Empathic Suffering: Refugee’ Campaigns and Humanitarian Communication

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Abstract: This paper addresses some of the tensions regarding the connection between humanitarian communication and human suffering, particularly in relation to the issue of refugees in contemporary politics. It analyses how refugee campaigns, devised by both non-governmental and intergovernmental agencies, in order to raise awareness on protection construct the relationship between suffering and political agency. The paper conveys the argument that current attempts at creating “empathic suffering” (Bennett, 2005) campaigns on refugee issues are in important ways responses to a crisis of representation in humanitarian communication and intrinsically connected to a different model of subjectivity enacted by neoliberal communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009). The paper dwells with this tension by looking at current trends of refugee camp simulations, asking whether these strategies contribute to create an affective discursive economy revolving around trauma and loss as constitutive aspects of the refugee figure in International Relations.

January, 30th, 2009. One of the grimmest meetings ever held in long-standing “big business, small government” little town of Davos, Switzerland. Still in the midst of the shock effect of the global economic downturn of 2008, CEOs of transnational corporations, state leaders, finance ministers, NGO activists – from eco-friendly agendas to right-wing Christian groups -, and United Nations officials gathered, once again, to discuss the future of the world economy. In between meetings, panels and discussion tables of economic parlance, and in a reformed garage of an old Davos clinic, participants were able to experience life as a refugee in a staged camp, sponsored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and ran by a Hong Kong-based NGO called Crossroads. Two hundred VIP attendees at Davos accepted the challenge of spending one hour in a simulation of a refugee life at the Refugee Run. Among the many high profile adherents were British tycoon, Richard Branson, UN Secretary General, Ban-ki-Moon, Gucci’s CEO, Robert Polet, ICRC President, Jakob Kellenberger, co-founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, CEO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, and International Director of Green Peace, Kumi Naidoo.

Refugee camp simulations have become a widespread phenomenon in recent years. Schools, NGOs, humanitarian agencies, media activists among a range of other groups have been involved in setting up these spaces as a way of bringing attention and awareness to the issue of refugees. A common feature in the US over the past decade, simulations are going increasingly global. Crossroads
has staged the event in several parts of Southeast Asia, similar NGOs have done the same in Australia and New Zealand, several universities and colleges around the world (including Harvard University) use simulations of refugee camps to train humanitarian workers, and, as the trend goes, apparently Refugee Run has become a regular event at the World Economic Forum agenda (it was held again in 2011). More than that, UN agencies have now turned to the general public in order to make the “virtual” experience real for anyone, through online games that also attempt to replicate the life of a refugee. The most notorious is UNHCR’s simulation game “Against all odds”, launched in 2009, but this type of online media expands on a daily-crisis-basis (see the game “Darfur is dying” by Susana Ruiz).

What do these new forms of “humanitarian media” tell us about politics? Or better, to what extent do they reflect intrinsic dilemmas of the contemporary disjunction between humanitarianism and politics? What sorts of relationships can indeed be fostered in such approaches to the suffering of others and how do they challenge the prevailing representation of the refugee as the quintessential humanitarian subject/object? In the pages that follow I argue that the theatrical spectacle of refugee camp simulations is, in part, a response to a crisis of representation that permeates the history of humanitarian branding. I will build on Chouliaraki (2010) compelling analysis of humanitarian communication and Bolstanski’s (2000) politics of pity to show how these strategies have come to dominate the contemporary humanitarian imagination. Whereas their focus is on a large scale discussion of humanitarianism, my emphasis here lies specifically on representations of the refugee figure and campaigns devoted to raise awareness of the issue. Simulations are also in part an effect of a constitutive facet of a more general transformation (or internal continuity) of contemporary capitalism, responding to an increasing linkage between affection and production, immanent to the current neoliberal logic of government. I build on Vrasti’s (2010) provocative reading of neoliberal governing to show how an effort like Refugee Run caters precisely to the sort of subject neoliberal global capitalism forges and depends upon.

