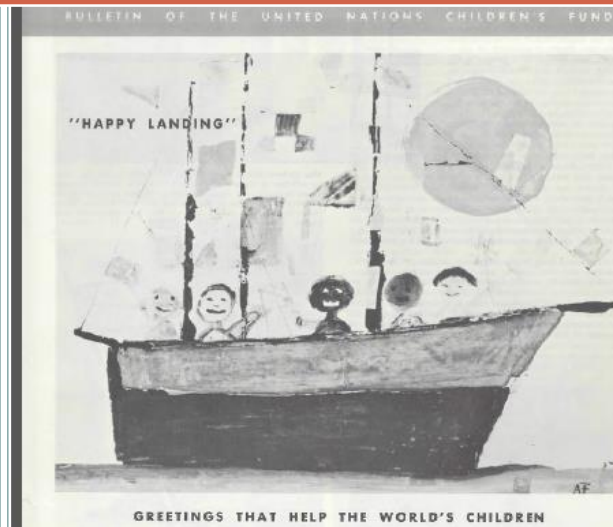


2013

Mapping the Cultural Production of the Commodified Child Sponsorship Subject

Image:

<http://www.unicefusa.org>

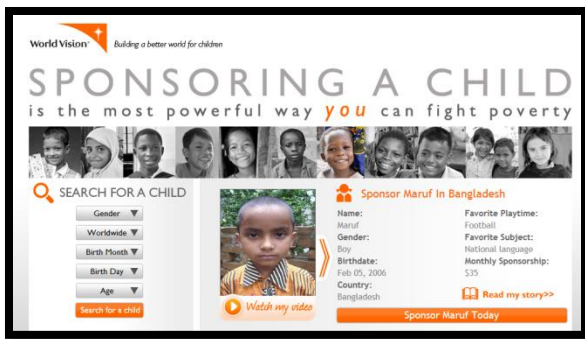


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BIS 589B: Topics in Global Cultural Studies

Development and Globalization

3/20/2013



“CHILDREN ARE A TRANQUILIZING CONVENTION”

LIISA MALKKI, 1997

In the projects of cultural studies, it seems I am repeatedly—even relentlessly—drawn to questions of positionality and subjectivity, the ways particular interests and apparatuses choose to represent the ‘other’, and perhaps more significantly, *how* society comes to embrace these privileged formations as acceptable, and in the case of child sponsorship, even righteous, decent, and noble practice. Interrogating child sponsorship alongside our course study in global development pushes these questions beyond the simple binary consumer/subject relationship into fresh ways of pursuing how political, economic, historical, technology (Live Aid) and development discourses situate and produce systems of difference, that ultimately influence public resolve, sometimes to the detriment of particularly vulnerable populations.

Whether coming to know how cultural histories of bread production influence social values towards eugenics as a wholesome ideology, coffee trades reproduce fundamental inequalities *and* inspire social movement, or, how well-established “helpless child victims” serve as fundraising tools, (in global development and autism); we are always taking into account how “very specific ideas enable very concrete practices” (class discussion, Gardner, 2013) across a variety of social, political, and geographical landscapes. At the onset of this research, each group member selected a series of questions regarding the complex child sponsorship commodity chain; the following attend specifically to the use of objectifying child imagery and my area of focus:

This project begins with an investigation into whether World Vision International development practices and marketing strategies produce children as commodified essentialized subjects, how humanitarian agencies interact politically and culturally with media and public interests to produce, represent and reify children as commodities through imagery... how the child/image is consumed... and how Western audiences come to accept World Visions 'online child menu' as an acceptable and even noble fundraising strategy" (Caldwell, Kerckmar, Thibault, 2013).

