“Be Thankful That You're Miserable”: A Critical Review of Modern Photographic Representations of Extreme Suffering and Its Effect on Relief Efforts

The headline of the BBC’s November 28 headline reads “Africa devastated by AIDS” accompanied by a picture of an AIDS patient (Figure 1). He lies on a plain brown couch, disinterested in the world around him, unaware that he is naked except for a tattered hospital drape. His arms are folded across his chest, perhaps defying his disease, perhaps because there is no one else around to hold him as his life ebbs away. As if to accentuate his already emaciated frame, his severely atrophied legs hover over the couch as if he knows they could break at the slightest disturbance. His downcast eyes and Pieta-like position assure the viewer that this androgynous figure is experiencing suffering to such a tortuous and gruesome degree that only a heartless individual could look at him without feeling compassion. This man needs help, and he needs it soon. But how should we respond? How do we eliminate his suffering? Since all photographs are, as Susan Sontag suggests, “species of rhetoric,” (Sontag 6) each of these images inform its audience about the suffering of their subjects and how the audience, ought to behave toward that suffering. For better or for worse, these pictures are shaping Western society’s perception of and response to suffering, making it absolutely imperative to analyze the rhetoric of these representations in order to successfully alleviate suffering.

This paper seeks to critically examine commonly encountered photographs of suffering and how they influence our current paradigm of relieving that suffering. To understand our current attitude towards suffering, a brief historical review of philosophies of suffering and their representations will be presented. I will then examine the rhetoric of the two most prevalent methodologies of representing suffering in the West– aestheticizing suffering and humanist
photography – and what courses of action each naturally prescribes in their rhetoric. I argue in both cases that these methodologies are indulgent exploitations of the suffering of others fraught with a blend of neo-colonialism, racial superiority, and ennui towards the plight of others and that they offer little constructive dialogue in effectively working with those problems, but because of their commercial value, they remain prevalent in our society. I will conclude with a review of alternative philosophies of photography that encourage the West to engage with suffering local communities to create lasting, effective changes.

Heartache vs. Famine – Distinguishing Inevitable Suffering from Extreme Suffering

Before any argument is made, it is important to define suffering in the context of this paper. The founder of Partners in Health, Paul Farmer, remarked that “not all suffering is equivalent” (Farmer 50). Intuitively, we know that suffering from the loss of a family pet is in no way comparable to the suffering of a starving child or a woman dying of AIDS without hope of treatment. The great commentator on suffering of our time, Woody Allen, says in Annie Hall, “I feel that life is divided into the horrible and the miserable. The horrible are like… terminal cases … And the miserable is everyone else. So you should be thankful that you're miserable, because that's very lucky, to be miserable” (Annie Hall). Indeed, we are all suffering to some degree, but there is a very obvious dichotomy between suffering due to life’s inevitabilities like death or relationship problems and extreme suffering due to treatable diseases or starvation. What differentiates low-grade suffering from extreme suffering is the component of preventability and intensity. For instance, the common cold is neither debilitating nor, to a large extent, preventable; Hepatitis B causes liver cancer and is completely preventable with a 75¢ vaccine (Gay and Edmunds 1457). The common cold is inevitable, but Hepatitis B transmission
is unjustified in today’s world. For the purposes of this paper, suffering will refer only to extreme, preventable suffering like Hepatitis B, AIDS, starvation, and war.

From Prayer to Vaccines: Historical Attitudes Towards Suffering

Halpern frames the way that we interact with suffering saying that “Every society needs to incorporate in some way, the inescapable fact of suffering: it needs to interpret it, to give shape and cultural expression to it. It needs to make it intelligible so that it is bearable” (Halpern 47). While we interpret suffering in a way that emphasizes preventing it, this viewpoint is, in fact, unique to our modern Western society. Before the Enlightenment, extreme suffering was seen as a positive God-ordained facet of life meant to purify the sufferer. It is only after the advent of modern medicine and other life-improving technology that this view was replaced with the idea that if we have the ability to prevent suffering, we are morally responsible to do so. A review of the history of how Western society has dealt with suffering will enlighten where we came from, how we currently think, and the path we are on in regards to alleviating the pain of others.

