

Distant Compassion

CNN and Borriboola-Gha

—Clifford Orwin—

AS HUMAN BEINGS have always suffered, so have they responded to the suffering of others. Compassion is as old as the human race. What is new is our window on the distress of fellow human beings no matter how remote from us. Thanks to the impact of the information revolution, there is no instance of suffering anywhere that is out of range of the camera or that, once recorded, is not instantly available for display everywhere. Often we view these reproductions “live” as the suffering actually occurs. Should we miss them the first time around, we can count on the most gripping ones being replayed again and again. Without leaving our living rooms we have the sorrows of the world at our fingertips. As the French commentator Pierre Hassner has noted, the power of televised horrors has vindicated (in a manner of speaking) Immanuel Kant’s hope that a violation of right anywhere on earth would be felt everywhere on it.¹

Naturally this development has been widely noticed. People speak of the “CNN

factor.” The theory is that thanks to the immediate and insistent diffusion of such images of suffering, democratic governments have come and will continue to come under pressure from their peoples to undertake humanitarian interventions. Thus may the gods of television pride themselves on furnishing their viewers with an education in humanity more universal, more vivid, more effective than any earlier one. This is a beautiful hope—but how plausible is it?

The Need for Images

IT IS A FACT that many viewers credit television with having awakened their concern for distant sufferings to which they would otherwise have remained indifferent. There is even a reason why television might seem particularly suited to such a role. Compassion depends on the imagination. Only insofar as we can imagine the sufferings that we ascribe to the other—and perhaps even only insofar as we can imagine those sufferings befalling ourselves—do these kindle our compassion for him. (It is for both these reasons that most children exhibit so little compassion.) Imagination, in turn, requires images, the more concrete the better. What will excite our sympathy for the

Clifford Orwin is professor of political science at the University of Toronto and author of *The Humanity of Thucydides* (Princeton University Press, 1994). This article is a revised version of a talk given on September 6, 1995 in Seoul at the Global Convention on Tolerance and the Restoration of Morality and Humanity, sponsored by UNESCO and Kyung Hee University.

¹Hassner, “Par-delà le national et l’international: la dérision et l’espoir”, *La violence et la paix: de la bombe atomique au nettoyage ethnique* (Paris: Éditions Esprit, 1995), pp. 343-4.

people of Rwanda is not the grim tally of the dead or displaced, however horrific that may be. As the French sociologist Luc Boltanski has noted in his valuable study, *La Souffrance à distance* (*Suffering at a Distance*), a table of statistics on poverty, however grim, does not evoke compassion with the plight of the poor.² What is needed are images of particular victims, pegs on which to hang our imagination. As Kant once remarked, “a suffering child fills our heart with sadness, while we learn with indifference the news of a terrible battle.”³

Of course, as we may as well admit at the outset, televised images of suffering trade at a substantial discount. The first point about such images on which to insist is also the most obvious. As with everything televised, we can always turn them off or tune them out, i.e., watch without seeing and listen without hearing. In the many households in which television serves as a permanent background din, the horrors that it displays remain in the background also. As for those viewers who do pay attention, they are always free to change the channel. The five hundred-channel universe will offer plenty of alternative fare. Recently, advertising campaigns for foster parent programs have begun to challenge the viewer directly either to respond to the suffering displayed before him or just to switch channels as he has done so often in the past. I would be curious to know the success of such campaigns.

Let’s assume, however, that as good citizens we do watch the news each night. We then experience the rhythm of the typical newscast, which follows grave matters with trivial ones (e.g., weather, sports, “lifestyles”, and entertainment news). Whatever sufferings may have assailed us at the top of the hour, our minds are eased back into the usual preoccupations of everyday life in a consumer society. Television producers tend to remember—they have confessed it to me—that their audience wishes to be entertained. And the right amount of suffering is entertaining—but only the right amount. Even

within the realm of televised pathos, the actual misfortunes of distant peoples must vie with talk shows, soap operas, and prime time dramas, all striving to be more maudlin than the competition. So while television doubtless renders distant sufferings more vivid, it does not thereby necessarily render them more real.

The danger of blurring the line between real and fictive suffering is all the greater in the case of foreign affairs, our sense of the reality of which is none too solid to begin with. So remote are these affairs from our ordinary concerns as citizens of modern democracy, and so tenuous their relevance to these concerns, that, as Joseph Schumpeter long ago observed, “one feels oneself to be moving in a fictitious world.”

What strikes me most of all and seems to me to be the core of the trouble is the fact that the sense of reality is so completely lost. Normally, the great political questions take their place in the psychic economy of the typical citizen with those leisure-hour interests that have not attained the rank of hobbies. . . . This reduced sense of reality accounts not only for a reduced sense of responsibility but also for the absence of effective volition. One has one’s phrases, of course, and one’s . . . likes and dislikes. But ordinarily they do not amount to what we call a will—the psychic counterpart of purposeful responsible action.⁴

²Boltanski, *La Souffrance à distance: morale humanitaire, médias, et politique* (Paris: Métailié, 1993), p. 27.

³Immanuel Kant, [*Remarks to the*] *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (*Bemerkungen zu den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*) [1764-65], trans. J.T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), pp. 57-62.

⁴Schumpeter, “The Classical Doctrine of Democracy”, in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 261.

Can television, itself a "leisure-hour interest that [has] attained the rank of [a hobby]", bring home to us the reality of such faraway happenings? Yes and no. Recent writers have underscored the paradox that television at the same time brings distant matters closer to us and serves to distance us from these very matters. The viewer is not as such a teledoer (or even a doer of things close to home). As Curtis Gans puts it, "People say that television brings the international community into your living room, but what it really does is bring *you* into your living room" (and, he might have added, keep you there). Harvard political scientist Robert D. Putnam has suggested a negative correlation between television watching and participation in community activities of whatever sort (and, more interestingly, a positive correlation between newspaper reading and such participation).⁵

I will not dwell on the vanity of looking to television to effect universal moral regeneration. The noteworthy fact is rather that, despite the ease of evasion, the CNN factor is real. Consider the terrible spectacles of starvation in Somalia, tribal slaughter in Rwanda, and ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. In the past, the first two of these would hardly have come to the attention of publics in the Western democracies, let alone have captured their imagination. Nor would Bosnia have assumed the role of the central foreign policy issue confronting those democracies. None of these cases is perceived by the relevant publics as crucial to their respective national interests. The widespread response to them has therefore indeed been "humanitarian", and has been stimulated largely by televised images.

In assessing the promise of this response, we should note at the outset Boltanski's distinction between "humanitarian" and "communal" (*communautaire*) frameworks of response to suffering.⁶ The former obtains where there is no commitment or partiality (or for that matter antipathy) prior to the perception of suffering. This perception

forges the bond, which expresses itself in the spectator's efforts to relieve the suffering. Here the reaction is that of a human being to the distress of a fellow human being, not that of an American to the distress of a fellow American, or of a Presbyterian to that of a fellow Presbyterian, or of a communist to that of a fellow communist. Responses of this last sort, reflecting a prior commitment founded on a shared particular identity, are what Boltanski calls "communal."

In terms of this schema, then, a Hutu's attachment to other Hutus is communal: it precedes and shapes his response to their misfortune. Similarly, his hatred of Tutsis conditions his reaction to whatever suffering might befall them: he welcomes it, and may seek to aggravate it. He will surely not wish to relieve it. If he does, he rises above his tribal identity to respond to the sufferings of a fellow human being; in that case his response is a humanitarian one. The typical onlooker from afar is partial to neither tribe and interests himself in the fate of its members only as victims of suffering; his response is "humanitarian."

Rousseau and Mrs. Jellyby

BOLTANSKI'S distinction between humanitarian and communal responses to suffering recalls the reflections of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the first great modern proponent of a politics founded on compassion. While modern thought had been philanthropic or "humanitarian" from the outset, Rousseau was the first to seek to ground this concern in a direct emotional response to the sufferings of others. He was the first to interpret moral education as largely an education in compassion, relying precisely on exposure to images of the sort that we are discussing.

⁵Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995), p. 75.

⁶Boltanski, pp. 24-9.

In his work *Émile or On Education* Rousseau depicts the education of an imaginary pupil whose tutor (Rousseau's alter ego) sets out to instill in him the virtue of humanity. This requires exposure to the whole range of human suffering, moral as well as physical, in every station of life and in every class of society. The poor, the sick, the crippled, the unfortunate and the dispossessed, those ravaged by vanity—all have their day in the sun of Émile's compassion. Many an expedition must be undertaken, and many a *mise en scène* contrived to assure Émile an ample and balanced diet of vicarious suffering. As the obtrusive barriers to mutual sympathy in the society of the ancien régime were those of class, it is these above all which Émile must learn to transcend. He must undertake a new kind of Grand Tour (carefully chaperoned as was the usual sort), not of the other countries of Europe but of the different milieux of misery within his own. Émile is to learn that contrary to what the rich man likes to think, the poor are as sensitive to suffering as he is—and he is as vulnerable to it as they are.

Yet if breadth of sensitivity to human misery is the goal, why not a Grand Tour of the usual sort? Since Rousseau likens the youthful Émile to a knight-errant, relieving suffering wherever he finds it, why not make of him a *compatisant sans frontières*?

As a matter of fact, Émile is to be led to conclude from his exposure to suffering that it is the lot not just of Frenchmen but of mankind as such. Practically speaking, however, Rousseau placed no faith in a global or cosmopolitan benevolence. He viewed this last as a pose of the intellectuals of his day, the so-called *philosophes*.

Distrust those cosmopolitans who go to great length in their books to discover duties they do not deign to fulfill around them. A philosopher loves the Tartars so as to be spared having to love his neighbor.⁷

Rousseau's critique of what we would call "humanitarianism" follows from his analysis

of the psychological basis of compassion. According to him the force of our commiseration varies with our capacity to relate to the specific sufferings and sufferer. Compassion tends to be most effective where spectator and victim have the most in common.

It seems that the sentiment of humanity evaporates and weakens as it is extended over the whole world, and that we can't be moved by calamities in Tartary or Japan as we are by those of a European people. Interest and commiseration must in some way be compressed to be activated. Now since this inclination in us can only be useful to those with whom we have to live, it is good that the feeling of humanity, concentrated among fellow citizens, gains fresh force through the habit of seeing one another and the common interest that unites them.⁸

Nearby sufferings foster compassion in those educated to respond to them; far-off ones provide the insensitive with an alibi for failing to act to relieve those nearby. Rousseau's critique of compassion at a distance anticipates Dickens's presentation of

⁷Rousseau, *Émile or On Education*, translated with an interpretive essay by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 39. For the original French see Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. B. Gagnebin and M. Raymond, 5 vols. (hereafter *O.C.*), (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-95), vol. 4, p. 249. Cf. Rousseau's remark in the *Geneva Manuscript*: "It is apparent from this what should be thought of those supposed cosmopolitans who, justifying their love of the homeland by means of their love of the human race, boast of loving everyone in order to have the right to love no one." Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, with *Geneva Manuscript and Political Economy*, ed. Roger D. Masters and trans. Judith R. Masters (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 162 (*O.C.*, vol. 3, p. 287).

⁸Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*, in Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, p. 219 (*O.C.*, vol. 3, p. 254).

Mrs. Jellyby, so mindful of the plight of the natives of Borrioboola-Gha and so blind to the needs of her own children and the sufferings of the London poor.⁹

To which we must add, of course, that even if the men of Rousseau's day had possessed the will to global beneficence, they would have lacked the means. Not even the French king, the most powerful monarch in Europe, could have provided "humanitarian aid" to the victims of a disaster in Tartary. Hence Rousseau's remark that one's commiseration could only be useful to those with whom one lived. Obviously this is no longer the case. On the other hand, even were interventions on the other side of the globe to become possible, Rousseau would not have expected human beings to undertake them with the constancy that their fellow citizens might expect from them.

Returning then to Boltanski's distinction between humanitarian and communal frameworks of response to suffering, we can see that Rousseau's thought issues for all practical purposes in an endorsement of the communal one. The more we share with the sufferer above and beyond our common humanity, the keener our sense of the latter. A tight political community (Rousseau's models were ancient Sparta and Rome) fosters this sense of humanity (if only toward other insiders). The absence of such communities (as in the Europe of large monarchies of Rousseau's day) tends to diffuse it. The choice is between an intense but constrained humanity and a universal but shallow one. Those who speak of the "global village" of television watchers must consider whether this expression is not misleading. While the relations of traditional villagers were permanent, deep, and insular, those of their global equivalents are fleeting, casual, even illusory. The power of television notwithstanding, what we feel for a distant stranger is unlikely to approach our solicitude for one of our own. Unless we're a Mrs. Jellyby.

Yet another obstacle, then, to a sustained commitment to any humanitarian interven-

tion in the Third World is the "otherness" of those who need our assistance there. By this Boltanski intends more than the foreignness of these peoples in the usual sense. He means to convey as well the vast chasm separating our way of life from those of the sufferers to whom we are called upon to rally. There is nothing to mediate between the two ways of life; while appealing to our common humanity, these ragged, tribal, often unpeaceable peoples are alien to us in every other respect.

Indeed, this gulf is perhaps wider than it ever has been, not only in material terms but even in spiritual ones. In the 1920s, survey research disclosed that the people whom Americans most disliked were the Turks. Americans then were still deeply Christian—as were the victims of the Turks. So too Americans of the 1950s accepted a special humanitarian obligation to the South Koreans, destituted by the struggle against communism. In Boltanski's terms, a "communal" element supported the humanitarian one, and focused and invigorated the latter just as Rousseau would have predicted.

The Cold War is over and Christianity has declined in the West for several generations now. We are thus left with two fewer grounds of identification with any particular group of sufferers in the Third World. There remains, of course, a variety of "communal" attachments: that of Jews to Israel, for example, and more recently, that of African Americans to Haiti. Turkish Americans will side with Turkey, and Greek Americans with Greece. One can't hold a discussion of the former Yugoslavia without attracting indignant partisans. But most of us will lack such attachments in most of the cases that confront us as viewers. The media choose their featured victims from the larger slate available to them, and from these the viewer chooses his. Given the interchangeability of the sufferers, however—all are grievously afflicted, all are worthy of our compassion, all are people with whom we

⁹Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, chapters 4, 5, 8.

have little in common beyond this—it is not surprising that television can rarely generate permanent constituencies for them. One such case in which it has played some role is the partiality of certain Western intellectuals for Sarajevo, on the (dubious) premise that its citizens are modern secularists, victims of a sectarianism in which they take no part.

Increasingly, then, humanitarianism in Boltanski's sense, and it alone, will define the relationship of most of us with the majority of distant sufferers. Humanitarianism as so conceived may link human beings however dissimilar, but such links are liable to be fickle and highly unstable. To find, as the Good Samaritan did, a single victim by the roadside is one thing. To confront a succession of them on television, widely scattered around the globe, is something else entirely. Our humanitarian impulses may fire, but they will also tend to sputter. On the one hand, we wish that we could help; on the other, we are only too likely to feel ourselves absolved by the fact of this very wish.

To Intervene Ineffectually

BUT IF WE ourselves are slow to act, we will still welcome such action on the part of others. Whatever the limitations of a televised perspective on distant sufferings, it is likely to foster in citizens a predisposition toward humanitarian intervention by governments. Here, however, we must pay attention to the adjective as well as the noun: "humanitarian" qualifies "intervention."

The instances of Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia, to name three of the most recent, disclose not only the possibilities but the limits of humanitarian action. Indeed, for millions of North Americans (I discuss only the continent that I know best) "humanitarian" implies the limits of the desirable commitment to a given situation in which their nation has no interests of a more pressing sort. As that which is noble precisely because it is not (from the point of view of the

donor's interests) urgent, humanitarianism has at the same time the highest and the lowest claim to the attention of the donor country.

As a principle of foreign policy, then, "humanitarianism" proves a curious blend of interventionism and isolationism. (This is as true of Canadians as of Americans, for while Canadians have been as willing to contribute their young men as peacekeepers as Americans have been generally averse to it, what they mean by peacekeeping is an activity involving little danger.) Hence the penchant for multilateralism in operations of this kind. This last is taken not only to vouch for the humanitarianism of an intervention—multilateralism abroad being analogous to nonpartisanship at home—but also to limit both its costs and risks.¹⁰

From this it follows that the viability of humanitarian intervention abroad depends very much on the perception of it at home. Here too the role of television is both crucial and ambiguous. As no other medium is as successful in evoking sentiment in favor of intervention in the first place, so none should have proved as effective at sustaining it. A long train of images of suffering, as a daily feature in months of newscasts, provides an ongoing reminder of the humanitarian basis of the intervention. But it also fuels doubt as to whether the intervention is succeeding. And while underscoring the ruthlessness of an oppressor may deepen indignation toward him as well as compassion for his victim, it also highlights the risks inherent in continued intervention.

Both of these effects are on display in the response of the American public to the situation in Bosnia. An article in the *New York Times* this past summer surveyed the views of the inhabitants of Merrillville, Indiana:

¹⁰On the limits of humanitarianism in foreign policy as viewed from a European perspective, see the excellent discussion by Hassner, pp. 350-1.

Donna Stath was embarrassed. 'I try to follow the war in Bosnia, but it's so confusing. . . . It's been going on for three hundred or four hundred years. I know there are atrocities going on. . . . I think it's sad . . . I think, Golly, is this a similar situation to Nazi Germany? And everyone ignored that for how many years?' But when it comes to the question of American involvement in Bosnia, Mrs. Stath . . . feels deeply reluctant. 'I think it would be another Vietnam', she said. 'I don't think our sons and fathers should be losing their lives over it. I think we should continue the dialogue.'¹¹

Mrs. Stath is torn between two precedents for viewing the conflict: that of Nazi Germany, which implies that a more vigorous American intervention is imperative, and that of Vietnam, which she takes to imply the opposite. Not surprisingly it is the more recent of the two that prevails. The interviewer presents Mrs. Stath's response as typical; it is certainly the case that it reflects the ambivalence (and even the vocabulary) of television coverage. Others interviewed in Merrillville explicitly presented televised images of suffering as their only source of information about the conflict. While they were shaken, these images had left them as uneasy as Mrs. Stath over the prospect of direct intervention.

It is hardly surprising that the responses of Western governments to the Balkan war have deferred to this ambivalence. These governments have wanted to do something, and they have wanted to appear to do something, but they have not wanted to appear to do too much. They have wished their interventions to be [tele]visible, while avoiding [tele]visible losses. "We knew from the beginning of the war what can no longer be concealed", the German essayist Peter Schneider has written, "[that] Western threats and initiatives were meant primarily to ease the suffering of the European onlookers rather than that of the victims themselves."¹² Not long ago a high official of a

European foreign ministry was asked—off the record—why his country's policy was neither to intervene in force in Bosnia nor to refrain from intervening, but rather to intervene ineffectually. He replied that such was the policy dictated by the CNN factor. From such revelations a skeptic might conclude that as it is on television that the evil comes to light, so that is where it must be combated: images of actual suffering are neutralized by ones of symbolic concern.

With a flawed peace agreement now in place and a U.S.-led intercession underway to enforce it, the situation has changed dramatically. The Clinton administration has deferred to the frailty of compassion as a *casus belli* with a self-defeating promise to withdraw American forces in one year's time. In the meantime, images of refugees and sniping have given way to perhaps even more affecting ones of empty snowswept fields beneath which thousands of corpses lie buried. The question remains whether an intervention whose public support has been generated by humanitarianism at a distance will continue to be sustained by it. For now this question is unanswerable, yet it may soon become moot. With the engagement of American forces a new "communal" interest is likely to override the "humanitarian" one, with consequences impossible to predict. Will the public cut and run if and when serious American casualties occur? Or will indignation at those who have inflicted them fire a new determination to punish malefactors no longer perceived as merely the savage enemies of others?

Those who, like myself, have favored intervention in the Balkans are obliged to consider what policy will best serve relative

¹¹Sara Rimer, "Bosnian War Bewilders a Midwestern Town: Merrillville, Indiana, Feels Sympathy for Victims but Fears a Morass", *New York Times*, July 24, 1995, pp. A1, A7.

¹²"False Tears Over Bosnia", *New York Times*, July 30, 1995, p. D15.

peace and stability there. It will not be one of continued reliance on the humanitarian concern of the West. When this past summer the Croats joined the Muslims in submitting to the risks (and inflicting the hardships) required to revamp the map of the region, thus paving the way for the Dayton agreement and succeeding where UN peacekeeping had failed, it was evidently not compassion that drove them. As no stability can be expected in the region that is not supported by a balance of forces, the logic of compassion dictates so rearming and retraining the Muslims as to free them from dependence on our compassion. Yet this is just the sort of activity at which the sentiment of compassion balks—in this case seconding timidity.

The Desensitizing Effect

TO MY MIND the evidence supports Rousseau's account of the limits of political compassion. To us his critique of cosmopolitanism seems harsh, even cramped. We are familiar with a form of hypocrisy opposite to that which he denounced: the invocation of the priority of local concerns to excuse inaction on global ones. Jean-Marie Le Pen has remarked that he will consider it appropriate to concern himself with rapes in Bosnia only when there are no longer any rapes in the region of Paris. This recalls the rationalizations of earlier French politicians (leftist as well as rightist) for turning a blind eye to German persecution of the Jews.¹³ If humanitarian action abroad has to await the cessation of all problems at home, then none will ever be undertaken.

Yet there is this much truth in Le Pen's odious position: that the government of France does bear primary responsibility for the safety of the women of Paris and that its duty to protect them no matter what the cost is clearer than its duty to the women of Bosnia. However general the obligation to affirm universal human rights, a government's duty to risk the lives of its citizens to secure those rights for strangers—in effect the duty

to police the world—will always remain debatable. And we may rightly deride the government that undertakes an intervention abroad to distract attention from nagging problems at home. Today any such intervention is likely to be a humanitarian one, and if indeed its motive is diversionary, then Rousseau's critique of "loving the Tartars" is fully applicable to it.

The CNN factor is real, but it remains to be seen whether its effectiveness will stand the test of time. The final pitfall of the new abundance of televised suffering is also the most ironic. It is the danger that constant exposure to such suffering will not sensitize but inure us to it. It has long been observed that those whose daily fare is the suffering of others tend toward indifference to it—"it is", as Rousseau remarks, "by dint of seeing death and suffering that priests and doctors become pitiless."¹⁴ Such is now our situation as spectators. As one victim recedes from view another always appears to replace it. Televised misery resembles the hydra: It persists (if sometimes with a new head) no matter how hard we attack it.

The globalization of the spectacle of suffering may broaden the horizons of our compassion, but will it do so without diluting its force? Will world reserves of beneficence expand to meet increased demand, or will there be an ever thinner spreading of the same naturally limited supply? The international flow of humanitarian concern may come to resemble that of capital. Both will migrate freely, and their allegiances will prove almost equally fickle. Last year the Tutsis attracted attention, six months ago the Chechens, today the Bosnian Muslims. Newer, fresher causes will siphon air time and humanitarian sentiment from older, tedious, and intractable ones. Like those residents of great cities who become hardened to the misery that lies always near to hand, we voyeurs of the global village will turn away from the distant sufferings that come daily within our purview. □

¹³Boltanski, *La Souffrance à distance*, p. 279, note 98.

¹⁴*Émile*, p. 231 (O.C., vol. 4, p. 517).