Hall (2007) argues cultural studies "has to analyse certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death" (p. 42). Locating answers to these questions requires a deep historical analysis of 'the constitutive and political nature' of how, as Malkki contends, "children, as incarnations of utopia in humanitarian discourse, serve as depoliticizing agents in highly political contexts" (cited in Bornstein, p. 71). I found, through historicizing the commodified child subject, there are key moments where humanitarian development, national politics, transnational economics, neo-liberalism, Western media, INGO structures and public interest come together, in 'very specific ways', that produce what Cottle and Nolan (2007) name the "'crisis triangle' composed of INGO's, news media and governments" (p. 863)". While conducting this research, it became evident that a contentious interdependent relationship between the media and INGOs reflexively shifts and reframes throughout the decades. These tensions result from the highly competitive INGO field, neo-liberal structural adjustment policies that increase displaced people and the those involved in crises, and what Moeller describes as the media's appetite for "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse... disease, famine, war and death", driven by limited Western attention spans and media consumer "compassion fatigue" (pp. 2-3).

These formations produce a system of conflict where, as BBC correspondent George Alagiah confesses, “relief agencies depend on us for publicity and we need them to tell us where the stories are. There is an unspoken understanding... we try not to ask too bluntly ‘Where will we find the most starving babies?’ And they never answer explicitly. We get the pictures just the same” (cited in de Waal, p. 83). Cottle and Nolan argue this ‘media logic’ pervades contemporary Aid organizations that learn if they wish to facilitate public attention and governmental support, they must “reflexively incorporate... information and images in conformity to the media’s known predilections” (p. 866). These are a few key factors mobilizing INGOs and media outlets to conjure incessant child victim images to garner public sympathies, affirm organizational legitimacy, and shore up fiscal support. The *Cultural Production of the Commodified Child Sponsor Subject* section of our Google map intends to highlight these moments, demonstrate how these images came into social view and public practice, and to what degree they serve to promote economic policies and political structures beyond the interests and goals of agencies like World Vision.

The following summarizes the production of the child subject through qualitative image, media, textual and artifact analysis while highlighting linkages between children objectified by “the pornography of suffering”, the INGOs that in some manner benefit from their dehumanization, and the political economies situated within Cottle and Nolan’s “media logic” and “crisis triangle” (p. 863). There are limitations in this work that include the glaring and unintentional omission of non-Western produced images, representations, and news artifacts—an area of comparison that could greatly enhance the conclusions of future research. Additionally, after working through the image/media analysis for this project, I believe organizing selections into particular categories, such as media and news productions versus those with explicit

marketing goals, would streamline analysis and clarify presentation. This work briefly considers historical moments the child subject begins to appear in fundraising images and charitable texts, how these moments coincide with the political economies and cultural formations of their time, and finally, the shifting relationships in response to each other.

Post-War Construction Humanitarianism:

I launched my image search expecting the narrative of child imagery to begin geographically and temporally with “helpless, passive, ‘victim’ depictions of Southern clients particularly from Africa” (Dogra, 2007, p. 162); however, child-focused campaigns seemingly emerge on the *European* landscape around 1919 when Eglantyne Jebb established what she intended to be the temporary *Save the Children Fund*, to deliver “aid to children in war-ravaged central Europe” (<http://www.savethechildren.org>). The organization appears to be the first in a long line of NGOs initially motivated to assist victims in war torn regions that continued their efforts as new crises, manmade and natural, appeared. In 1932 “Save The Children” began operations in the United States with an “immediate goal to help the children and families struggling to survive the Great Depression” (<http://www.savethechildren.org>), and the Oxford Committee on Famine Relief (OXFAM) activated their campaign against the famine of war in 1942 (see image).

Children are the clear signifiers in these representations, however, my initial findings suggest they generally appear surrounded by volunteers or family members situated within community settings, hospitals, cafeteria’s or homes; a particular tactic in stark contrast to the lone starving isolated child images placed on the landscapes of the Global South in later decades.



