

An iconography of pity and a rhetoric of compassion: war and humanitarian crises in the prism of American and French newsmagazines (1967-1995)

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The 20th century, which was qualified of “age of extremes” by Eric Hobsbawm (1999), has seen the worst in terms of “total wars” and genocides. But it was also the century of a new ideal, the rise of a modern humanitarianism in front of a still enlarging horizon of civil victims and sufferings. If testimony was the base of its action from its very origin, modern humanitarianism has benefited from the cover of mass media; playing a debated role in raising public opinion and influencing politics (Minear et al., 1996; Robinson, 2001). It is now largely admitted that modern humanitarianism, along with pictures of pain and death, have contributed to the appearance of the “victim” concept and its representation through media (Mesnard, 2002).

This communication wished then to explore this rhetoric of compassion on a humanitarian perspective across space and time. If recent works have shown the salience of a sensationalist, emotional and compassionate discourse in the media reporting of recent conflicts (Moeller, 1999), they lack with a better understanding of the historical and cultural perspective. Indeed, if media representations insist on figures of innocent suffering, such as women and children, their narratives and images often appeal to older collective references and memories. Media discourses then have helped in the persistence of stereotypes and “clichés” in social representations of “self” and “the other”. This communication then proposes an in-depth analysis and reading of media narratives and images around four wars: the Lebanese War (1975-1990) and the Balkans War (1992-1995), the Biafra crisis (1967-1970) and the Somalia crisis (1992-1993).

Based on a three-steps analysis – thematic content, discourse and image – this communication will focus on a particular medium, which is made of a sample of international and national newsmagazines: Time, Newsweek, Life, Paris-Match, Le Nouvel Observateur, and L’Express. This empirical comparative study will help to understand media representations on civil wars through time (late 60s-70s and 90s) and space (Western and African spheres). This communication wishes then to emphasize on the concept of framing (Entman, 1993) and its semio-pragmatic applications around the notion of distant suffering (Sontag, 2002).

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