Prior to the Enlightenment, the institution wielding the greatest control over how humanity ought to interact with this world and thus with the paradox of suffering was the Church. As the only liaison between god and man, what better way to answer than by saying that suffering was pre-ordained and purifying for the afterlife? Capitalizing on the story of Christ, the Church fostered the idea in its parishioners that suffering “serve[ed] a purpose that was above all redemptive” (Halpern 28). By enduring suffering, one was joining the multitude of sufferers hoping to build parity with the Savior by virtue of the mantra “blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven” (King James Bible, Matt. 5:3). Upholding Jesus Christ as the archetypal individual who exemplified “God’s suffering and his pity for
man’s sin and the agonies of his wrongdoing and guilt” (Halpern 28), the Church created positive associations between suffering and God’s grace and munificence. At the end of the day, the sum of all this religious iconography and dogma was the doctrine that suffering purified one’s soul thereby making one a better candidate for eternal rewards.

Linked with this argument for reward was also the argument for ignorance. In the child-like faith advocated by the Church, suffering sometimes just had to be accepted as part of a divine plan that we cannot know (Halpern 32). According to the Church, we are mere minutiae in the entirety of God’s creation, and our limited perspective thus bars us from seeing the eternal purpose, the eternal good that is inevitable because God is good. Their argument went something like this: suffering seems arbitrary and therefore understanding why it occurs is unknowable, so be content in the knowledge (or lack thereof) that we can never know the unknowable. Indeed, it requires a child-like faith to accept so obviously circular and vacuous an argument as the previous. Perkins notes this paradoxical explanation, commenting that “things that had universally been thought bad and contemptible were suddenly seen as valuable. . . . This empowerment, together with the emphasis on the resurrected body, display the subversive underpinnings of this discourse.” (Perkins 122-123). Sadly, because of its enormous authority, the Church was able to make feeble arguments like this coupled with the promise of a greater eternal reward and get away with it.

While the portrayal of suffering in Christian art is a much broader topic than this paper can comment on, it does not take a very deep analysis of iconic works like Michelangelo’s Pieta in St. Peter’s Basilica (Figure 2) and the Museo dell’Opera to see the strong influence of the Church’ philosophy on suffering in representations of suffering. Notice
that while the freshly-tortured Jesus lies in the lap of Mary, her face maintains an angelic expression that reflects her stoicism bordering on resignation towards the suffering that her son just endured. Enveloped in her liturgical robes, Jesus is supported by a larger-than-life Mary which, as the religious viewer may infer, is a metaphor for the way that an omniscient God holds each suffering individual in his hands, endowing her with the celestial fortitude to continue her wretched existence. Explaining suffering as an agent of the Divine was a weak answer, but reiterating this philosophy through immortal works of art was a clever strategy.

With the advent of the Enlightenment, this philosophy of suffering was quickly and thankfully abandoned. Within a matter of decades, the West had steam engines, better farming techniques, and vaccines allowing for the possibility of improving the lives of everyone. “Science and technology allowed progress to occupy the place of Providence… if God had created evil, it must be an evil that could be eliminated” (Escalante 113). However it is exactly this transformation that Escalante deems a “spiritual crisis” in the Church, since “the firm conviction that suffering is justified, that it is morally necessary in the order of the cosmos, has been lost” (Escalante 49). But what is one institution’s “spiritual crisis” may be an individual’s salvation, and progressive thinkers have never looked back.

In our modern society, suffering no longer has any meaningful value. Inviting his audience to look around them at a lecture given at Stanford, Kleinman once said, “Pain and suffering, especially chronic forms, are dealt with as if they were without positive value, a thoroughly bad thing… No one is expected anymore to merely endure pain and suffering. The methods for socializing children… do not reward endurance of misery” (Kleinman, Experience 29). Indeed, it is unthinkable that anyone today would consciously relish in the death of a starving child as justified in the grand scheme of the universe. Logistically, it is within our
power now to prevent and treat, to a certain degree, AIDS, famine, genocide, and war. Logically and morally, we are responsible to do everything within our power to do so. Why then do we still allow these things to happen, and, more importantly, what are the influences that aid or detract from the alleviation of suffering?