This pre-IMF, World Bank, United Nations “predevelopmentalist development” (Cooper & Packard, p. 7) frame also marks the introduction of child sponsorship with the 1938 formation of the Christian Children’s Fund (CCF), now known as Child Fund International. Also motivated by the damages and losses of war, CCF appealed to United States donors to “support orphanages for the children who had been left without homes or families in the wake of the second Sino-



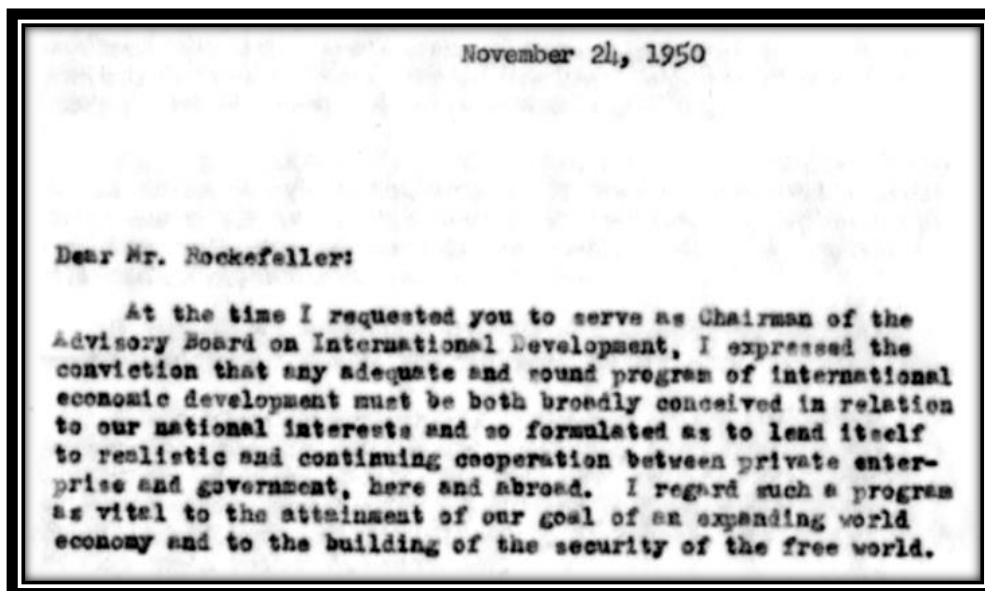
Japanese War” (childfund.org, 2013). While the majority of images (although by no means all) in this period appear *less* like the contemporary “scenes of skeletal figures that appear on our TV screens” (Cottle & Nolan, 2007, p. 863) , textual signifiers do evidence savior/victim ideologies. *Save The Children England* offers Eglantyne Jebb’s visceral narrative expressions and “grand emotions on suffering”

(Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 108) on the organizations founding, in which she pleads, “We cannot run the risk that they should weep, starve, despair and die, with never a hand stretched out to help them” (<http://www.savethechildren.org>). As agencies progressed through WWI, WWII, and the formation of the United Nations, relief efforts shifted to the international stage where global development policies, increased needs from the international community, competition for INGO funds and the emergence of neo-liberal economic policies obliged new INGO ideologies, tactics and marketing strategies.

The Formations of Development and International Capitalism:

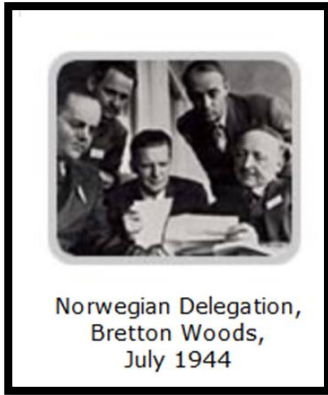
A radical shift in political, economic, social, and cultural Western mindsets of the late 1940’s through late 1950’s imposed intense and long-lasting changes onto the global humanitarian and development stage. This period marks the moment when “internationally, a new world order was

constructed” (Harvey, 2005, p. 10) with new dominating economic structures such as The World Bank and The IMF, the creation of the UN and UNICEF and the introduction of the first celebrity spokesperson into the international humanitarian arena—and most profoundly—the dawn of neo-liberal capitalism. In the correspondence below, President Truman impresses upon Assistant Secretary of State Nelson Rockefeller the urgency of advancing international development in the name of national and *private* interest.



