

Empty Portraits – Humanitarian Aid Campaigns and the Politics of Silencing

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Abstract

In the Age of Information, humanitarian aid campaign targeted at donors are carefully planned and executed. Competing with the burgeoning figures of other agencies for limited donor money, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) – our case study – has employed photos of vulnerable populations as pivotal items in their attempt to convey narratives of urgency and disempowerment. This campaign format is not new. In this paper, we flip the coin from humanitarians to vulnerable populations, approaching the impact of such images as disempowerment devices. The voices of those portrayed cannot be heard, even in digital times. After the Internet revolution, it is said, unprecedented access to information fostered a “do it yourself” culture. However, as we argue here, access to the World Wide Web, as well as the capacity to define your own image, are not readily available to those silenced, silently portrayed in humanitarian campaigns. We proceed by analyzing current approaches to the possibilities of Internet as communication, in order to map where humanitarian campaigns fit in the overall picture. In this sense, we pose the question: are we witnessing the prologues to a politics of silencing?

Introduction

In the 21st century, it is easy to forget that many people all over the world remain far away from Internet access in any meaningful way. They have never owned a computer or any device connected to the *web*, and their homes may well be made of plywood and sit over large garbage dumps in the outskirts of major cities. It is often hard to remember that violence and medical vulnerability is widespread in urban centers, affecting lives in ways completely different than, say, the ones of average suburban Americans. However, in an Age of Information, it seems trivial that *any* kind of reality can be portrayed and transmitted “*as it happens*” – in real time, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to spectators anywhere (there is, where Internet connections and appropriate devices are available).

Humanitarian Aid Campaigns partake in this reality, and have been affected by the aforementioned social changes. As we will see in the following sections, the nature of campaigning has shifted. Nowadays, it is pervaded by the possibilities of new medias, in terms of triggering awareness to humanitarian needs and receiving much-needed donations for funding. The object of such campaigns has broadened accordingly, beyond the traditional focus on *persons with humanitarian needs*, in order to include other situations, as the one described in the previous paragraph. In contemporary humanitarianism, assistance gets relocated to violent urban settings not covered by consecrated notions of humanitarian law (the Geneva conventions fostered by the Red Cross since the 19th century).

This paper aims to assess political consequences of this new humanitarianism in terms of effects on the renewed objects of humanitarian campaigns, focusing campaign portrayal of urban settlers allegedly in need of humanitarian assistance. To do so, we will first review some classic campaigning methods and then approach MSF innovations. We will look at two MSF campaigns. Firstly, one that employed images by renowned Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado. Secondly, a more recent one, “*Urban Survivors*”, in collaboration with photographers at NOOR. To understand what political movements underlie such portrayals, we will employ an anthropological approach to agencies as well as representation of *the subalterns* in art.

An Age of Information

It is now commonsensical to say that, during the 20th century, the world has changed arguably more than in many previous centuries altogether. In spite of becoming an abused *cliché*, the idea that *we are now living in new times* has never been more universally widespread. We tend to see those new times on a much broader scale than previous utopians, reformers and futurists – in a global scale, which is experienced daily. The perception that our realities have expanded and converged seems now trivial matter. We attribute the major responsibility for such unprecedented change to revolutions in technology that ultimately coalesced in an Age of Information. With innovations such as computing, the World Wide Web, Wi-Fi, cellphones and Bluetooth gadgets, life has never *seemed* more modern and interconnected – especially in social networks.

Some benchmarks in those so-called *revolutions* are important here. Not only the way we communicate with each other has changed, but also the way we *perceive* reality. A seminal work that explores this idea is Jean Baudrillard's "*The Gulf War did Not Take Place*" (1995), where he discusses the impact of real-time satellite broadcasting of events that took place in the Persian Gulf in 1990-1991. Such framing of events ultimately led to a widespread opinion that a war in the more traditional sense has taken place, despite the lack of engagement between UN and Iraqi armies on the front.

This kind of framing provides two signposts of change spurred by technology (especially communication technologies). The first trait is the greater quantity and quality of information produced and transmitted in real-time by satellite or Internet. In the Gulf War, war was waged with traditional strategic planning efforts of hands-on intelligence, but images were the main source of information at the planning stage. The second trait is that images produced about a certain event can shape people's perception on such event. Images get under the public opinion's skin to such a degree that what took place in the Gulf, despite the lack of battle-related deaths, *becomes* a real war.

It is this second trait that we emphasize, more specifically, regarding the portrayals of recipients of humanitarian aid in MSF campaigns. In this sense, it is relevant to stress the *double effect* of images – not only information providers, but also as powerful knowledge-shapers¹.

Other feelings revolve around the newly dubbed Age of Information that surrounds us. As the Cold War drew to a close with prospects of a new order rising stakes (in spite of its unipolar or multipolar character), the walls that divided the system for so long tumbled down along with the Soviet Union. The unprecedented pacific "resolution" of 45 years of bipolar competition brought into the international arena a *sense of unity* underpinned by the apparent triumph of liberalism and its political ideals – the idea of liberty for all. Triumphant liberalism set forth images of *a world without borders*, a true *globalized world* in economic terms, but also ringing true in the everyday lives of human beings across the globe.

This imaginary of unity is further sustained by the interconnectedness that the Internet made possible in the wake of the personal computer revolution. Access to Internet becomes a norm and the virtual world of social networks, blogs, micro-blogs and emails becomes increasingly an inexorable part of the *material* world – the virtual world seems no longer virtual, but increasingly real for most of its users. The enormous amount of information available within a few clicks and keystrokes is something that preceding generations lacked – and would arguably be at odds with it. Even more impressive is the widespread notion that anyone can contribute to "knowledge" nowadays, that accessibility is universal and user-friendly in unprecedented ways. This is now taken for granted, understood as a "natural" fact in many social settings².

