously. Each representation works to elicit specific emotions from a Western audience, ultimately upholding Save the Children's own narrative of benevolence.

The Role of the Child in Humanitarian Discourse

The first trope Malkki introduces in her chapter is that of goodness. Due to longstanding associations between the child and an elementary form of humanity, innocence has become a presumed characteristic of any young person. By attributing "innocence" to children, Malkki suggests that innocence itself is somehow both timeless and "not-knowing, of not being worldly," or at least not being in a world that exists (Malkki, 63). Malkki illuminates the extent to which the figure of the child becomes a blameless moral subject. External groups exploit this image for the express purpose

of promoting political agendas that could be tarnished by any victim not rendered "innocent." For example, a "third-world" adult who has been subject to political violence.

Children, in such instances, become caricatures of peace and world community. This much is true of the young girl in Save the Children's short film. She, like the general "embodiments of goodness" Malkki describes, begins in a state of un-knowing. As political turmoil rises, the girl is blatantly unobservant and continues living her happy, normal (Western) life. This original state of naiveté, or innocence, is what makes the pain of the girl-child even more gut-wrenching to the audience. She had no preceding knowledge of the events that caused her life to erode. She is not complicit in their occurrence and is therefore blameless.

Compounding the innocent image of "The Most Shocking Second a Day" child is her evolution into an object of suffering. This is the second trope Malkki discusses in her essay, and one she endows with a great deal of affective authority. Due to their innocence and goodness, children as sufferers have become familiar charismatic figures that are "attributed an affective authority that adult refugees and other victims can generally never hope to address" (Malkki, 65).[1] In "The Most Shocking Second a Day," the little girl often looks directly at the camera with wide, pleading eyes. Through emotion and facial expression, she becomes representative of the affective authority we – the Western audience – are helpless when confronted with. Through her presence and emotivity, the video succeeds in its pathos. Despite Malkki's critique that "even the most urgent humanitarian appeals are hobbled by the highly conventionalized and ritually circumscribed nature of the affective authority of children as sufferers" (Malkki, 67), Save the Children and Don't Panic were triumphant in compelling viewers to recognize their pleas, as evident by the sheer press coverage following the film's release. Much of this, I argue, is due to the Western setting and cast of characters.

Save the Children's aim was not simply to raise awareness for Syrian plight, but to forge emotional ties between the "First" and "Third" world. Hence, Don't Panic's decision to transfer a violent war in the Middle East into a familiar European setting, and subsequently victimize a white, Western child. This move effectively invokes the compassion intended by Save the children, while exemplifying an additional trope: the child as ambassador of peace. However, Malkki argues that the cultural artefacts of this peace are "located in a sphere of selectively transnational production usually quite disconnected from the transnational arena of 'real' politics, 'real' business, and 'real' history – that is to say of 'practical reason'" (Malkki, 71). Due to its association with childhood, peace becomes infantilized in a move that depoliticizes both objects of this comparison. Within the short one minute and 30 seconds of "The Most Shocking Second a Day," the young girl is depoliticized as a Western subject, the conflict is decontextualized from Syria, and the calls for peace echo in an ahistorical chamber veiled by childhood innocence and suffering.

The final trope Malkki addresses is that of children as "our future."[2] This equation depends on "moralizing universalism" which Malkki identifies in almost all work done by international organizations and NGOs that operate "under the banner of an unmarked secular, modernist universalism" (Malkki, 75). Like peace, truth, and future, "universalizing empathy" is a strategy the producers of "The Most Shocking Second a Day" employed to evade the more difficult task of asking viewers

[1]The familiarity of this trope has grown through a homogenization that depends on casting children as generic human beings, rather than specific persons. Each individual starving child becomes the general idiom for hunger, which is thus synonymous with general need. These analytic leaps allow Western audiences to feel secure in their perceived understanding of third-world "problems," that, in reality, are fully decontextualized from their social and historical specificity (Mohanty 1986). In this vein, Malkki acknowledges the recurring use of suffering children in humanitarian campaigns that center on "third world emergencies," such as the Syrian conflict (Malkki, 59).

[2]This trope itself is entrenched within Western modes of thinking. While it may appear universal to equate youth with the rest of humanity, this link is embedded with historical assumptions of Christianity and linear renditions of time (Malkki, 75). To view children as "new beginnings" and "unspoiled futures" depends on a temporal progression that is very specific to the Christian religion. This understanding of the future leaves no room for non-Christian identifies, child or adult, to occupy the space of neutrality.

to embrace a different society and people. Instead, by centering on the familiar face of a young, white European child, producers urge us to imagine what might happen should we find ourselves in a similar situation. The Western audience is therefore asked to empathize with the girl because she is familiar, not because she represents greater atrocity happening elsewhere to other racialized bodies. This Eurocentric version of events allows Syrian children to remain at a distance, while the conflict maintains its foreign classification.