Harry S. Truman to Nelson Rockefeller (www.trumanlibrary.org)

Truman’s transitional economic, nationalist and political agendas were in mutual accord with the formation of The World Bank and International Monetary Fund, entities run by



powerful, primarily Western, financial overseers of the international “system of exchange rates and international payments that enables countries and their citizens to buy goods and services from each other” (International Monetary Fund, 2013). These apparatuses influence the mechanisms and structures of post-colonial international relief delivery in profoundly influential ways discussed later in this work. In his 1949

Inaugural address, President Truman announced U.S. intentions to save ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘primitive’ regions. In what has come to be known as the *Point Four Program*; the partial transcription below illustrates how the emerging of neo-liberal post-modern economic agenda became historically, geographically, and politically submerged into the discursive practices of humanitarian and development interests:

We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas...

I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life. And, in cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development.

<http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres53.html>

Cooper and Packard (1997) suggest tropes of Western superiority such as those expressed by Truman are based on “the assumption that certain kinds of societies can be defined as “backward” and means devised for transforming and “underdeveloped person” into a “developed” one” (p. 19) have long occupied imaginations of the Global North.

Limitations of this project do not allow for a complete analysis of the multiple and complex economic, political, humanitarian, and social ramifications stemming from the far-reaching policies of The IMF, The World Bank and dominating Western agendas. However, there are significant historical productions situated alongside these apparatuses that meaningfully influence the shifting representation of the child subject. With the introduction of the United Nations and UNICEF, child health and welfare, and the *visibility* of global subjectivities occupied a growing space in the development discourse.



In 1946, The UN General Assembly unanimously established an International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), to facilitate and deliver “urgent relief programmes for children in war-ravaged countries... distributed without discrimination due to race, creed,

nationality, status or political belief” (unicef.org). UNICEF occupies an interesting and intricate political and social space in humanitarian/development discourse and the sentiment of nations.

Further efforts to deconstruct the many instruments of UNICEF, its complicated funding sources, service-delivery practices and political advocacy efforts could help this project form a clearer appreciation for the influencing practices of this dominant force on the humanitarian-aid landscape, and more consequentially, its structural and economic relationship to and with the UN, IMF, WHO and The World Bank. While the origins of UNICEF parallel the agencies outlined earlier in this work, its historical legacy, contemporary presence, and political influence across the globe is immense. An exceptionally brief analysis indicates UNICEF avoids summoning child victim images, at least as a fundraising tactic, opting instead for representational styles that convey meanings of innocence sketched in immature drawings borne

from the imaginaries of children. The 1949 illustration above depicts the first of many in the legendary “greetings that help the world’s children” UNICEF campaign that signifies the organizations textual declarations of unity, diversity, protection, innocence, and peace. It would be interesting to compare and contrast the efficacy of UNICEF’s constructed messages of hope to other agencies reliance on aesthetics of pity, despair and the “appeal to suffering as a universal moral cause” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 108). Moral fundraising appeals draw from the social values and cultural context in which they are constructed, how these images and tactics are then taken in by the public sphere returns us once again to Mitchell’s (2000) conversations regarding how privileging certain practices over others creates profound cultural *meaning*. The debate over the ways in which humanitarian agencies choose to represent the child subject in the appeal for funds can productively be analyzed as “arguments about *values*... [and] arguments about *value* in the economic sense” (p. 71); fundamentally, sympathetic appeals to our sense of morality are the ultimate tactic to solicit fiscal support.