Narrative of the Lens: The Inevitable Rhetoric of Photography and Its Moral Obligations

Michael Shapiro says in *The Politics of Representation* that “the grammar of discussion of photographs tends to approximate the grammar of face-to-face encounter: ‘this is John’ is an intelligible and appropriate utterance whether one is introducing someone to John or showing them a picture of John” (Shapiro 124). Likewise, Sontag points out that photography unlike paintings or sculptures is the only artistic medium allowed to be submitted as evidence in a court of law due to its seemingly neutral nature (Sontag 47). The philosophy that photographs are completely unadulterated reflections of the truth because they are taken by an unbiased machine of science is what Bleiker terms “naturalist photography” (Bleiker 140). If a picture shows a man with three legs, then there must be a tripedal man clomping around this world somewhere.

Unsurprisingly, this old philosophy of photography has been largely obliterated by more recent scholarship on the subject of photography. As Sontag says, “photographs represent the view of someone” (Sontag 31). There is no way of arguing around the fact that when the shutter of the camera closes for a millisecond, there was a hand behind the camera and a human mind behind the hand choosing or excluding each element that goes into the picture (Pearlmutter 28). Because the photographer inevitably makes subjective value judgments about what she chooses to photograph, Sontag is completely justified in stating that “the photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb” (Sontag 22), that the photographer is reciting a narrative in each picture she takes. Furthermore, this biased message is unusually persuasive because there is a
psychological tendency to regard photographs as documentation rather than art. The cliché that “a picture is worth a thousand words” is probably as true as it is trite.

Since the health and well-being of communities is at stake in the photography of suffering, a close analysis of a photograph’s message is of the utmost necessity. Due to the complex relationship between the subjects of the photograph and the viewer (Berger 9), the emotional response to the picture will inevitably influence the action taken on behalf of the subjects. Richard Dawkins posits that this emotional response is actually a product of evolution, implying that compassion is built into our biology (Dawkins 221). Assuming (and not without profound moral responsibility) that the goal of manipulating this emotion should be to galvanize the audience of the photograph to alleviate the suffering, how ought one display the subjects to achieve the most effective solution to their suffering? Should the picture elicit sympathy from the viewer? Does sympathy lead to effective relief? Should the photograph focus on the positive aspects of living with AIDS or should it show the excruciating pain of the disease? Which leads to better outcomes? These questions must not be taken lightly, as lives and communities are affected by each and every answer.

**Beautiful Agony: Aestheticizing the Plight of Others**

The best in his field, Sebastiao Salgado is the face for a growing movement in photography to portray “millions of refugees, exiles, orphans, landless peasants, homeless families, boat people, internees and others who today endure incredible hardships to escape even more extreme circumstances” (Kimmelman) in a visually appealing style. Influenced by iconic works of the
suffering of Christ or St. Sebastian, Salgado has adapted the classic theme of suffering for a new medium. The NY Times art critic Kimmelman says that even though Salgado portrays scenes of powerful agony, “the good photographs are so stupendously gorgeous that they make you forget everything else while you are looking at them” (Kimmelman), even, I would argue, the presence of suffering. Indeed a glance at Figure 3 reveals that though all subjects including a child are wasting away, there is something innately beautiful about the serenity of the faces, the earthy connection with nature, and the overpowering presence of a crucifix all working together to create what might be called a modern day Nativity. It is no understatement to say that Salgado has greatly contributed to the canon of art with his photography.