The politics of refugee pity

According to Chouliaraki (2010), two major strands of humanitarian communication were the target of debate and criticism mainly due to how they approached suffering. The first one, which she terms “shock effect appeals”, was typical of early humanitarian campaigns, portraying people in humanitarian emergencies deprived of their “humane” characteristics. Campaigns would have a highly gendered perspective, focusing on women and children, poorly clothed, abated by hunger, disease and
deprivation. Their semblance foreshadowed a ghostly-like figure, “a composition of people devoid of individualizing features” (ibid, p.110). The general, abstract image of suffering conveyed by these campaigns would bring empathy in the spectator/donor by connecting affectively the universal aspects of human pain. The horrors of famine, poverty and violence were represented in the absent personality and agency of the portrayed. The shock caused by these images would then have the effect of triggering the spectator’s action, either by guilt (that s/he may be in part responsible for the situation) or by pity.

“Shock effect” appeals were common in the 1990s in refugee protection campaigns. In a 1999 essay, Nyers advanced a forceful critique of pity-based campaigns regarding refugees. Among the many problems levelled, he highlights how pictures emphasized the emptiness of the condition of refugee. Absence was a central theme in the campaigns, both in terms of the inexistent, shadowy bodies displayed and in relation to the lack of community-based relations. Reduced to their biological condition, refugee bodies were also deprived of any social component that would add any semblance of a human life (no religion, no family, no cultural display, no eating and cooking). As he demonstrates, these representations echoed, in important respects, the institutionalized perception of what it meant to be a refugee: an indistinct mass of peoples, deprived of country, home and culture, desperate for help, living in fear and in a condition of suspension, of absolute lack. Despite “an unprecedented polymorphism and complexity in the causes, underlying dynamics, and effects of global refugee flows [the images display the belief that] behind these experiences born out of particular contexts and circumstances lies a common underlying identity which is universally shared among refugees” (Nyers, 1999: 16). This identity is marked by silence (the refugee lacks a voice) and invisibility (the refugee is but a shadow of an individual striving to become human again). This universality speaks to a certain imaginary that allows the spectator to comprehend and apprehend what it feels like being a victim of such violence, even if the cost for this is that the victim cannot participate in any active way in the relationship. Complicity comes hand in hand with a feeling of personal and consequently collective responsibility. For the refugee to become a silent victim, deprived of agency and voice, the spectator is also somehow caught in a double bind: on the one hand, s/he feels that he is part of the problem (feelings like outrage, guilt, revolt, shame range in the psychological turmoil of the role of the spectator as indirect perpetrator – omission – of violence); on the other hand, s/he is also part of the solution (volunteering, donating, adopting, caring for the suffering other and taking a stand). But, as Chouliaraki remarks, this paradox “informs an ambivalent form of moral agency that both presupposes the Western spectator’s complicity in world poverty, collectively and individually, and at the same time enacts this
complicity in the power relations that it seeks to expose and redress” (2010:111). Therefore, the action of the spectator, whatever it might be, reinforces the unequal standing between him/herself and the sufferer, even when his/her actions are benevolent towards the other. De Waal has called this sort of humanitarian branding as “disaster pornography”, a type of representation that ends up diminishing and reducing the represented to an object of compassion, adoration or contemplation and that tires its audience to a point of numbness, powerlessness or outrage “for bombarding you with material that only makes you feel miserable” (Cohen, 2001:214 quoted by Chouliaraki, 2010:112).

In response to the relative ineffectiveness of shock effect style, positive image appeals started to circulate on humanitarian themes. These, according to Chouliaraki, are marked by personalizing the sufferer and by addressing the spectator in its singularity and highlighting how they can “make a concrete contribution to improve a sufferer’s life” (2010, p.112). Rather than focusing on the negative emotions brought by humanitarian situations and in the abstract generality of the figures that haunt those contexts, positive image appeals speak in an affirmative tone and invite the spectator to learn about the sufferer and to engage, from a distant proximity, with their realities. The spectator is distant because s/he cannot actually partake in the unfolding life events of humanitarian reality, but is, at the same time, close in feeling and hope to the portrayed sufferer. Empathy, the emotion of identification and understanding of one’s situation, is fostered as a central mark of the relationship between spectator and sufferer through affirmations of hope, future, strength, prosperity, recovery and rebuilding usually conveyed in the campaigns. The sufferer is presented as an active person, with a hold over their destiny and life chances, but in need of a benefactor for the first (or perhaps) final push. This type of appeal was common in refugee protection campaigns during the 2000s. The 2005 World Refugee Day campaign, for instance, was based on the motto “It takes courage to be a refugee”. The several posters and ads presented five individual portraits of both women and men with their faces up, eyes staring the horizon as if they were ready to walk, move on with their lives. The posture and the way in which the individuals stand in the pictures denotes a certain positive flare, an attitude of bravery facing the atonement of the past. The images are sold as if what we see is in fact a personal, realist and almost intimate portrait of that particular individual, ready to be hanged in the family living room. Under the rubric of the