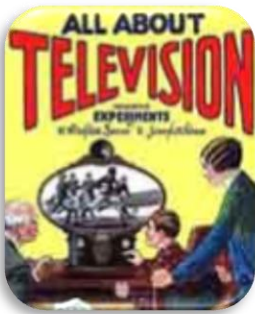
In 1953, the seeds of World Vision's child sponsorship model appear when founder Reverend Dr. Bob Pierce “in response to the needs of Korean War orphans... developed its first Child Sponsorship programme in Korea”



(worldvision.org). Bornstein (2005) effectively argues that the World Vision’s child sponsorship model of humanitarianism/development is “built through correspondence... alongside the impersonality of the monetary exchange of child sponsorship” (p. 73). This is a specific moment where World Vision’s organizational values privilege the practice of the helpless needy child,

which in turn devalues their subjectivity and fixes them in a commodity role. Mitchell cites cultural theorists Fred Inglis thoughts on value as “the name given to those fierce little concentrations of meaning in an action or a state of affairs which fix them as good or important” (p. 71). Does this ‘fixing’ of children as commodities in the name of the humanitarian ‘good’ ultimately produce ‘fierce little concentration of meaning’ that dehumanize children in service to the morals of World Vision?

The Development Decade



In his 1960 speech to the UN General Assembly, President Kennedy proclaimed "political sovereignty is but a mockery, without the means of meeting poverty, illiteracy and disease... my nation now proposes... designating this decade of the 1960's as the United Nations Decade of Development" (UNICEF, 1996). Western broadcasting capacity increased significantly throughout the 50's and 60's and the viewing public witnessed

Danny Kaye, the first international humanitarian celebrity spokesman, “travel the globe, giving speeches, entertaining communities and ‘bringing attention to the world’s poorest children”

(UNICEF, 2013). Archival video of Kaye’s travels document wholesome footage of UNICEF’s spokesman entertaining communities and walking amongst engaged and smiling children. Images depicting Kaye’s hospital and



community visits primarily focus on his interactions with the children rather than their injury, suffering, or victim status.

The use of celebrity to raise funds, develop agency branding, and target messages of urgent need coming from the global South to Western demographics, remains a stable practice in contemporary development. The Australian National Red Cross Communications Manager views celebrity ambassadorship as a necessary attention grabbing tactic; “you can talk about it, you can have a community service announcement... a wonderful little ad... but until you’ve got a celebrity or photo-worthy person up there to sell it, then it’s going to be a steep hill” (Cottle & Nolan, p. 868). As Western imaginations became increasingly enthralled with the growing entertainment industry in the 60’s and new platforms of technology into the 70’s, the romanticized interactions between the media and humanitarian agencies that formed in the Danny Kaye years became increasingly complicated, interdependent and at time contentious. As humanitarian interests continued to endeavor towards effective measures to gain Western sympathies and the reach of the media lens expanded across the globe, parallel shifts in international economies, global politics, and structures of development forced aid workers and recipients into the middle of a discursive crossfire.



The Biafran Famine of 1968 politicized humanitarian aid and depoliticized the child image as a tactical method for the political means of the Biafra State of south-eastern Nigeria. In what de Waal historicizes as “The first humanitarian effort dominated by NGOs”, Biafra became a watershed moment in the political, economic, and mediated manipulation of the pornography of suffering after images captured by a priest delivering aid to the region were published in the

Western press.

De Wall situates the use of the snapshots of dying children, and Western misinterpretations, into the politics of the region:

Biafran propaganda was the use of images of starving, dying, hungry children. It completely obliterated what Biafra had done before then, and the outside world bought it... the pictures of starving children and women, dying children, children with kwashiorkor stomachs touched everybody, it cut across the range of people's beliefs.

(pp. 73-75).

De Waal further illustrates the complicated nature of the crises in which Red Cross workers found themselves caught in violent political instabilities while delivering aid:

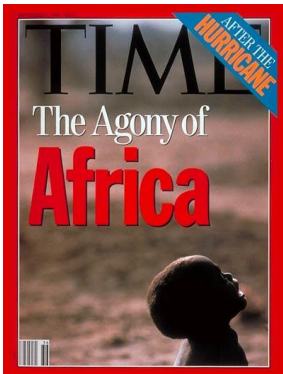
The Igbo-dominated Biafra State of south-eastern Nigeria and the Federal Government had erupted into war, with the Biafrans unilaterally declaring secession. The Biafrans gained almost no diplomatic support... but came to gain enormous sympathy from the Western public.