Discourse of the (White) Girl Child

The base of my analysis has so far resided in examining "childhood" as a comprehensive category unto itself. While this is true in relation to "adulthood" as a similarly constructed category, there is no singular childhood and therefore it is imperative to recognize the nuances of this experience, as well as how these nuances become tools for media campaigns. Prominent postcolonial and transnational feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty provides a critique of socially constructed categories in her essay "Under Western Eyes." This piece argues that by constructing a "Third World difference," Western feminisms participate in a "process of discursive homogenization and systemization of the oppression of women in the third world" (Mohanty, 20). Anthropologist Rania Sweis extends this discussion by relocating the site of analysis to girlhood, adolescence, or youth. Sweis draws attention to the image of female youth as a nexus of social suffering and foreign intervention, and therefore as that which becomes grounds for claiming various political stakes (Sweis, 40). Sweis argues that girls, in particular, are depicted as exceptionally underrepresented due to the overlapping marginality of economic impoverishment, gender disadvantage and social liminality. Thus, "Girls, as individuated and politicized subjects, are constructed as national panaceas, as the answer to global poverty and underdevelopment" (Sweis, 28). Swei's argument finds agreement in Malkki, who writes that,

> [Children] are placed on an ethereal pedestal in the transnational ritual sphere that I have tried to sketch here, and this is especially evident in the broad sphere of humanitarian interventions...Sometimes it is the generic moral figure of the children that stands there; at other times, specific children (remarkably often, girls) stand there alone, as representatives of all children and of moral conscience of the world (Malkki, 78).

Based on such sensationalized circulations of girlhood, it is no coincidence that Save the Children chose to focus on a female child. Relying on the trope of female vulnerability, Save the Children seeks to invoke greater compassion for their cause than would be elicited from a young boy.

In addition to gender, it is important to take note of the racial decision made by producers. As of the 2011 census, London was the most ethnically diverse region in England and Wales. 40.2% of residents identified with either the Asian, Black, Mixed or Other ethnic group (gov.uk). Yet, despite the statistically proven heterogeneity of this region, Save the Children and Don't Panic decided to center their video on a white child. This move carries heavy implications, the first being that using a white child to evoke universal empathy equates whiteness with universality. It also equates British youth with whiteness when, in reality, London at the time was home to the smallest percentage of White British people in England, only 44.9% (gov.uk). White-washing an ad such as this one erases other faces present in this discourse, often those more at risk, in both Europe and in Syria.

Humanitarianism as a Discourse of Deflection

One of the film's greatest paradoxes may lie in its portrayal of suffering as a product of fiction and solely representative of suffering elsewhere. This seemingly hypothetical image of a European

child refugee elides the actual precarity faced by many children in the West. Situating both the ad and NGO in their social and historical specificity highlights the potential damage of their message.

The Save the Children Fund was founded in the United Kingdom in 1919 to promote children's rights, provide relief, and support children in "developing" countries (savethechildren.net). Since its founding, Save the Children has expanded into 29 additional organizations that span multiple countries, and has gained consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. At the time "The Most Shocking Second a Day" was released, the conflict in Syria was approaching its third anniversary. Save the Children, alongside many other humanitarian agencies, was dealing with growing donor fatigue and what they perceived to be an increasing sense of complacency amongst both nations and individuals. The attention the film received allowed Save the Children to revamp their aid campaign and call attention to the deaths and evictions of millions of Syrian Children.

I am not attempting to dispute the tragedy in these numbers, nor am I condemning Save the Children for their efforts to help bodies impacted by the devastation of conflict. The irony I am illustrating is simply that the emphasis on providing Syrian children with aid deflects attention from the dire circumstances faced by children domestically. Both Save the Children and Don't Panic are based in the United Kingdom, a country that reported 4.1 million children living in poverty during 2016-17, 30 percent of children in the nation ("Child poverty facts and figures"). In fact, London as a region displays the highest rates of child poverty in the country, statistics that go unspoken in the fictional world created by "The Most Shocking Second a Day." The film's alternate title, "What if London Were Syria," further highlights the effective erasure of impoverished Western children. London does not need to be Syria for children to die. Relocating the Syrian war to London makes it seem, to a Western audience, that these are the circumstances most immediately in need of attention and care. While such circumstances do demand attention, perhaps more immediacy is owed to recognizing the plight one block over. Failing to acknowledge needs simply due to their proximity to modernity and so-called Western privilege, carries with it the cost of childhood health and livelihood. These lives—on the doorstep of organizations like Save the Children—become forgotten and neglected, allowing cycles of poverty to continue without interruption.

Conclusion

From a monetary standpoint, "The Most Shocking Second a Day" represents NGO fantasy. Save the Children reports to have gathered 340,000 dollars in the video's aftermath, providing water, clothing, education, healthcare and trauma treatment to tens of thousands of people. As a fundraising and mobilization campaign, the film would appear a success. However, in its vision of humanitarianism, "The Most Shocking Second a Day" becomes a caricature of the forced empathy so often employed by international aid campaigns. Through invocations of the childhood tropes identified by Liisa Malkki, this video utilizes a narrative that upholds Western discourses surrounding our own international benevolence. The privilege Westerners—such as myself and my relatives—perceive in ourselves, demands we provide for the blameless victims of the non-West. However, to be deserving of our generosity, these victims must be marked with a childlike innocence, and thus rendered truly "blameless." By placing so-called "Third World issues" in a "First World" setting, the producers call on their audience to empathize with similarity as opposed to difference, removing the impetus for Western subjects to participate in the critical thought work so often needed in the context of humanitarian giving. Through the film's narrative switch—replacing Syria with London—"need" becomes equated with "distance," erasing the precarity of children in the West, and the UK specifically, through their proximity to a "progressive, liberal" society. In a true "spirit of giving," we must hold each other accountable for the nuances of aid. A critical Western subject is not one who succumbs to the affective appeals of international humanitarianism, but one who examines such appeals and thus recognizes their inherent ironies. This examination

does not demand that we dismiss calls for help, but rather asks that we prevent such campaigns from blinding us to the need that exists all around, and not only in those places we deem "other."

Sources

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