1 Each poster depicts a person and a region: one Vietnamese refugee, one Afghan refugee (both men), one Bosnian refugee, one Sudanese and one Colombian. Viewing is available at: http://www.aidh.org/Refug/Images/hcr-doc.pdf, accessed December 10th. 2010.
campaign, the viewer could read the life story of the individual and the general conditions that led them to become refugees. Rather than emphasizing emptiness, silence and a condition of lack, the posters conveyed the idea of an active person, filled with hope (rather than despair), with courage (rather than fear) and willingness to face the challenges of a new life. These emotions can certainly strike a broader audience, since almost anyone can connect with the idea of “moving on” in light of dramatic changes. Refugees are, following the campaign, not that different from anyone; they are ordinary people faced with extraordinarily difficult choices that yet find courage to go on.

Nevertheless, the particularity of the refugee is also subsumed into a certain degree of generality, since these individuals are spoken of as elements in a larger composition of community life in ruins. For example, the poster below shows a young woman, with indigenous traits, half smiling: an ordinary lady if not for the captions that follow. “Husband shot. Village burned. Hiding in the forest. Then rescue. Shelter. New documents. A fresh start. And, a widow at 17, the challenge of a new life”. Firstly, the viewer becomes acquainted with the depth of her loss, certainly a gendered one. We come to know her age, her legal and marital status, her current standing in life. We know she found protection, that she became a refugee and that the challenge she faces is that of beginning once again. A leaflet distributed for the campaign enters into more detail in the lives of the individuals portrayed. They are given names, country of origin; we learn the details of their plight and the role humanitarian agencies played in granting them a new chance. And there we meet Maria:

“Maria, Colombia. Maria is seventeen, and already a widow. Last year members of an armed group rampaged through her remote village in Colombia, shot the men and torched the huts. Terrified, Maria ran into the dense forest, where she walked and hid for days. Exhausted and bleeding, with no identification papers, she stumbled into a friendly village and, eventually, found herself in the care of UNHCR at a facility in Bogotá. With their help, she was provided with proper documentation. Now, with her ordeal behind her, and armed with renewed hope and a basic education, Maria plans to start her young life all over again” (UNHCR, 2005).

It is interesting to note how the posters portraying women tend to emphasize ideas of home, family and friends. The private domain, which uncritically constitutes the space of the feminine, is less prominent in male portrayals in the campaign. In fact, the stories about man in the posters tend to highlight the harsh physical conditions endured during flight (exception made to an African woman’ poster) and the social elements of adaptation (new customs and career). The only poster with an elder resembles in style the female ones (the theme of home and protection).
UNHCR’s positive appeals campaigns (Source: www.aidh.org)

These are the particularities of her story, but they are never detailed to the point of making her unique in the mass of young refugee widowers out there. She is singular yet plural. She has a face, a nationality and a story, but her face and her story are told in such a way that many other refugees could certainly attest to the same narrative. The agency seems aware of the complex relationship between universal and particular that is played out in the refugee regime:

“There is no typical refugee. Every story is different; every loss is a personal one. But around the world different crises affect different groups. Some are almost settled. Other conflicts are new, with fresh refugee problems. And still others are shadowy, long-running guerrilla wars whose victims are often the ordinary people the revolutionaries claim to represent. In this year’s World Refugee Day awareness campaign, out of the roughly 17 million refugees under our protection, we profile five individuals from five different regions. Naturally, their names are not real. But the courage they typify most definitely is” (UNHCR, 2005).