(p. 73).

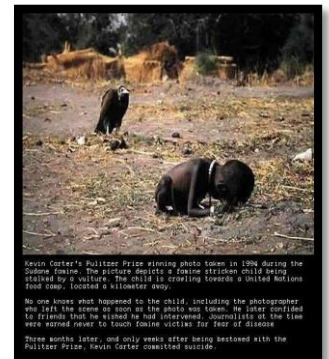
The social implications and political complexities of Biafra require more research and attention; however, the salience of the extreme shift in representation from the recognized child *subjects* submerged within the Danny Kaye, OXFAM, Save The Children, and UNICEF community, to graphic *media* performances of diseased, parentless, lifeless, culturally void and sustenance starved, pathetic *objects* cannot be overstated. As “the field of humanitarian agencies has become increasingly crowded... clamoring for government and public funds” the line between these very distinctive ways of seeing, knowing, and strategizing the child subject become extremely hard to distinguish. This merging of ‘media-logic’, humanitarian ethics of pity, ‘consumer compassion fatigue’, the ‘crisis triangle’ and the dominance of neo-liberal economic structuring produce a

layer of false consciousness in the social sphere that displaces the political interests of the populations and cultures development claims to serve.

Essentializing Africa: 'The West and the Rest'

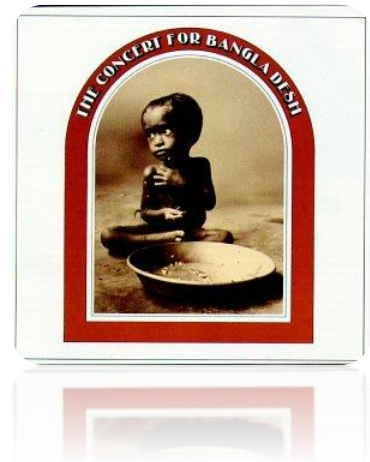


"Journalists know in advance what a 'famine story' looks like and search for the right elements. The overall plot has been characterized as a 'fairy story'... consisting of a helpless victim in distress"(de Waal, p. 83). The significant shift from 1930's humanitarian war relief and reconstruction into broader reaching internationalized development projects that



“captured the imagination of many people across the world from the 1940's onward had quite specific origins—in the crisis of colonial empires” (Cooper & Packard, 1997, p. 6). The effects of this temporal/geographical shift in frameworks of development have considerable ramifications on *how* children of so-called undeveloped nations are imaged—and imagined. Cottle and Nolan argue that even though “NGOs have been rightly identified as leading agencies in the promotion of global humanitarianism... their capacity to do so has been, and remains, highly dependent on the practices of the media” (p. 863). The weaving of news reports regarding international crises co-exists with development and humanitarian agency efforts to attract public interest, a relationship further complicated as pop-icons and internationalized mediated events impose their political interpretations into the landscape.

For Western children of the 70's there is perhaps no more iconic or radicalized representation of 'Other nations' than the lone emaciated child squat before an empty grain dish, frozen in time, and plopped on the cover of George Harrison's 1971 *The Concert for Bangladesh* LP. For some of us, Harrison's production represents *the* moment we came to realize and appreciate any culture or nation outside of the West. Harrison and UNICEF raised millions in this "first benefit concert of its kind... an extraordinary assemblage of major artists collaborating for a common humanitarian cause" (concert for bangladesh.com). UNICEF and Harrison successfully brought the attention of Western audiences to the Bangladesh region; however, the image they chose is a significant shift from UNICEF's early creative art productions depicting unity, diversity, and the equal status of all children. The international celebrity of Harrison and friends assured media interest, which in turn sparked unprecedented public curiosity regarding the previously ignored politics of suffering in Bangladesh. Leveraging the Concert for Bangladesh starving isolated icon for marketing, nostalgia, and mass merchandizing continues to generate millions for UNICEF today, forever erasing the young child subject from the historical frame.