The problem with his photography, however, is that he regards it, and asks that it be treated as, photojournalism and not art (Ryman 27). As a work of art, his photography is excused from the traditional conventions of moralizing because the art is understood to be the point of view of the artist; to label his photographs as photojournalism, though, insists that these are accurate representations of his subjects and should be used by the media to communicate information to the public. Accordingly, many scholars have praised his work as "militant photography" that “compellingly, and with a sad tenderness, depicts human and economic injustice while always respecting the innate dignity of the workers” (Fee and Brown 1245) as though it is a well-written news article or an uncompromising documentary. Even his colleagues in photojournalism have argued that he forces his audience to “look into the lives and deaths of people who inhabit

Figure 4 - Sebastiao Salgado, "Garimpeiros"
places that few of us would pause to consider on our own” (McDonald 109). I, however, am skeptical that his work is as constructive in eliminating suffering as his peers would say. How does focusing on the beauty of suffering bring about a resolution to that suffering?

Thankfully, Sebastiao Salgado has at least as many critics as supporters. In a direct attack on Salgado, Sontag points out the self-indulgent nature of his photography which “drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself” (Sontag 77). Furthermore, she characterizes Salgado as one “who specializes in world misery” and is guilty of focusing on the “powerless, reduced to their powerlessness” (78). I too would argue that there is something terribly disconcerting and crass about putting the pain of others on display as a spectacle for audiences to delight in. Morton agrees that if Salgado’s work was meant to be an agent of change that the medium of contemporary art may not be the most effective approach. “Twenty years on, and transformed into fine art, who are these arresting images for …, and who will speak about them – just curators?” (Morton 177). At the heart of the problem is the fact that these photographs are taken for the enjoyment of their wealthy, far-off audiences instead of for the betterment of the people they photograph.

More harmful than commercially exploiting the suffering of others (an argument to be followed up later) is that these photographs subconsciously instill ennui in the audience to correct the injustice of suffering. Masquerading as photojournalism, these photographs elevate suffering into an untouchable realm of godlike, heavenly beauty; it becomes an overwhelming and untouchable entity. Sontag makes the following insightful comment:

Making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to ‘care’ more. It also invites them to feel that the suffering and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder. (Sontag 79)
To think that we cannot alleviate suffering is a selfish and self-deceptive line of thinking steeped in pre-Enlightenment philosophy that suffering is god-ordained, inevitable, and that we are powerless to change it. Resigning oneself to this philosophy is basically saying to the subjects of this photography, “That’s quite a shame, but thank god it’s you and not me.” Photography, by the success of its artistry must be careful not to get caught up in the very processes it seeks to criticize (Kleinman, Appeal 11).

**Dehumanizing Humans: Humanist Photography**

Beautiful suffering is, however, a mere sliver of the images of suffering that we typically encounter. The photographs that we are probably most familiar with fall into a category that Bleiker terms “humanist” (Bleiker 1) whose goal is to portray its subjects as so completely miserable and pessimistic that viewers will be compelled to help either monetarily or through advocacy (Schwarz and Murray). The definitive example of this methodology is Kevin Carter’s photograph which gained the 1994 Pulitzer Prize “for a picture first published in The New York Times of a starving Sudanese girl who collapsed on her way to a feeding center while a vulture waited nearby” (The Pulitzer Prizes). As seen in Figure 5, the little girl is alone and helpless; every aspect of the picture is dripping with death – the dusty ground, the razed trees in the background, the ominous vulture waiting for carrion. While this scene is undeniably heart-breaking, is the emotion created in the viewer one that will constructively alleviate the situation? I would argue that photographs such as these exacerbate suffering by dehumanizing the sufferers.
Sontag directly addresses this dehumanization by saying, “the journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic – that is, colonized – human beings: Africans and denizens of remote Asian countries were displayed like zoo animals in ethnological exhibitions” (Sontag 72). Though not intentional, Carter has captured certain aspects about his subject - suffering alone, disinterested, dying in the wilderness, naked, quadrupedal – that invite comparison to subhuman forms like Homo erectus. Particularly in relation to regions like sub-Saharan Africa, this line of thinking has a tinge of racist ideology by saying that Africa contains less evolved people than the West. Proctor calls this the “Out of Africa: Thank God!” supposition: “to point out the presumption that hominids became human in the process of leaving Africa – a slight that seems always unintentional, yet is surprisingly common” (Proctor 225). I would be loathe to accuse Carter and other humanist photographers of unabashed racism, but the composition of these photographs reveals a subconscious bigotry by attributing economic disadvantages to biological disadvantages which brings us to the foremost problem of this methodology.

Humanist photography perpetuates the stereotype of suffering people as intrinsically different from and at odds with our own Western culture and society. The scene captured by Carter seems very foreign in the eyes of a typical Western viewer because it was meant to seem foreign thus creating an arbitrary but intentional demarcation of the world into dark and light zones (Bancroft 96). Light zones like the Western World and first world countries are characterized as progressive, far-sighted, benevolent, intelligent, and stable in contrast to dark zones like sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia that are associated with stagnation, suffering, violence, incompetence in a global economy, and a hotbed for infectious diseases that threaten the light zones.
Armed with these assumptions, the only logical conclusion is that these developing nations are hopelessly unable to solve their own problems. These pictures represent Africa as a “romantic tragedy” that is so poverty-stricken, so disease-ridden, so helpless that nothing will do but for the West to ride onto the continent and save it (Patton 83). This rings with neo-colonialist slogans that we (but only those of the correct racial persuasion) should “Take up the White Man’s burden” as Kipling so self-importantly enjoined his British fellows.

The result of such patronizingly antiquated beliefs is a plan of action that completely ignores the opinion and needs of the community affected, for the “the greatest threat to solidarity is the lack of collective efficacy” (Wise). Indeed, to suspect a group of individuals of the most incredible idiocy makes a partnership impossible. Narcissism is almost never a good way to solve international problems, as proven by the current war. But if a suffering community is only portrayed as incompetent in dealing with their own problems, is it surprising that we in the West feel that our ways are superior? Using the hypothetical situation of a community stricken with AIDS, it is not difficult to imagine do-gooding Westerners charging in with condoms and HIV-prevention literature in an attempt to help their hopeless brethren. There is, unfortunately, no amount of AIDS workshopping and prophylactics that can prevent AIDS if the root problem is impoverished women forced into the sex industry (Varga), something the action plan would have accounted for had it considered the opinion of those actually suffering. Of course, if we have already labeled those suffering as biologically and intellectually inferior, it is just as easy to attribute the failure of our programs to this self-same inferiority. Kleinman eloquently comments that when we “impose” policies on local worlds and “those localities
end up resisting or not complying with policies and programs that are meant to assist them, such acts are then labeled irrational or self-destructive. The local world is deemed incompetent, or worse” (Kleinman, *Appeal* 8). If our goal with these photographs is to create lasting and effective alleviation of suffering, to represent the sufferers as helpless and incompetent is perhaps the least constructive method of translating emotion into action.

Recalling the argument made against aestheticizing suffering, humanist photography, in addition to dehumanizing its subject, also runs the risk of being so pessimistic that it enervates its audience from working towards a solution. As Paul Wise, professor of child healthy and society at Stanford, asks, “How much can you see before you go numb?” (Wise). “That complex problems can be neither understood nor fixed works with the massive globalization of images of suffering to produce moral fatigue, exhaustion of empathy, and political despair” (Kleinman, *Appeal* 9). We must always be watchful of regressing to the pre-Enlightenment zeitgeist that we are powerless to help. More destructive than creating programs that are predestined to not succeed, is not trying at all.

A Painful Industry: Commercialization of Suffering

If aestheticizing suffering and humanist photography are so deleterious to the situation of those suffering, the question remains as to why these methodologies are still so prevalent in our society. Why have we not changed our ways now that we are aware of their folly? It is unfortunate that these photographs benefit us fiscally and exalt our current system for dealing with global suffering. This creates a discrepancy between what is good for those suffering and what benefits those manipulating the suffering. It is a sad fact that more often than not, the pocketbooks of the West usually triumph over the alleviation of suffering.
It is not a new observation that shock sells in our media-saturated world. While humanist photography and aesthetic photographs of suffering endeavor to help those portrayed, they are regretfully not above being used for commercial gain. According to Sontag, “the photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it” (Sontag 39). Often, the communities that have use for photographs of suffering are the media who employ them to enthrall readers with their gruesome stories. Kleinman reiterates this unfortunate truth when he says that “watching and reading about suffering, especially suffering that exists somewhere else, has… become a form of entertainment. Images of trauma are part of our political economy” (Kleinman, Appeal 8).

While media outlets may be the least tactful manipulators of these photographs, nonprofit organizations and relief organizations are probably most reliant on the revenue that suffering brings in. A recent study by Small looking at how the average American responds to images of suffering in Africa found that a picture of a suffering individual extracted almost 75% more money from the test subject than simply offering statistical information on suffering and, interestingly, almost 40% more money than both information and pictures (Small, et al). It seems that photographs have such an awesome psychological power that words can only detract from the emotional response. The master of many words, Henry James said that in the face of extreme suffering words have “weakened, they have deteriorated” (James 144-145) which would explain why photographs are so often used to elicit funding for various relief organizations. It is not surprising after the heavily televised, heavily depicted Hurricane Katrina disaster that philanthropic organization donated $3.3 billion dollars, with 85% of it going to five large charities (Lipman). While humanist photography and aestheticizing suffering must be
commended for bringing in large quantities of cash, one must question whether sporadically enriching non-profits and NGOs able to advertise the most grisly pictures is more of a band-aid than an actual solution to definitively eliminating suffering. Is it possible that the West needs a complete paradigm shift in dealing with global suffering rather than temporary repairs to a broken system?

To create lasting changes in our world, there comes a point at which a society must abandon an old way of thinking in favor of a new, progressive one. Unfortunately, by reinforcing stereotypes and causing us to abdicate proactive approaches to eliminating suffering for a mindset that suffering is inevitable, humanist photography and aestheticizing suffering maintain the status quo. There is really no impetus for our response to suffering to change or evolve when we honestly believe that nothing more can be done, that this is as good as it gets, that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. In regards to AIDS, famine, wars, etc there is a clear and, sometimes obvious, room for improvement. Falling prey to only playing within the boundaries of our system is what Paul Farmer terms “structural violence” (Farmer 8). Structural violence is not the result of personal attacks on individuals, but the suffering of individuals at the hands of the institutions we have constructed or allowed to exist– social inequalities, poverty, human rights violations. Farmer claims that “the intervening decades have seen little progress in the efforts to secure social and economic rights” (Farmer 213) to a large degree because of our inability to work outside of the present, stagnant paradigm of dealing with world problems. In 1620, the champion of rational thought, Francis Bacon, wryly noted, “It would be an unsound fancy and self-contradictory to expect that things which have never yet been done can be done except by means which have never yet been tried.” (Bacon 90).
Regrettably, humanist photography suggests no need to try anything new and even less of a need to change our current practices.

Picturing Hope: Alternative Photography Methods

To combat the consequences of the previous methodologies of capturing suffering, there has been a growing movement of photography that seeks to catalyze permanent solutions. With the philosophy that the best consultants on how to solve suffering are the sufferers themselves, these new approaches to photography give their subjects a voice by reflecting the suffering as those suffering perceive it. While there are far too many examples and techniques for me to explore in this paper, the commonality among all of them is that they show the sufferers actively struggling to overcome and interpret their own suffering.

Taking literally the call to capture life as those suffering see it, Hope for Children undertook a project that placed cameras in the hands of AIDS victims in a style that Bleiker terms “pluralist photography” (Bleiker 123). The photographs, as expected, are not material that would make the headlines of the NY Times, offering instead a far more complex outlook into the diverse and localized ways of how victims of AIDS see their illness. In a single photoset taken by a young girl named Tenanesh living in Addis Ababa, there are photographs of Tenanesh enjoying her toys (Figure 6), posing with a portrait of Jesus (Figure 7), and playing a game of
football with friends (figure 8). In a great departure from our previous photographs, Tenanesh’s photographs show the many hours in her day where she is actively engaged in her community and not writhing in pain and filth, the behavior of choice according to the delusions of our previously examined photographs. Through these self-portraits of a twelve year-old girl engaging in activities typical of any twelve year-old, Tenanesh is made human. She enjoys life much as any other child would except for the horrible reality that she lives with HIV. These photographs may not cause Bono to rush to her side with open arms and an open checkbook, but they do communicate to the viewer that HIV-positive children like Tenanesh are not mere statistics in a UN report. They are individuals who deserve happiness as much as anyone else. Realizing this is the first step and motivation behind eliminating suffering.

There are also approaches that are a bit more orthodox than Hope for Children’s project as evidenced by the Drik Picture Library. Like any other photojournalism outlet, Drik is committed to capturing images from newsworthy events around the world. However, they depart from the mainstream media with their vision to portray “the majority world, not as fodder for disaster reporting, but as a vibrant source of human energy and a challenge to an exploitative global economic system” (Hoek 334). Consider Figure 9, depicting the 10 day flooding of parts of Bangladesh in 2004. Instead of showing emaciated people packed into a shelter waiting for the paternal UN to come in, it shows Bangladeshis working together to rebuild their own homes together after this tragedy. To a Western audience, this picture entreats us to work with the Bangladeshis instead of on their behalf. In making this
appeal, Drik is a fierce advocate for the idea that we, the West and those suffering, can eliminate suffering by working together.

Paul Wise holds that the most constructive representations of suffering are those that show “compassion and shared action” (Wise). Pluralist photography and other similar photography methods, by showing a community actively seeking to solve their problems, show the importance of partnering with the communities we are hoping to help. Indeed, our efforts to assist those in need will fall flat if we simply share suffering without a sense of capacity to overcome that suffering. Because of the potential benefits for sufferers and those seeking to help, I therefore strongly advocate the inclusion of these photographs in our media. It is only by challenging stereotypes and rethinking our approach to international problems that we have any hope of overcoming them.

Zooming Out: Photography of Suffering in the Big Picture

Strong evidence exists that photographs of suffering have great power to influence the institutions of philanthropy, international relations, and international relief. As for humanist photography and aestheticizing suffering, they offer self-serving Western-centric advice, effectively contributing nothing to the dialogue of eliminating suffering. Alternative philosophies of photography like pluralist photography and progressive photojournalism are much more constructive in this regard. Even if we implement this small change, though, how effective is it in addressing the suffering others?

While this paper deals with the minutiae of how depictions of suffering speak to us, the much broader question from which this topic is derived is why is there suffering at all and what do we do with it. If the world is divided into the miserable and the horrible, as Woody Allen says, how far have we come in eliminating the horrible? Since the Enlightenment, have we truly
embraced the idea that extreme suffering is preventable? Why, centuries later, do we still have 1.3 billion of the world’s 6 billion living on less than $1 a day (World Health Organization)? Photography and the way that we represent suffering are only a very tiny portion of an incredibly complex part of life. Suffering is a problem, a way of life, an industry, among a myriad of roles it plays in our world.

While the questions and answers I have established here might seem very focused and formulaic, it is important to remember that every situation, every mode of suffering will be different and thus require a unique response. Thus trying to define suffering and the proper response to it is a task too large for this paper or even a thousand papers. Where then does one start with such an enormous assignment? The great doctor Albert Schweitzer once said, “Our hearts often look for something very big, something wanting a lot of sacrifice, and often our heart does not see the humble things. At first you must learn to do the humble things and often they are the most difficult to do” (Schweitzer’s Message). The role of photography in eliminating suffering is one of those “humble things” that paves the way for greater change, and thus should serve as a lens for reviewing other aspects of suffering.
Figure 3

Figure 4
Figure 5

Figure 6
Figure 7

Figure 8


*Schweitzer’s Message for Young People.* Dr. Schweitzer’s Hospital Fund of Great Britain. 1 June 2007 <http://www.schweitzershospitalfund.org.uk/students_uk.html>.