The personal is subsumed into the universal emotion that marks their condition of refugees. It is not to the particular life, problems, challenges of those portrayed that the campaign speaks, but to the emotion that both distances and unites refugees and the spectator. Even if every refugee is different, even if ‘there is no typical refugee’, there is something which provides commonality between the refugees and the world at large. It is the inner strength that makes it possible to overcome the basic emotion that defines them: fear. In the words of the agency,
“As ordinary people living peaceful lives, we rarely have to put our courage to the test. Refugees are ordinary people, too, except that through no fault of their own, they find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. As such, they are often required to dig deep into their own inner sources of strength in order, as another dictionary puts it, to find “the ability to overcome fear.” Initially, that fear may be the immediate one of trying to escape the horrors of war and persecution, the pain of losing homes and loved ones, and the ordeal of flight. Later comes the deeper anxiety of uncertainty—the worry of how to rebuild their lives, either in completely new circumstances, or back home where they now may not be welcome” (UNHCR, 2005).

So, the positive appeal makes room for the conventional, and therefore ‘typical’, narrative on refugees: involuntary displacement, fear of violence and courage to flee, uncertainty and insecurity, the sense of not belonging both home and abroad. It is this impossible balance between leveling the refugee figure (and narrative) with that of the ordinary person and keeping the refugee’s specificity that makes it difficult for positive appeals to overcome the problems and paradoxes of humanitarian communication. As Chouliaraki (2010) aptly remarks, positive appeals speak to a change in humanitarian action geared towards a more interventionist approach, “which goes beyond relief and aspires to transform the economic and political structures that can support a life for vulnerable others” (p.113). As such, the refugee-hero portrayed in these campaigns is very much linked to an increasing emphasis on autonomy in refugee protection policies. Recently, guidelines for action in refugee ‘emergencies’ are routinely focusing on capacity building and on projects which can foster an independent livelihood for these individuals and their families. Charity, a major driving force in the refugee-victim-beggar campaigns, gives way to self-determination and self-sufficiency—two requisites that are at odds with the conventional definition of the refugee as a powerless side-effect of global structures of violence. It also connects to local development policies, targeted specifically Towards receiving communities and calling for closer engagement with hospitality and policies of refugee inclusion.

However, positive appeals follow the same structural conditions of shock effect campaigns. The refugee beggar and the refugee hero are but two sides of the same coin; what we see is the same image under different light. Suffering is the element that connects them and that provides the underlying thread to both approaches. Boltanski (2000), building on Arendt’s discussion on the spectacle of suffering, argues that humanitarian communication tends to convey a politics of pity. This politics is based on three major premises. First, there is a clear separation between the sufferer (in our case the refugee) and the spectator. The opposition between ‘the fortunate and the unfortunate’ is necessary to keep the
hierarchy between distinct roles: the unfortunate as receiver of the fortunate’s benevolence and the fortunate as giver, as problem-solver. In order for the fortunate to give, it might be more efficient to represent the receiver as someone who has courage and autonomy to make the best of the gift, or as victim for whom help will be mediated, directed and governed by a care-taker (Moulin, 2011). Secondly, in either case, ‘the politics of pity does not ask whether the misery of the unfortunate is justified […] For a politics of pity, the urgency of the action needing to be taken to bring an end to the suffering invoked always prevails over considerations of justice”. To that end, suffering is brought about by involuntary circumstances, “by reference to luck” (Boltanski, 2000:5). The sufferers, “through no fault of their own, [they] find themselves in extraordinary circumstances” (UNHCR, 2005). Thirdly, and of particular relevance to us, “the politics of pity regards the unfortunate together en masse, even if, it is necessary to single out particular misfortunes from the mass in order to inspire pity” (Boltanski, 2000:4). Here we come to the tension between universality and particularity that is at the center of problem of humanitarian communication and of refugee campaigns specifically (a reflection of a problem immanent to the refugee regime itself; see Walker, 1993; Soguk, 1999; Nyers, 2006). It is worth recovering Boltanski’s analysis in detail for its clarity and depth:

“As a politics, it [the politics of pity] aspires to generality. Its role is to detach itself from the local and so from those necessarily local situations in which events provoking compassion may arise […] But in its reference to pity, it cannot wholly free itself from the particular case […] To arouse pity, suffering and wretched bodies must be conveyed in a way as to affect the sensibility of those more fortunate. […] However these particular cases must be treated in such a way that suffering is made concrete. The unfortunate, or rather, every unfortunate, must therefore be conveyed as if they were met in person; as if one could touch their wounds and hear their cries. But going into details always run the risk of collapsing the demonstration into the local. Now a politics of pity is not just concerned with one unfortunate and a particular situation. To be a politics of pity it must convey at the same time a plurality of situations of misfortune, to constitute a kind of procession or imaginary demonstration of unfortunates brought together on the basis of their singularity and what they have in common […] They therefore must be hyper-singularized through an accumulation of the details of suffering and, at the same time, underqualified: it is he, but it could be someone else […] Around each unfortunate brought forward crowds a host of replacements […] Although singular, they are nonetheless exemplary” (Boltanski, 2000:11-12).

The power of the concrete image of the refugee/sufferer, coupled with the rough strokes of the painting of his/her life, is the mechanism through which a politics of pity operates. We feel we know Maria; we can trace back her steps and her sorrows; we can somehow appreciate her suffering from a distance, in the imaginary scaffold these representations evince. Yet, there are many Marias, Colombians or otherwise, for whom her cries attest. The spectator becomes a distant witness of the image of personal
suffering; the exemplary status of her plea comes along with a call for an exemplary response by the fortunate viewer. In fact, distance is a central piece in the umbrella of a politics of pity, because the spectator must be able to hear and comprehend the sufferer as if they met on a “face-to-face encounter” (Boltanski, 2000:12); nonetheless, the viewer must be constantly assured that the sufferer is not present, just represented. For proximity erases pity and brings along a feeling of repudiation: upon contact, “the sufferer is nothing but undesirable”.

There are many problems regarding the possibilities of action within a politics of pity. For one, the bond between spectator and sufferer is “minimal and abstract” (Boltanski, 2000:18). The spectator’s commitment is restricted to an impersonal response (be that of giving money, adopting a far-away starving child, signing letters of indignation). Second, in the same way in which shock effect campaigns tend to trivialize suffering, positive appeals “feed into an increasing compassion fatigue” (Chouliaraki, 2010:113). The spectator might feel there is nothing left to do. In our case, if UNHCR is taking care of the refugee problem, all one has to do is to contribute to the agency’s efforts. Consequentially, these appeals tend to strengthen the gap between fortunate and unfortunate, sufferer and spectator. Thirdly, there is a “misrecognition” of both the extent of systemic power relations and inequalities and of the degree of difference that pervades the identities of sufferer and spectator (2010:114). Finally,

“Positive image campaigns deepens the crisis of pity by introducing suspicion in the representation of suffering - a ‘How do I know this is real?’ sensibility further amplified by the public’s awareness of the capacity of media to manipulate images of suffering” (Chouliaraki, 2010:114).

The politics of (refugee camp) simulations

I want to argue that it is precisely to the shortcomings of both types of appeals that humanitarian simulations respond to. On the one hand, it reduces suspicion by making the suffering real to the spectator. S/he no longer merely observes, s/he becomes a participant-observer unmediated by photorealism or media discourses. Baudrillard argues that we currently live in a post-representational order in which the logic of simulation reigns supreme. This logic follows a “structural law of value in which models of the real are substituted by natural or produced referents” (1983: 4). Simulation strategies operate not only through the production and representation of the real, but also through seduction and manipulation of appearances (Weber, 1996:34). Simulations make distance a virtual and
temporary one, bringing the suffering to the heart of the spectator’s experience. Past and future collapse into a seductive present that controls temporal disjunctions and contextual nuances. Action and speech become intertwined in the composite of the sufferer’s life, a life that now the spectator cannot only talk about but live through, even though in a transient manner. Secondly, simulations tend to bring about a reflexive capacity in the participant audience, “inviting us to rely on our own judgement as to whether public action is possible or desirable” (Chouliaraki, 2010:115). Whereas previous appeals tended to invite and insinuate certain actions as appropriate for the spectator role, in simulation strategies, it is up to the participant to draw, in their imagination, what the reasonable course of action might be. This gives the participant a sense of freedom that was lacking in the previous realist portrayals of suffering where imagination was reduced to figuring out the “host of replacements” for the sufferer’s role.