Pre and Post Ethiopian Famine Imagery and Humanitarian Policies



De Waal believes “there is a tendency to speak of ‘the Ethiopian famine’ as though it were a homogenous national phenomenon, and to assimilate all experiences across the country into a single famine with a single explanation. This is misleading”(p. 112). In 1983 BBC news produced and aired a graphically disturbing report from Ethiopia, and announced to Western viewers the “Famine caused by draught is the worst in world history... complicated by two secessionist wars” (BBC News: Ethiopian Famine, 1984). The film reel depicts thousands of Ethiopians while news reporter Michael Buerk narrates through the Western lens:

Dawn, and as the sun breaks through the piercing chill of night on the plain outside Korem, it lights up a biblical famine, right now, in the twentieth century. This place, say workers here, is the closest thing to hell on earth. Thousands of wasted people are coming here for help, and they find only death” (1984).

Alongside the image of a crying emaciated boy, in a close frame devoid of parents, community or humanity, Buerk continues his grandiose narrative of pity; “15,000 children here now, suffering, confused, lost” (1984) and successfully transfers the disembodied objectified child image from news print to millions of televisions screens across England and later the United States. Buerk’s nearly eight-minute projection of the pornography of suffering reduced all of Ethiopia, and arguably all of Africa, to a “sea of inhumanity” (Malkki, 1996) and essentialized entire nations of children to “panaceas for such ‘unexplainable’ human experiences as

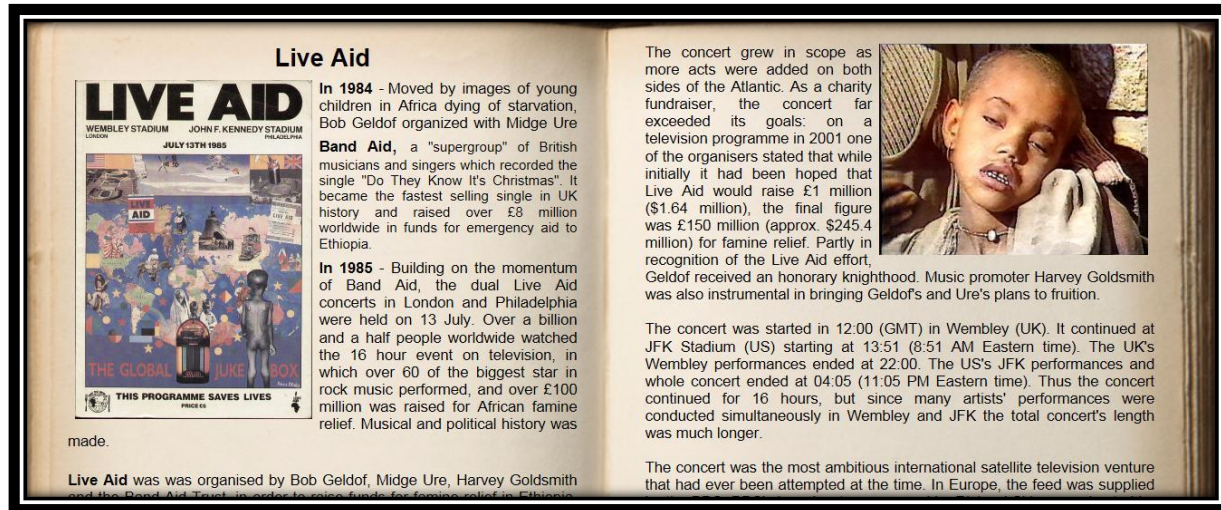
‘inhumanity’ and ‘despair’” (Bornstein, p. 72). Media de-contextualize those within their lens, largely because “Western journalists do not need to worry if they present famine victims in false, offensive or degrading terms, because they know that the people portrayed will not complain” (p. 84). I believe these misrepresentations also leave a great deal of room for the public, or “nearly burned out pop stars (Geldof, 2013)”, to interpret the politics of nations however they chose.



Internationalized and Mediated-Aid Delivery

After viewing the 1984 BBC News report Geldof partnered with Midge Ure to strategize ways to influence the political and social mindset, which even after BBC’s explicit representations, either ignored or was unaware of what was happening in parts of Ethiopia. The BBC documentary “Live Aid: Against All Odds” analyzes the political, economic, social, cultural, and transnational development implications of Live Aid” and situates how multi-millionaire pop-icons, who generated their excessive wealth within the same neoliberal economic environment that produced impoverished conditions on the Ethiopian landscape, came to express their outrage through internationally mass mediated interventions. The decision to produce the one-ay "Live Aid" event permanently altered the political and development debate, highlighted geographical and resource aid limitations, and challenged way we look at and practice development today. The internationalized media events that followed influenced aid delivery,

media reporting, and the manner in which the child subject is consumed.



De Waal finds it "interesting to chart the way in which the famine progressed from its niche as a news item and a campaign by relief agencies into an unprecedented international media event with political repercussions in leading Western democracies. Band Aid played a key role in this... It had the effect of intensifying competition among NGOs, with a greater scramble for media exposure and endorsement from stars: another stage in humanitarian deregulation" (p. 122.) Live Aid was performed and broadcast simultaneously in London, Philadelphia and a smaller version appeared in Australia. The 1985 event followed *Band Aid's* "Do They Know It's Christmas" and *USA For Africa's* "We Are The World". Known to this day as "The biggest rock concert and charity event in the history of the world" (USA For Africa, 2013), the event raised millions and stirred controversies that remain in contemporary conversations today. During the period following "Live Aid", debates about how the founders chose to represent the 'face of Africa' emerged, this, along with UNICEF's 1987 critique of neo-liberal development policies "*Adjustment with a human face*" brought the objectified and pitied child representation into global view. These debates helped reframe the child subject while alongside the emergence of development deregulation. UNICEF's *Adjustment with a human face* is an analysis and

deconstruction of IMF/ World Bank structural adjustment policies, which was followed up in 1989 with internal codes of conduct written by World Vision, Child Fund, Save the Children etc. According to de Waal, “UNICEF was modest and realistic in the concessions it hoped to extract from the World Bank and IMF, and it was moderately successful in influencing policy” (*de Waal, p. 52*).

Conclusions and Future Research and Questions



I believe the only way to productively survive a project as emotionally harrowing, intellectually provocative, and collaboratively rewarding as situating visceral imagery of starving and sick children into political, social, economic, cultural, NGO-Aid, and Development discourses is by working intimately with engaged and socially just minded peers. Since I was a child of the seventies, radio personality in the late eighties and news producer at

the turn of the new millennium, I have seen, discussed, and occasionally reported on the graphic imagery and explicit media content presented in *The Cultural Production of the Commodified Child Sponsor Subject* section of our [Google map](#). Through this work I realize, once again, that occasional reporting, incidental viewing, and casual discussions about ‘those poor children in crises living in desolate places located somewhere over there’ is profoundly different from historicizing how *as objectified commodities representing need* they came into view. The types of images our map displays are never easy to take in. As I scoured through hundreds of online images seeking the proper ‘selections’ for analysis—rejecting **this** one for *that* one—and contextualizing my ‘gaze’ within the theories and works that have brought me to see their production differently, I found myself necessarily displacing the subjectivity of the children in a manner similar to what

this research intends to critique. This was a troubling research moment; however, what draws me to cultural studies, its methods and its theories, is that this is the *exact* “terrain of struggle and contestation” (Hall, 2007, p. 42) they are so uniquely suited to address. Working in collaboration with fellow practitioners of cultural studies opens up new and meaningfully productive ways of having difficult conversations, discussing our shared feelings of anger, frustration, guilt and even some level of despair, working with these kinds of objectifying texts, images, and media representations inevitably produce. I found our ongoing conversations, mapping sessions, collective complaining (and more than just a bit of de-compressive swearing) about the unjust and unfair state of things extremely cathartic, and the collaborative spirit pushed this work into deeper, more provocative and significant territories of inquiry. This is the intervention of cultural studies.

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