However, this "global web" of information and communication is not as universal as it may seem at a first glance. In spite of the prodigious amount of information available, the high quality of images throughout the Internet and the transmission capacity of broadcast television, there is a large portion of humanity that is underrepresented in social forums of discussion, whose stories seldom illustrate newspapers, which still lack access to Internet and its do-it-yourself philosophy. This creates a vacuum of self-representation, one that is dangerously vulnerable, prone to be filled by the construction of narratives, such as the *American narrative of the Gulf War* criticized by Baudrillard.

¹Baudrillard 1995

²Kluver 2000

The theme of the political construction of “*the other*” is neither new nor circumscribed to the Age of Information, as said by Edward Said’s “*Orientalism*” (1979). Nowadays, there is a palpable increase of those silencing effects of outer-power interventions upon constructions of “*the other*”, as advanced by other authors such as Michael Foucault (1982) and Friedrich Nietzsche (2002), in terms of *the will to power becoming the will to truth*. Knowledge is underpinned by foundational violence and gets fixed in space by a power structure.

In a world where having your own voice is taken for granted, where freedom of expression has reached unprecedented heights of appreciation in the ideal form of the Internet, not participating brings an even heavier silence – the *digital divide* of the *digitally excluded*.

Our paper’s aim is to explore the specific portrayals of aid recipients in campaigns, circulated by NGOs, while keeping in mind this complex structure of communication that produces *paradoxes of knowledge and oblivion*, along with well-constructed *illusions of reality*. To better pursue this effort, it is important, firstly, to look at the evolution of aid campaigns throughout the years; such campaigns changed along with major advances in communication technology. Then, we will deepen our analysis by approaching MSF campaigns, one of the biggest international humanitarian agencies of our time in order to see how, in their own way, they address the issues of awareness, portrayal of recipients and fund-raising objectives. In terms of final remarks, we discuss the issue of the representation of this “*other*”, a debate that centers mainly around (although not restricted to) Spivak’s seminal paper “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*”³. In contemporary humanitarianism, we argue, imagistic representations of subjects as *others* often achieve ends *other* than the provision of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations.

Aid Campaigns

Aid campaigns serve two main purposes: the first is giving visibility to a cause; the second is giving visibility to a humanitarian agency. Those campaigns can involve different media outlets, ranging from leaflets and personal letters to music concerts broadcasted worldwide. One thing that permeates all aid campaigns is that all use strong rhetoric and appealing images depicting *women and children*. Also, there is a global North-South bias taken for granted. Campaigns are targeted at North’s hearts and minds (and wallets).

Increasingly, aid organizations have been reaching out to new media. Short movies (such as *Kony 2012*) have a huge appeal to a varied audience, since it combined appealing imagery in film and the use of social networks to mobilize people for a cause. Historically, the humanitarian sector has also used the power of celebrities to add weight to a certain cause, be actors in campaigns or concerts.

Pictures, though they don’t have as strong an impact individually as other media outlets, are still the most used eye catcher in aid campaigns. Pictures bear a different appeal. They leave a lot to imagination and, at the same time, have the power to touch the *humane* in people. Aid campaigns have this purpose: getting in touch with *human* feelings and highlighting what traits we all share. By playing with sentiments like pity, guilt and charity, images can approximate different social worlds but they can also be invoked to erect borders between “*self/other*”, therefore creating a hierarchy in which aid receivers become the ones lacking agency⁴. This issue will be further developed throughout the article.

Both purposes aid campaigns seek are correlated. Humanitarian agencies actively work for the causes they advocate, trying to raise awareness to issues that have little or no political resonance. This process involves a double mechanism: strong images with strong messages can mobilize civil society to engage in a situation, but the bigger the campaign is, the bigger the potential it bears to shame governments involved – directly, in the case of the state *hosting* the problem, and indirectly, the case of the governments that *host* target audiences. Humanitarian agencies must raise funds to do their very relevant tasks.

The issue of funding is a complex one, not only from the standpoint of the causes defended, but mainly for the humanitarian organizations themselves. Huge organizations have better funding. Although it seems tautological to state that propaganda is necessary in order to keep projects that demand attention but don’t have political importance rolling on, governments tend to give funding to agencies which are more accountable and reputable.

³Spivak 1988

⁴McLagan 2006

This dynamic engenders a vicious cycle, in which agencies grow ever larger and are become present in increasingly more situations of emergency; being larger, they have the capacity to raise larger amounts of aid, which by the way allows them to broaden their scope of action even more⁵.

MSF Campaigning

Aid organizations realized that using images from the people they are trying to raise awareness for is a complex matter. MSF, for example, chose to use images from Sebastião Salgado in its campaigns, due to the different interpretation the artist gives to *the lives of refugees*. Salgado's photography tries to differentiate itself from usual portrayals of the refugee situation. Firstly, the artist only takes black and white pictures, because he believes that the effect creates a different imaginary of the situation, while pictures in color are too *realistic*⁶. The photographer also uses light effects, taking pictures against natural light, which creates an atmosphere that lay open connections with transcendence and divinity, conferring his pictures a broad appeal (following the lines of major Abrahamic religions, in which we are all daughters and sons of the same God).

However, major questions about his pictures revolve around the choices he made. How he chooses to take photos? Salgado has a working ethics that depart from most photographers working in conflict areas. Instead of going from place to place without previous knowledge or major involvement, he spends long periods of time in each place he photographs, getting to know the persons he portrays in their daily lives. His pictures are of people, but they are different because, it is said, they always portray human *agency*. Instead of replicating the victim dimension in refugees or aid recipients, Salgado shows the *resilient* side of people, always portraying them doing some kind of action. As he said *"If the person looking at my pictures only feels compassion, I will believe that I have failed completely. I want people to understand that we can have a solution"*⁷.