The Refugee Run’s goal was to make CEOs and business leaders experience “the life of a refugee”. According to the invitation sent to participants,

“Just a five minute walk from the Congress Centre, you can enter a simulated environment that will thrust you into a war zone. You will meet a rebel attack, navigate a mine field and battle life in a refugee camp [Spoiler alert: no harm will come to you]. [This ‘refugee run’] has proven very popular because it takes participants well beyond speech or break out session into actual ‘experience’ of the issue. It will be an experience you will find impossible to forget” (Refugee Run, 2009 quoted by Easterly, 2009)

The invitation highlights how the participant will be able to fill in the shoes of a refugee, but keeps the invited assured that this experience is signified in a restricted manner: one can go beyond speech but no harm will come. It is this imprint on the participant’s memory, the uplifting of the fear of real harm combined with the actual experience of the issue which makes the simulation such a powerful technology of commitment. Simulations can thus be considered a technology of controlling meaning, whereby the participant has the ability to infer what being a refugee is while, at the same time, keeping the refugee as a simulacrum. Simulation therefore provides a witty solution to the universal/particular paradox: the path participants walk is built on general, archetypical portrayals of how one becomes a refugee and what it feels like to be under conditions; but the participant is responsible for ‘hypersingularizing’ the experience, for filling the gaps of the deductive movement that makes it possible for him/her to understand, in actuality, what is the truth that lies behind refugee’ representations. As one participant put it, the simulation breaches the gap between “hearing and being” (Crossroads, 2009). Thus, the question of whether ‘How do I know this is real?’, permeating previous
types of approach, loses its meaning. As Weber states, in simulation strategies, “models are neither authentic (referring to a natural signified) nor functional (referring to a produced signified). Instead, they are self-referential, infinitely substitutable, and reversible” (1995: 37). In Boltanski’s terms, the simulation of the sufferer works on the terrain of the exemplary, it does not aim to answer whether the refugee experience is real or virtual, true or false, but whether it exemplifies and seduces the participant in relation to the inexistence of a typical refugee. Simulations operate on the basis of a truth effect that “becomes disembedded from discourses of morality and relies on each spectator’s personal judgment of the cause of action” (Chouliaraki, 2010:119). Therefore, participants are not asked to reflect on the (i)moralities of the refugee condition, but only to assimilate how that run connects to a host appearances that, in their composite, are productive of a system of symbolic exchange in which there are so “many signs of truth [in our case, so many different and diverse experiences of being and becoming refugees] that truth has no meaning” (Weber, 1995:38). It is interesting to turn to participant’s perceptions, collected by Crossroads, after they took part at the Refugee Run.

“You lose control of your life; No rights; I felt dehumanized; You live in fear; You never know what happens next; There was no hope; No time for grieving; No justice; Hard to express feelings so deep; Makes my normal life seems ostentatious; Very realistic; There is no exaggeration. Camp life really is like this; Really impressive; Very powerful; This should be compulsory for everyone at WEF; We need reminders like this because we human beings forget too easily” (Crossroads, 2009).

Their testimonies reflect, on one hand, an adherence to the general, conventional portrayal of what being a refugee is (no control, no hope, no right, no justice). These perceptions are connected to an idea of the refugee as negativity, as absolute difference. Difference is important for producing a truth effect by attempting to create a reference point, which turns out to be the life of the spectator. By producing and attributing signs of truth to the refugee figure, participants are able to interpret the simulation as real, impressive, not exaggerated and compare this ‘very powerful’ experience in reference to their own ‘ostentatious’ lives. This comparison activates, in its turn, the possibility of the participant becoming a “refugee by proxy”, i.e., the symbolic experience of living as a refugee becomes not only an emulation of reality, but ultimately replaces the actual experience of being a refugee. “As reality is increasingly obscured, signs lose their connection to what they initially represented (as seen is Andy Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans, for example). Further removed from their original meaning, signs and symbols become imitations of facsimiles and reality and fiction dissolve into indistinguishable imitations” (Charles & Wood, 2003). The detachment from the search for authenticity, never fully conquered in
previous humanitarian appeals, is finally achieved in simulation mode, where the representation of refugee life no longer refers to a reality, but becomes reality in itself. Camp life really is like this’ perceptions, as stated by one of the participants, makes the Refugee Run an example of the ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality (Baudrillard, 1988). The refugee reaches the status of a simulacrum; a sign without a referent, or, in other words, with multiple referents depending on how one is seduced by its appearances. The dichotomies that were once central to defining the refugee experience (fear/courage, absence/presence, forced/voluntary) become now intertwined in a chain of signifiers that retain their power because of their truth-effect capacity. Simulations ability to convey the refugee as a unity of oppositions is made possible by the fact that “the distance between the real and its double, and the distortion between same and other, is abolished” (Baudrillard, 1988:67 quoted by Weber, 1995:126). Being seduced by the experience of becoming a refugee, participants are, in fact, capable of feeling and attesting to what being a refugee is. The participant self is therefore intrinsically constituted by the symbolic aesthetics of their refugee other. The refugee-victim and the refugee-hero become, within the simulation logics, interchangeable and reversible signifiers, finally annulled in the experience of the participant. These processes “result from both the inability to police distinctions between terms [in our case, of precisely defining who a refugee is] and the inability to ground ‘truth’ in some transcendental signified or foundational figure [in our case, of being able to specify a universal yet particular narrative of what being a refugee is]” (Weber: 1995:126). The refugee becomes a fantastic, hyper-real figure, composed of symbols which actually replace the complex social fabric of their existence. Refugee becomes a code, a “bundle of practices” destabilized by its inability of producing and fixing its own referents. The logics of simulation thus speaks to a context of increasing anxiety about the possibility of policing, managing and regulating refugee flows and images, while, at the same time, providing a lasting attempt to, in the midst of a crisis of representation and authenticity, keep the ground of an economy of appearances that sustains its power relations.

More than that, refugee camp simulations reflect a fundamental element of contemporary neoliberal regimes of governance that work no longer purely through the expansion and activation of economic rationality, but mostly through the government of affect. “The criteria for becoming a subject on late modernity have shifted from a focus on market rationality to a focus on emotionality, creativity and mobility [...] which involves a desire for social change, an ability to operate in distant and diverse settings, and an interest in experimenting with one’s self and the world around it” (Vrasti, 2010: 9-10). The affective subject of “communicative capitalism” (Dean, 2009) functions within a therapeutic
relationship between work and compassion (Vrasti, 2010). S/he is someone who can reinvent “their work to help save the world because doing good can mean more than volunteering and philanthropy; earning our living can actually become the way we give back” (Moulden, 2008:3 quoted by Vrasti, 2010:11). The manipulation of appearances engendered in simulation strategies provides one way of operationalizing the government of affect and exploits the potential of equalizing, on one hand, the valorization of late modernity subjects’ competencies (emotionality, creativity and mobility) and, on the other, making this process suitable (and somewhat intrinsically connected) to the flexible accumulation of capital. It is no coincidence that Davos and the WEF have become the staging laboratory of initiatives that connect labor and affect, consumerism and compassion, economics and humanitarianism. To support humanitarian causes (be it fight against AIDS, the effects of climate change or refugee protection) emerges, in this context, as an unavoidable feature within the processes of reconfiguration of contemporary capitalist globality. Far from residing at opposite ends or being the result of pure strategic calculations, the refugee figure and the cosmopolitan entrepreneur are both, and simultaneously, emblematic of current post-modern, neoliberal subjectivities. As Bauman highlights, the refugee, the vagabond, the unfortunate operates within a symbiotic relationship of desire with the humanitarian, the tourist, the fortunate; they are one the alter-ego of the other; both necessary elements in the chain of signifiers that constitutes the simulated politics of humanitarianism.

Refugee camp simulations thus efface the distinction between caring and consuming, between caring and containment fostering the collusion of capitalist entrepreneurship and humanitarian virtuosity. The plasticity that is central to neoliberal subjectivity, that malleability of adjusting individual desires to structural demands of competition and productivity, is also a driving feature of simulation strategies, because they allow the participant to turn into reality “the double strategy of capitalist expansion – to extract wealth and control, on the one hand, while giving aid and advice, on the other” (Vrasti, 2010:17). And it does so by making extraction and giving simultaneous practices on the symbolic economy of humanitarian capitalism.

**Conclusion**

Some have accused the Refugee Run of being a bad-taste “Refugee Theme Park” (Easterly, 2009), a pageant that sent the wrong message (Crumb, 2009), and a manifestation of the ‘please-forgive-me spirit of Davos’ recently (Galloni & Davis, 2009). Others have praised the initiative as a very moving event and an eye-opening initiative (GRForum, 2009). Rather than providing an evaluation of refugee
camp simulation strategies as either a solution or a nightmare, I have tried to show how such initiatives are an intrinsic part of contemporary changes in humanitarian branding schemes as well as an effect of the reconfigurations of subjectivity formation in a post-representational society (Baudrillard, 1981). Building on Chouliaraki’s (2010) work on post-humanitarian communication, I have argued that simulations are a response to the “compassion fatigue” of shock and effect and positive appeals. Simulations operate through the manipulation of appearances and by rearticulating individual desires with flexible accumulation prerogatives. They dismiss the question of authenticity by transforming subjective perceptions into objective information, by substituting the spectator’s witnessing for the participant’s hallucinated belief in active imagination within a system of symbolic and controlled hyper-reality. Creativity/autonomy and suffering/trauma become no longer distant sets of signifiers, but interchangeable aspects in the production of meaning regarding refugee experiences. This is not to say that participants conflate what they live through in refugee camp simulations with what they think actually goes on in refugee camp lives; but rather that such distinctions are secondary in the framing of their course of action. The affective component of current communicative capitalism is worked through the simulated “narrative aesthetics” of Refugee Run, by imprinting on participant’s perceptions and desires the capacity to “experiment with one’s self (through the emulation of another’s life that is both undistinguishable and reversible with one’s own) and the world around it” (Vrasti, 2010:9).

The illegible humanity (Limbu, 2009) the refugee represents is supervened by the truth effect produced in simulation strategies that makes it possible for the participant to know what being a refugee is and to become one, even if transiently. The conversion of the refugee into a code, a bundle of practices, works to transform the refugee regime into a collaborative project, reducing the ambivalence between “an altruistic discourse of humanitarianism and a narcissistic discourse of personal trauma” (Chouliaraki, 2010b: 229). It is no coincidence that the Refugee Run was coeval with the launch of “business.un.org” at Davos, a website created to match the needs of UN humanitarian agencies (including UNHCR) and the private sector, aiming to increase business partnerships in humanitarian aid. As Antonio Guterres, High Commissioner for Refugees, stated, “we should have the same level of determination in saving lives as in saving banks” (Galloni & Davis, 2009). Whether the comparison between human and financial lives is outrageous or just an attempt to make sound an appeal for an economic audience in the midst of a global financial downturn remains to be discussed. The point here is to highlight that, in an age of simulation, there is no divorce or incongruence between humanitarianism and capitalism, aid and
finance, refugees and business entrepreneurs. Tourists and vagabonds are, at last, able to meet in their interchangeable roles at the [simulated] camp.

The reversibility of roles works to empty the “political and historic content” of refugee production and regulation, thus keeping unchanged the power relations central to the current dilemmas and challenges of refugee protection. It is a sublimation strategy that, despite its potential for encompassing larger audiences into the refugee-aid-industry-complex, leaves unresolved the basic cultural, economic, political and social structures of globalized violence to which the refugee condition attests [Davos being one but certainly not the only forum of its ingenious capacity to reproduce itself].

References:


