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Photography

Photography is the process of impressing a transparent film coated with a light-sensitive emulsion (analog photography) or a magnetic memory (digital photography) with the light reflected from a subject or object through the lens of a camera and reproducing the image thereby created. Photography has been commonly associated with a higher true value than other genres, such as pictorial art or sculpture, because of the particular technology that it uses. Victor Bürgin (1982) notes how pictorial art and films are usually received by the public as objects that need to be experienced critically, whereas photography presents itself as part of the environment. Similarly, Susan Sontag (1973) explains how photography is commonly perceived as a transparent method showing a piece of reality, while writing and paintings are associated with interpretation. On the contrary, scholars have highlighted how the act of taking a picture is not only about appropriating what is represented, but also about locating the image producer in a certain position toward the subject/object photographed, this being a position of knowledge and therefore power (Sontag 1973; Bürgin 1982).

Since the end of the 19th century, when technological progress allowed the popularization and easy reproduction of photographs, photography was increasingly used “to focus public attention on select examples of human misery in the world—from the local slum to the distant famine—transforming specific episodes of privation and suffering into humanitarian crises and campaigns” (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015: 4). Photographic accounts of humanitarian

crises, together with documentaries and other visual representations, have been crucial in the second half of the 20th century in the global spread of information about large-scale suffering and affliction, and have been functional in mobilizing support and raising awareness and funds for relief operations. The relatively new notion of “humanitarian photography,” coined in the 1990s, refers specifically to the use of photo representation in the humanitarian sector (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015).

However, although images of distant suffering are particularly powerful in creating an emotional response in the viewer (Sontag 2003; Boltanski 1999), their ability to elicit an ethical or political action is less clear. Vivid and shocking images of suffering have been denounced for reproducing a colonial perspective, further distancing the observer from the victim and ultimately dehumanizing the sufferer (Benthall 1993). Representations of suffering, a characteristic trait of humanitarian communication, have also been criticized for their inherent commodification of suffering (Kennedy 2009), compassion fatigue (Moeller 1999), and their role in concealing the root political causes of humanitarian disasters (Campbell 2012). Humanitarian photography has also been extensively criticized for its tendency to represent people as helpless and passive victims (Manzo 2008; Kurasawa 2015).

At the same time, humanitarian photography has been characterized by an attempt to gradually modify its iconography and using more positive imagery (Lidchi 1999; Chouliraki 2013). In 2006, some of the major international humanitarian organizations have collaboratively elaborated and signed a code of conducts on the use of images (Concord 2006) with the objective of challenging traditional visual stereotypes of starving babies and images of people in distress.

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Post-disaster Recovery

Post-disaster recovery is a complex process at the crossroads of environmental, social, and infrastructural dimensions. The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction defines recovery as the “restoring or improving of livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets, systems and activities, of a disaster-affected community or society, aligning with the principles of sustainable development and ‘build back better,’ to avoid or reduce future disaster risk” (UNDRR). Recovery comprises the short-term restoration of basic services and facilities, which is called rehabilitation, and medium- to long-term reconstruction activities, which relate to the construction environment and social systems and livelihoods.

In the past, recovery was seen as the last phase of the disaster management cycle and it emphasized the reconstruction of infrastructure, subsuming social considerations. This linear understanding also informed sequential typologies of post-disaster shelter and housing provision. It can be correlated to the defunct, event-centric, “hazards view” of disasters—where the goal of recovery meant a return to the status quo, albeit with improved technological