A more recent MSF campaign, created in collaboration with NOOR, a photo agency, and Darjeeling Productions is called *"Urban Survivors"*⁸. Hosted in a website and defined as a multimedia project, a *"web-documentary"*, its aim is to *"highlight the critical humanitarian and medical needs that exist in urban settings worldwide"*⁹. In the words of Loris De Filippi, Operational Director for MSF:

*"Slum residents live in a constant state of vulnerability. Not only do they live in places that are unfit for human habitation, they also face discrimination and neglect from other parts of society. Through the Urban Survivors project, we want to put a human face to the humanitarian emergency that exists in many slums around the world."*¹⁰

It is clear from the start that this is a novel effort, not only for MSF but, supposedly, for the humanitarian aid community at large. In this sense, it is a pivotal moment, because this can be perceived as the first portrayals of specific persons in need, along with portrayals of their exact needs. This is made clear by further excerpts from the official release on MSF's website:

*"Featuring the work of award-winning NOOR photographers, Urban Survivors lets visitors discover more about the daily lives of people in these slums, the humanitarian issues they face, and what MSF is doing to address these problems"*¹¹

In order to advance this effort, the campaign approached 5 cities from the Global South which held this groundbreaking humanitarian project: Dhaka (Bangladesh), Karachi (Pakistan), Johannesburg (South Africa), Port-au-Prince (Haiti) and Nairobi (Kenya). In each city, the campaign emphasized local particularities through photographs taken by NOOR (some we made available here as annexes) of such *realities*.

As seen on the website, such photographs consist mainly of fully-colored plans of slums, highlighting, in the first plan, locals and their vulnerability. As an attempt to portray humanitarian needs, it is probably right to say that the campaign succeeds, by bringing to the Internet the grueling scenery of slums.

⁵ Terry 2005

⁶ Campbell 2003

⁷ Guardian apud Campbell 2003

⁸ MSF & NOOR 2011

⁹ MSF 2011

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The quantity of filth captured by the camera eye conveys a clear message of sanitary inadequacy and invokes many diseases associated with such circumstances. It, thus, conveys the need for medical assistance, here advanced as a humanitarian need – incidentally, medical assistance provides the core MSF’s self-image as a humanitarian agency. The filth example is only one among many others that can be extracted from the campaign, but one that is relevant to our purpose: understanding the *double movement* present in portrayals of need and of those in need.

Another feature worth mentioning is the one clearly stated in the first trailer, where a slogan “*Could you live in just 3 square meters?*” is followed and preceded by a series of photographs of small inhabited spaces. By bringing into campaigns such images in order to trigger awareness for this underestimated need, MSF is actively reaching out to explain to its audience *what is needed by whom*. This is a *political* move, acutely difficult to understand and to control when acting in the *humanitarian* field¹². In order to understand the implications of such a move, it is necessary to move over to a more anthropological study of the portrayal of the *subaltern* in art.

Can the Aid Recipient Speak?

The dialectic that produces the *self/other* relationship, which can be seen throughout the series of photographs in this article, is forged by an exclusionary logic identified by Foucault in his study of power relations. This relationship does not appear above the society nexus as a construction that stands out of the society structure itself, but it is a fundamental part of this group, which cannot be single-handed as a neutral point of analysis. Foucault goes further and affirms that it is impossible to see a society exempt of power relations; such a thing could only be considered an abstraction, and would thus be rendered meaningless¹³. These struggles are inherent in power relations and are responsible for a process that culminates with the subjection of participants.

The exclusionary dimension of this particular kind of relationship is central to understand the logic underpinning the fabrication of *subalterns* and the tutoring of their needs. The action that a humanitarian organization performs to portray an individual, a human being in a certain manner serves to create a generic collective image of an “*other*”, a set in which “*their situation*” as a whole becomes a kind of *label* that postulates *a priori* all the needs and aspirations of those under the labeling process. It is important to notice that this process can be intentional or unintentional. The possibility of defining and delimitating *what is shown, in which manner and in what circumstances* constitutes a *political core related to agency*, leaving to the “*others*” portrayed only *a bare representation of itself*, lacking further discussion about their needs, that is, what agency can they have conditioned by their needs¹⁴.

So, based in the Foucault’s logic of power relations, *the act of portrayal itself can be seen as a way of capturing agency*. When you fix the whole cause at one image – or a series of them – you are privileging a specific point of view, inert and fixed, in contrast with the ambivalent dynamics of interactions. The stipulation of characteristics that will appear in a certain campaign ends up putting the eye of beholding spectators under this particular perspective, and many repercussions are at sight.

This action not only assigns two different entities in the same relation, but establishes a particular interaction of meaning between the portrait and the ones seeing it. Such relations are deeply analyzed by the literature that tries to understand the *locus* of art and cultural representations in power and societal relationships. Gell’s work is a fundamental milestone to understanding how photographs and other representations show a lot more than one image – we should pay attention to other dimensions of its signification¹⁵. This author affirms that art does not only play a representational role in social life; it has also a *mediatory* identity, which gives way to notions of relational agency even in allegedly “*pure*” acts of portrayal.

Agency is, therefore, relational. That is, the act of observation and further registration made by the observer has to be seen as a special point where he could have made inferences, particular to his own, to that scene.

¹² The humanitarian field is especially sensitive to political moves because of its manifest emotional component, the humanitarian imperative – that does not aim at being rationalized any time soon. Although the discussion of this psychological dimension is not the purpose of our paper, it represents an important step in furthering research.

¹³ Foucault 1982

¹⁴ Haddad 2002

¹⁵ Chua 2009

Gell highlights that the observer has some power of agency over the observed, that is, he could have made inferences or have taken a particular point of view where this observation gains connotations that would not been uttered by another observer¹⁶. One of his examples – a story – is very enticing in matters of agency and objects in artistic craft. There was a Mongol emperor who ordered one of its sculptors to carve a cup where he should sculpt some adornments which shall praise the emperor's victories. While object – patient – of the emperor's agency, the sculptor turns into an agent when comes to decide what to sculpt.

The emperor, once the one who had agency and the one about to be portrayed, becomes a patient, and the sculptor became the agent¹⁷. To illustrate his point he elaborates a concept called the *abduction of agency*, which is the leap by which portraits attribute capabilities, becoming, therefore, its objects¹⁸. This abduction takes place by an appropriation of someone's characteristics under a certain object, removing the manifestation of the portrayed as an agent, but fixing him as an inert object under appreciation – in a photograph. There is not much room to identify or interpret the patient apart from the way that the portraying agent has already fixed her/him. This observation is very useful to understand what is left to the subaltern under the labeled representation: a fixed and empty image of its needs, based on the observation of the one who holds the agency.

Gell's work has a limitation concerning the contextual aspect of art objects, in our case, photos and campaigns. His work focuses the primary interaction, where the abduction of agency takes place, but he does not consider any further interaction that the object could have in a given ambient¹⁹. This relation forgets an important aspect of that occurs after the first interaction between the object and the patient of the art object, which is the different contextual meaning that this picture could have in different situations. Every time this object is shown to a person, a distinct interpretation of its meanings could be done (although there are material limits to this enterprise).

This particular characteristic of the correlation of meaning and its diverse implications in distinct cultures is observed in the work of Wendy Griswold. Researcher and student of cultural sociology, her work focuses the understanding of meanings produced by objects and the process of meaning-making. This approach emphasizes that symbolic manifestations and meanings attached to material objects overtake material aspects in understanding its implications in a given society²⁰. The impact of a given object is structured by its interaction with the space and viewers, in a process in which the previously available knowledge stock of spectators is decisive to framing specific interpretations. The meanings of objects are based on their *symbolic capacities*, but also dependent on the *perception apparatus* of those who experience it²¹.

The dialogue with the literatures who debate agency and the production of meaning in art is a fundamental contribution to a critical interpretation of how an aid campaigns have meaning-making properties. We can better understand this production if we consider the sociological aspects under the political umbrella that holds it in place. Since the photo represents a static and labeled object whose agency was stolen by Gell's *process of abduction*, the production of meaning stems from series of interpretations that will occur when this exposition reaches viewers²². The cultural aspects of those who see portrayals of others sense different productions of meaning.

The correlation between the one who produces the object, the one who becomes its object and those who see it is later where the process of the abduction of agency takes place implicates the production of specific meanings by the participants. The choice of models, locations, focuses and frames not only undermines the agency of those portrayed, but also gives the sensation that significations, aspirations and needs portrayed are *particular and peculiar* to the ones carved or photographed and transmitted to the viewer, thus circumscribing the human subjectivity and even possibly backfiring the purposes of humanitarian agencies.

¹⁶Gellapud Coote & Shelton 1992

¹⁷Gell 1998

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Chua 2009

²⁰McDonnell 2010

²¹Griswold 1987b

²²Gell 1998

What emerges from this deceptively simplistic relation of art production is the silencing of those who are portrayed amidst of *abduction of agency*– by the one who portrayed them, but also by the interpretation that viewers will provide. This specific relation can structure a *dangerous liaison* in which the art object could have been intentionally made to fulfill a particular view or sense of interpretation. The representation of the object is forced down a given path, where the goals of portrayal can be arranged into socially less conflicting (though salient and appealing) ones. Representations, then, become propaganda – give the viewers what they want by way of connotation, mobilizing their emotions, in a way that will keep audience closer to their comfort zones.

In this case, the agency of those who portrayed is not only abducted, but also perverted. Their true agency, abducted by a process of art production, is not only taken away, but also modified into an appropriate *function*. This process transcends the intention of the arts and artistic representations, in a way in which representation it is not a true resemblance of a given situation, but a general and amorphous mass that is fashioned with an objective. Here, the issue lies above the objectives of representation – whether the representation is a representation itself (the agency of the portrayed is reduced by artistic production) or representations get fashioned to fulfill a purpose.

When we resume the considerations from a Foucauldian perspective of power relations, we get additional insights on the relationship. The act of distinguishing between *what has to be shown* and *what shouldn't* consists in a *power act* on the part of those that choose to portray others. Agency lies beyond the artistic intentions and relations highlighted by Gell, when he defines what a fact is and what is not²³. When the portrayer decides to emphasize a specific distinction or a given cause, its power relies in creating *what exists in the situation* and what is transmitted to third part spectators. Those portrayed are not only defined in terms framed by the portrayer; *the very condition of what is true or not* is transmitted as well.

This Foucauldian perspective which problematizes agency in terms of the conditions of art's production has an additional element: the reception of art objects by spectators. The symbolic meanings of an object, responsible by the materialization of its manifestation, get twisted by a determined bias intentionally fostered. This process implicates the creation of blurry categories and interpretations that do not rightly assess the representations of the observed and, in a general way, create a specific and biased production of what the portrayer wants to be (see) revealed – a bewilderment motivated by its own expectations.

In humanitarian campaigns, processes of abduction and pervasion of true needs of those portrayed have dangerous implications. They could create not a true portrayal of each necessity and desire, but a general label that takes over all the specificities and turns them into a generic object, with no differentiation between the samples of individuals that are subjected to this situation. This process of labeling creates what Soguk calls an “*amorphous voiceless mass*”²⁴. He states that the agency of those portrayed do not exist in its proper way, with distinct voices and needs, but only as a conglomerate of identical persons without any destiny in sight.

So, the production of art, in the form as a humanitarian campaign, contains a complex nexus of agency and action, in which the observer, the portrayed and the portrayer get entangled. Agency in the humanitarian field, which is up to a certain point pacifically presupposed by the portrayer in the art movement highlighted by Gell²⁵, is not only abducted, but disrupted during the process of meaning creation, as a particular focus is conferred. This focus results in a biased way of seeing the situation, adjusted by those who control this agency and the distribution of portrayals, creating not just representations, but thick descriptions of amorphous subjects. The reference of agency ceases to be artistic representation, turning to power and control – thus, portrayal serves many ends.

In the case of humanitarian campaigns, this kind of politics at play is even more alarming. Unlike works of art, that may be an end in themselves, campaigns that carry images of this kind of “*otherness*” serve as a means to an end. This end can be inferred as the need to raise awareness or to raise money. In case of awareness, this can also be understood as advocacy (political lobbying) or also to inspire donations to humanitarian agencies. Many factors are involved here, but it is crucial to note that, above all, we notice that portrayals of aid receivers in humanitarian campaigns (or of those still in need of aid) serves a certain end.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Soguk 1999

²⁵Gell 1998

In some way or another, those images passed to viewers bear this purpose in mind, thus triggering what we identified as an abduction/perversion of agency of those human beings portrayed.

It is only when the ones who portray and later distribute such image become aware of these pervert effects that their impact can be minimized – but never completely erased. Many initiatives towards empowerment of aid receivers have been released on field, but results still remain to be seen.

Thus, we must always keep in mind the political effects – of constitution and subjection – that come along with portrayals of someone in need, which frame what someone in need of. This is an act of power as well as of narration, more than mere representation or mediations of an image. It is, in Foucault's terms, the disciplining of a body into conformity of "*what it should look like*" – a purpose, an end that such an image should promote – in spite of the (supposedly) best intentions of aid agencies promoting campaigns.

MSF/NOOR groundbreaking campaign "*Urban Survivors*" not only raised stakes over effective humanitarian needs and its audience's capacity to contribute to change the lives of "*survivors*". The campaign also framed the images of who is in need and what they need. Despite all careful planning and structuring, it still comes out as a perversion of agency – perhaps a more conscious one, in contrast with those that circulated in the early days of aid campaigning, when such notions were not as understood and their effects, studied by anthropologists and, eventually, by IR scholars, advancing Spivak's enduring question: "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*".

This is further complicated by multimedia features of contemporary communications, in its globalized scope. As discussed above, in the Age of Information, the Internet has become one of the main fonts of knowledge about the world beyond our daily lives and, for the majority of MSF's target audience, the slums portrayed in "*Urban Survivors*" are far removed from their *daily online lives*. More than a source of information, the Internet has created a *renewed sense of reality*, in which everyone has access and agency (inside digital borders) – a sense of freedom that acquires great meaning in our times. The agency lacked by those portrayed in images gains an even more poignant relevance, once triggered by the Internet revolution.

Final remarks: Speaking on the subject after the subjects' speech

After this exploration of the major themes behind the representation of the other in art and in humanitarian campaigns, a lot of issues still remain to be addressed. We have seen that perversion/abduction of agency in the portrayal of an "*other*" is an effect that is hard to escape from, in spite of mostly conscious efforts by those ordering such portrayals. This, in aid campaigns, is an extremely delicate situation, since the narratives portrayed are sometimes the only ones accessible by the larger public. This happens because of the destitute and distant reality of those in need, when compared to target audiences. It is important to state that these are relational notions and, thus, filled with power relations²⁶.

Especially in the case of "*Urban Survivors*" – MSF's campaign that aims at raising awareness to a very specific and underestimated type of humanitarian need, that of the urban, vulnerable and violent settings – and others that have circulated the Internet with great notice, much still remains to be explored. An investigative effort in this sense can further both the understanding of the situation and, in the future, raise awareness inside the humanitarian agencies themselves, about side-effects and unintended consequences of campaigning, thus spearheading more responsible (and maybe creative) responses.

In this sense, we continue to defend that, despite the many attempts at answering the question "*Can the subaltern speak?*", that here we have translated as "*Can the Aid Recipient Speak?*" it is necessary to continue investigating the matter, furthering our understanding of the issue of marginal agency and grass-roots mobilization. It is still necessary to look at the other side of the equation and identify, through the portrayal of humanitarian action, what exactly is legitimized/advertised by agencies. Without tackling the scope of political action, no assessment of power-impact of international, regional or national organizations in any issue-area is complete. Our aim was to get a little bit closer to coming to terms with the world in which we live in.

²⁶Foucault 1982

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Annexes

As explained in the paper, those photos are here reproduced from the MSF online campaign “*Urban Survivors*”. Considered a “*web-documentary*”, the use of photos online aims at fostering interactivity and highlighting the subject of the campaign, the needs of those portrayed. A glimpse of the site’s main features is offered below.

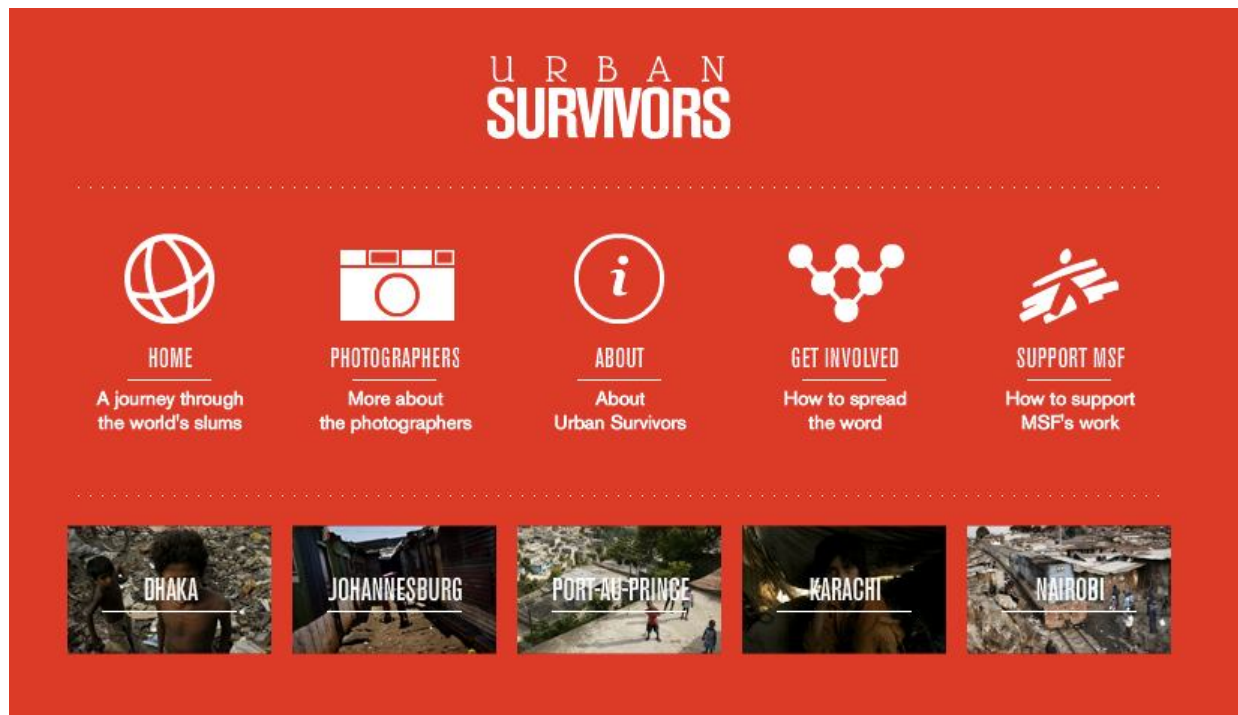


Figure 1: Urban Survivors, main page

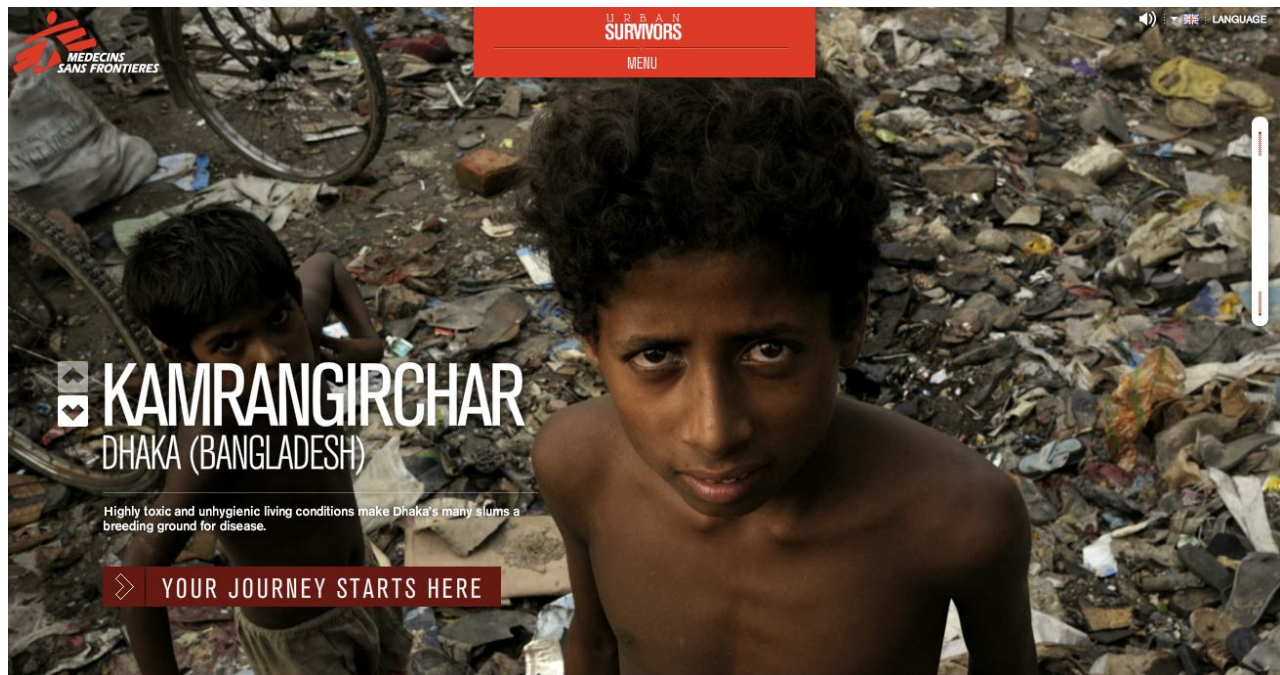


Figure 2: Urban Survivors, Kamrangirchar, Bangladesh

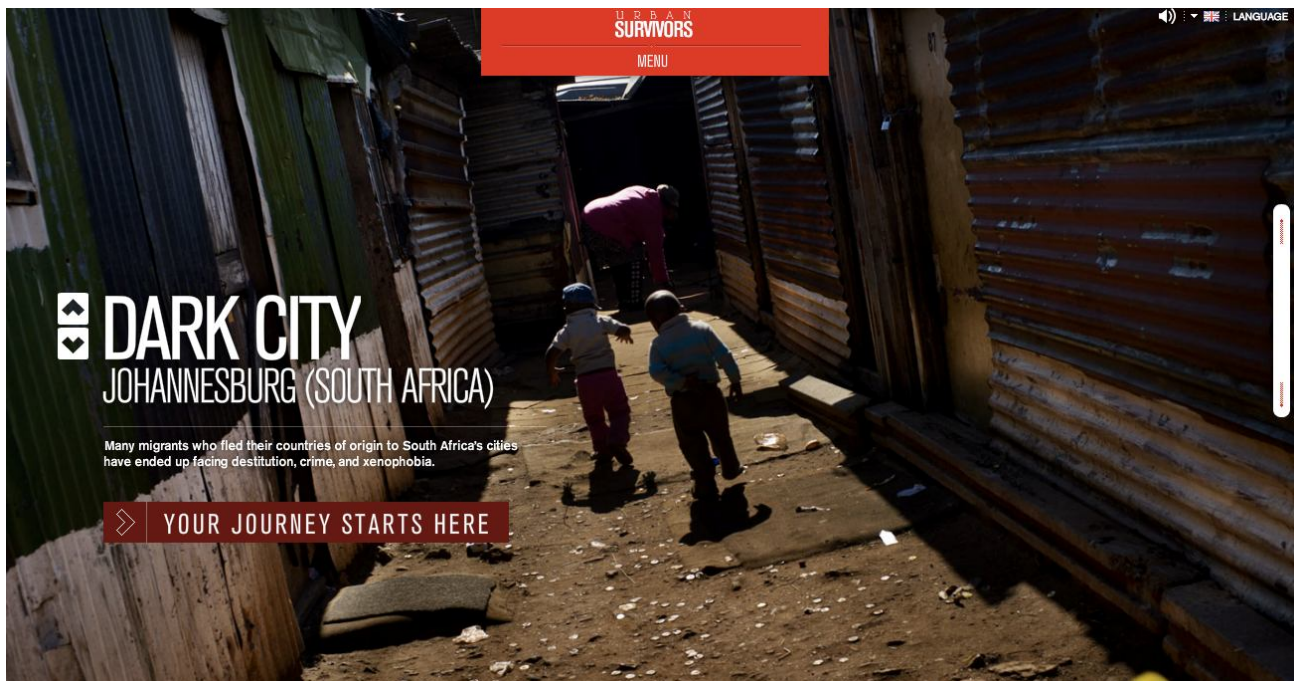


Figure 3: Urban Survivors, Dark City, Johannesburg, South Africa

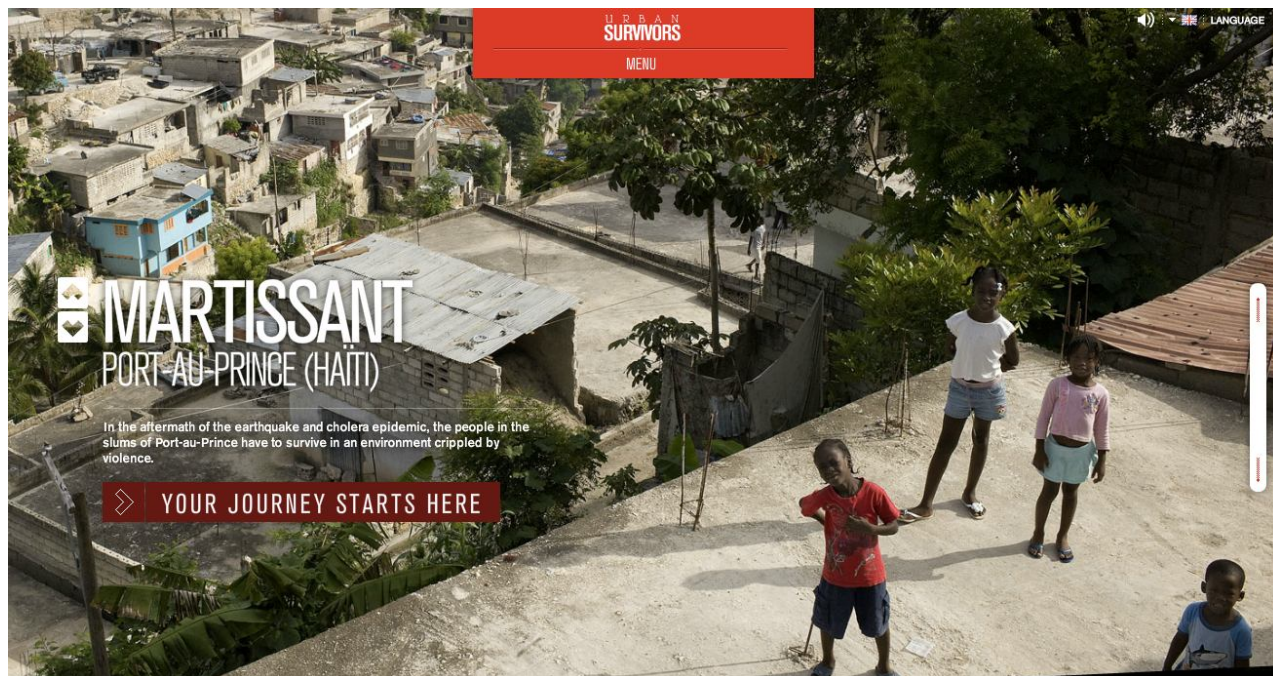


Figure 4: Urban Survivors, Martissant, Port-Au-Prince, Haiti

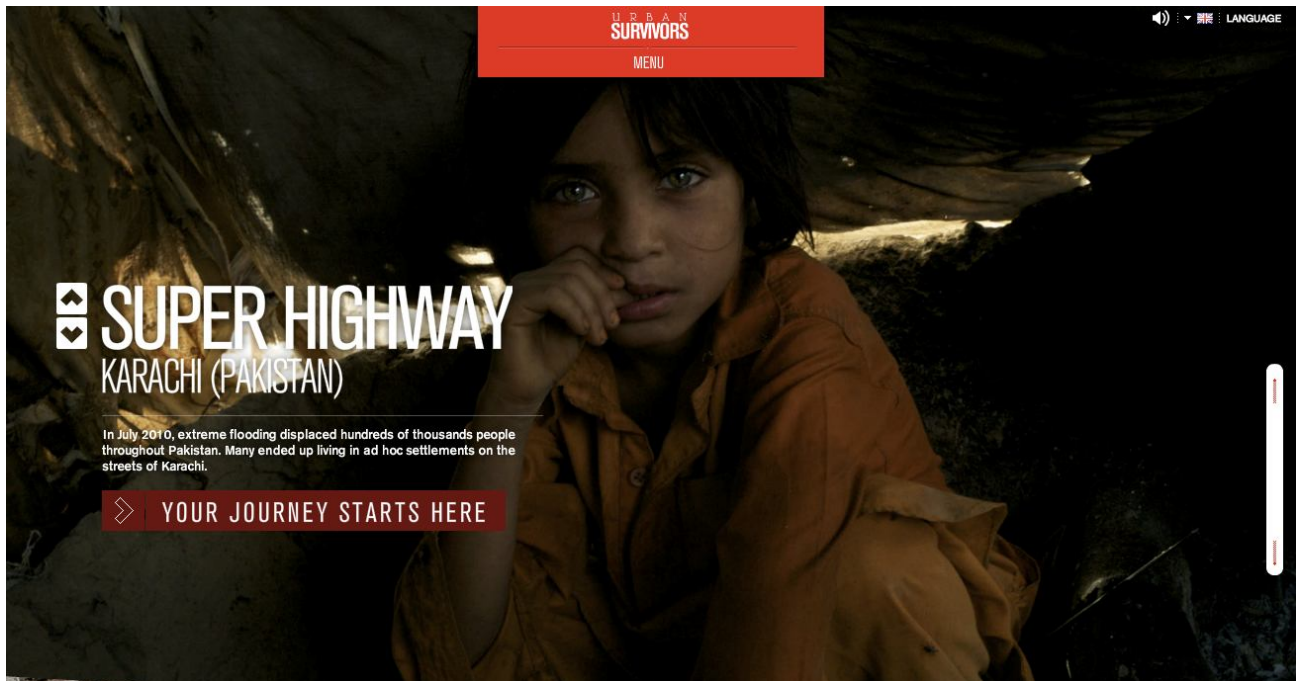


Figure 5: Urban Survivors, Super Highway, Karachi, Pakistan

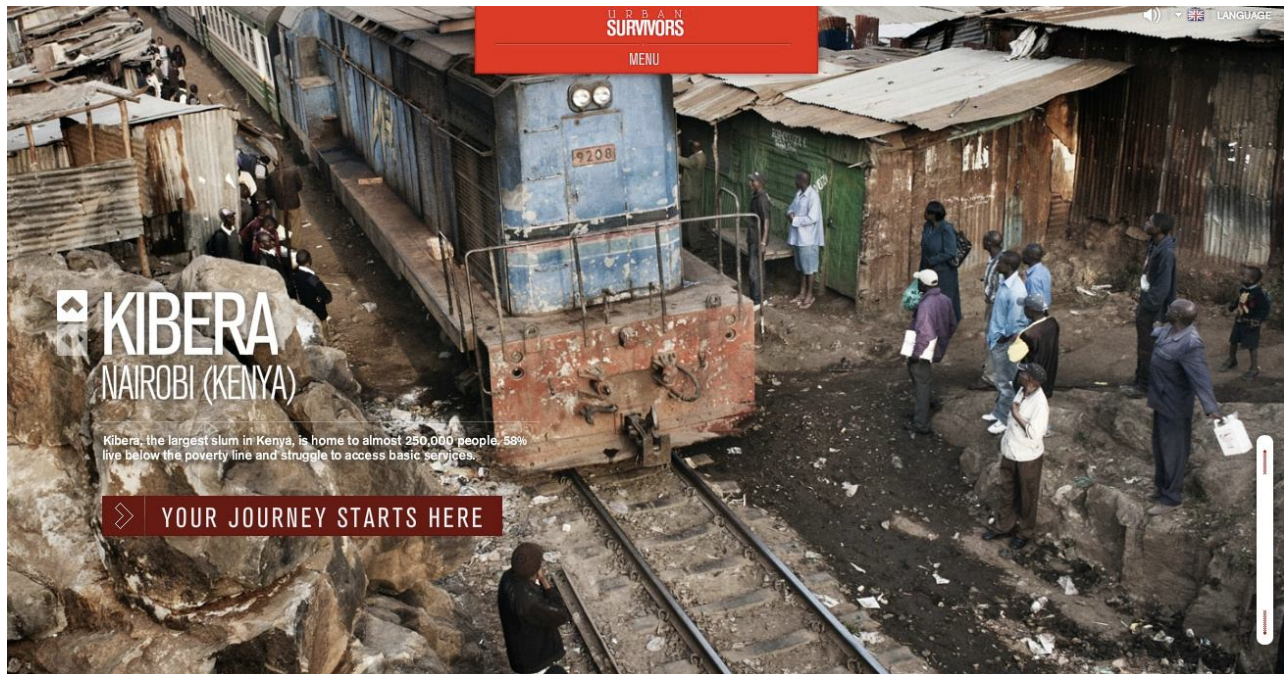


Figure 6: Urban Survivors, Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya