Doing good, feeling bad: humanitarian emotion in crisis

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ABSTRACT
For decades humanitarianism has captured and shaped the dreams of the populations of the global North, dreams of a better world, of a common humanity, of goodness, of solidarity, and of global healing. In this article I argue that when taking art and cultural objects into account humanitarian reason seems however to be in some sort of crisis. Looking at the interpretation of humanitarianism undertaken by cultural artifacts such as film, theater, contemporary art, literary fiction, and humanitarian communication, we realize that such cultural phenomena regularly reflect not only upon various humanitarian crises, but also upon a crisis within the humanitarian imaginary itself. I read two scenes of collective interpretation of the everyday humanitarian call to action, which is always a call to donate. The first scene is from the 2012 edition of the recurring televised Danish fundraising show, Danmarks Indsamling (Denmark Collects), and the second is from Norwegian playwright Arne Lygre’s 2011 play, I Disappear. What is at stake in both of these scenes is the status of humanitarianism as a good-enough fantasy and promise of doing good.

Today humanitarian reason has become so morally unassailable that it amounts to a sheer intellectual taboo, remarks moral anthropologist Didier Fassin in his landmark book Humanitarian Reason. On the face of it this observation seems just right. If humanitarianism designates, as Fassin suggests, a specific rationality that prescribes help for precarious lives, humanitarianism now appears at every level of the social formation. Still more humanitarian organizations continue to come into being. Still more military and political interventions are framed as humanitarian assistance. And still more narratives or images of suffering among crisis-affected populations become available to us in the global North to contemplate. Since 1990 the global humanitarian system has seen an increase in private and governmental grants from 2 billion dollars in 1990 to more than 20 billion dollars in 2014.

In this article I argue that when taking art and cultural objects into account, we see that humanitarianism is in fact in some sort of crisis. When looking at the interpretation of humanitarianism undertaken by cultural artifacts such as film, theater, contemporary art, literary fiction, and humanitarian communication, we realize that such cultural phenomena regularly reflect not only on various humanitarian crises, but also on a crisis within the humanitarian imaginary itself. When studying the cultural evaluation of humanitarian reason we often find a profound uncertainty with regard to humanitarianism as a moral and political order. This uncertainty reveals itself in a range of amoral and ambivalent feelings disturbing the apparently smooth workings of the moral sentiments of humanitarianism. As a global order humanitarianism may appear morally and politically irreproachable, but my suggestion is that a crisis in the support for humanitarianism—and thus a crisis in humanitarian discourses and practices more broadly understood—is catalogued by contemporary art and culture. My approach to humanitarianism and its moral sentiments is thus to examine the evaluation of humanitarian reason that registers in cultural artefacts.

For decades humanitarianism has captured and shaped the dreams of the populations of the global North, dreams of a better world, of a common humanity, of goodness, of solidarity, and of global healing. Yet my assumption is that humanitarian reason increasingly fails to provide these populations with a frame of reference for interpreting and legitimizing their activities in the world. In a sense the current size and success of the humanitarian sector is in itself part of the reason for this crisis, to the extent that the marketization of humanitarian work has disenchanted this work in the eyes of large parts of the populations. To be the target group of humanitarian communication is not necessarily experienced much differently from being the target group of any other kind of advertisement. This is not so surprising since humanitarian organizations operate today much like brands and speak to us as consumers just like any other brand would do. The fact that the
humanitarian enterprise has become big business implies that it is increasingly difficult not to experience such enterprise as business as usual. Another obvious cause of the crisis of humanitarian reason is the fact that this reason has proven useful as a way of legitimizing a range of military interventions. Humanitarian warfare is no longer a contradiction in terms in international law and politics, and to some humanitarians now tallies too well with both imperialism and militarism. This evolution of a military-humanitarian complex is not necessarily supported broadly in the constituencies of what is called the international community. The humanitarian organizations, the humanitarian workers, and the recipients of humanitarian assistance are responding with various degrees of enthusiasm and despair to this new configuration of the humanitarian order. Also, so are the populations of Europe and North America in whose name these interventions are frequently carried out.

This article is part of an endeavor to probe the current reconfiguration of the humanitarian imaginary: how does the crisis in the humanitarian imaginary manifest itself, which new forms and norms will possibly tag along with the crisis? I am interested in the ways in which we navigate collective crisis and, especially, in the experience of not having obvious ways of responding, as witnesses and actors, to what we term humanitarian crisis. In the first part of the essay, I outline a set of critiques of moral emotions, critiques advanced in the research literature on humanitarianism. My approach to the culture and politics of humanitarianism is to a large degree informed by these critical discussions of the relationship between power and moral sentiments. However, I am also interested in what it means to be a part of this culture, this specific historical atmosphere. How does it feel to be hailed and praised as the compassionate subject of humanitarian reason? What do people turn to, when the humanitarian promise of actually doing something good no longer seems credible to them? Humanitarian reason is manifested not only in large-scale events such as international emergency relief or military-humanitarian interventions, but also in the experience of diffuse impulses to donate, to circulate knowledge, and to consume in ways we believe will benefit vulnerable others.

In my efforts to identify this aspect of contemporary humanitarian culture I have tried to integrate a central insight from what Raymond Williams described as “structures of feeling,” namely the suggestion to view structures of feeling as important elements of social and material processes. For Williams, the term “structures of feeling” is a way to point out a stratum of the social reality that cannot be reduced to its formal institutions, traditions, systems of belief, or world views, but that nevertheless organizes our experiences and actions. A structure of feeling is, according to Williams, the actively lived and experienced version of a given historical formation, the here and now of culture, the social present that is not always recognizable as social. As a lived and living process, the humanitarian structure of feeling, I would argue, cannot restlessly be summed up as a reflection of contemporary humanitarian ideology, although it surely relates to such an ideology in complex ways. Looking to contemporary art and culture, I find that the humanitarian structure of feeling is undergoing a rearrangement, in that it is increasingly not comprised solely of moral emotions. A range of cloudy, dysphoric, and non-cathartic emotional attitudes—or, in the words of literary scholar Sianne Ngai, “ugly feelings”—tends to accompany the omnipresent humanitarian imperative to care, to give, to consume, and to distribute in ways that benefit distant others. Thus, this essay seeks to reorient the critique of humanitarian culture toward a consideration of the social and political significance of the ambivalent emotions of everyday humanitarianism.

In this vein, the second part of the essay goes on to sketch out a reading of two scenes of collective interpretation of the everyday humanitarian call to action, which is always a call to donate. The first scene is from the 2012 edition of the recurring televised Danish fundraising show, Danmarks Indsamling [Denmark Collects], and the second is from Norwegian playwright Arne Lygre’s 2011 play, I Disappear. What is at stake in both of these scenes is the status of humanitarianism as a good-enough fantasy, ideology, practice, and promise of doing good.

The critique of moral sentiments

Within the last 10 years we have witnessed a remarkable critical interest in humanitarianism from within disciplines and academic fields such as political philosophy, international development studies, anthropology, sociology, studies of visual culture, and affect studies. While this critical engagement has a much longer history the last decade has provided us with a host of scholarly engagements with humanitarianism and its moral and affective fundament. Compassion, in particular, has become a sharply criticized emotion. On the one hand, most of us are likely to agree with Hume, Smith, and Rousseau that the ability to empathize with human suffering is central to our moral sensibility as human beings. On the other hand, skepticism of compassion, so crucial to the moral philosophy of Nietzsche, thrives in our current period of late modernity, in which the Western media consumer witnesses global suffering on a daily basis.
While the modern version of humanitarianism, which emerged in the late 18th century alongside the American Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, has typically understood itself as something that is universal, a common focus in recent critiques of compassion, sympathy, and pity is the processes of depoliticisation that seem central to the moral and affective practices of humanitarianism. One prominent critique of the “politics” of compassion maintains that compassion is, in its very structure, an asymmetrical feeling that is typically directed downwards in social and geopolitical hierarchies. In this way, compassion may even contribute to the reproduction of these very hierarchies, insofar as such hierarchies are upheld by exactly the continuous forming of subjects and objects of compassion, respectively. Philosopher Alain Badiou grounds his critique of ethics on this aspect of the cultural practices of compassion and charity. In his book Ethics, Badiou writes:

Who can fail to see that in our humanitarian expediencies, interventions, embarkations of charitable légionnaires, the Subject presumed to be universal is split? On the side of the victims, the haggard animal exposed on television screens. On the side of the benefactors, conscience and the imperative to intervene. And why does this splitting always assign the same roles to the same sides?

Thus, according to Badiou, charity is part of a political discourse on civilization and barbarism. It produces and regulates the global distribution of agency by distinguishing the privileged subjects of compassion from its objects, the “victims,” and in turn promotes the superiority of the Western responsible subject, who is capable of compassionate feelings.

Art historian T. J. Demos has similarly described how both the global media industry and humanitarian NGOs have made themselves dependent upon what he describes as “poverty porn”. Humanitarian photojournalism, Demos posits, flows into a global image industry running on poverty as fuel, unleashing a vicious cycle of profit, objectification, and sympathy that perpetuates clichés of Africans as helpless victims mired in misery, reducing spectators to depoliticised charitable donors.

As Western consumers of this poverty porn, we should therefore be aware, Demos notes, that by responding emotionally to the moral claims of humanitarian images, we make ourselves co-responsible for this vicious cycle. In other words, according to Badiou, Demos, and others, compassion does not serve as a counterweight to suffering and injustice; compassionate feelings are instead part of the very affective basis for the reproduction of geopolitical inequality. Implied in this type of critique of the compassion provoked by the media is often an attention to the potentially stupefying effects of visual accounts of suffering. Such effects have been discussed most notably perhaps by Susan Sontag in her books On Photography and Regarding the Pain of Others. They have become collectively known as “compassion fatigue”, at least since media scholar Susan Moeller’s 1999 book of the same title.

This type of critique of the humanitarian emotions is deeply related to the critique of moralistic and sentimental cultures advanced by feminist scholars such as Wendy Brown and Lauren Berlant. In a critical essay on the role played by trauma and suffering in American identity politics in the 1980s and 1990s, Berlant diagnosed the age of sentimental politics, in which issues of social disparities and conflict are transposed from a register of power to a register of sincere emotion. In this age, Berlant wrote, public discussions and policy are structured in line with a politics of true feeling, according to which the most reliable evidence of societal injustices is produced when someone feels bad, while conversely, justice is most recognizable as feeling good. Berlant notices the ways in which the practice of a distinct sentimental feeling culture at once confirms the unity of society, regardless of its structural disparities, while also authenticating the morality and goodness of those benefitting from the disparities in question.

The problem with a politics based on the moral sentiments of humanitarianism is then not, according to the critical research literature, only that the experience of sharing a common human condition with the world’s poor and crisis-affected populations is of a transient kind. The problem is also that this fleeting experience of solidarity allows us to overlook the structural disparities organizing the global distribution of vulnerability. When the noble humanitarian sentiments fade, writes Didier Fassin, the international community again reveals itself to be profoundly hierarchized, and the indifference of the privileged classes towards the vulnerable populations is again made evident:

Humanitarian reason [...] allows us to continue believing—contrary to the daily evidence of the realities that we encounter—in this concept of humanity which presupposes that all human beings are of equal value because they belong to one moral community. Thus humanitarian government has a salutary power for us because by saving lives, it saves something of our idea of ourselves, and because by relieving suffering, it also relieves the burden of this unequal world order.

According to Fassin, humanitarian ideology thus invests us with a feeling of morality through which we collectively, as a Western society, perceive ourselves as in solidarity with the rest of the world—but without any significant political effort. Frequently,
this type of critique of sentimentality is also a critique of neoliberalism: scholars such as Badiou, Fassin, Berlant, and Demos thus pay attention to the extent to which humanitarian feeling culture goes hand in hand with the restructuring of the welfare state and the waning of ideological conflicts often associated with neoliberal reason and government.

If we look now toward art and other cultural artifacts concerned with the relations between the global North and its others, the moral sentiments of humanitarianism is, as I suggested in the opening of this piece, far from taboo. Here, the moral and noble feelings are often regarded with hesitation, irony, satire or sheer mistrust. In the cultural archive amoral feelings of boredom, indifference, cynicism, hopelessness, bad conscience, and sheer reluctance to let oneself be emotionally engaged are all tangible. These unsuitable feelings thus constitute a significant aspect of the cultural interpretation and evaluation of humanitarianism and its imperatives. Following Siân Ngai’s understanding of the diagnostic character of ugly feelings I propose that we regard these morally lesser feelings as indicative of the situations in which there is a vacillation of support for the social practices of moral sentiments. They are affective indications, that is, they may help us comprehend the social conflicts that are often curbed by the optimism of these sentiments. The unclear and ambivalent feelings signal an irresolute evaluation of the claims and practices of humanitarianism—a self-conscious uncertainty about, for instance, the inherent goodness of being compassionate. At the same time, such feelings demonstrate clearly that they know of no other, higher good than compassion as a suitable affective response to the suffering of others. Unsuitable feelings are not arrogant know-it-alls. Rather, they signal a conflict in the common experience of compassion as a transcendental good. It is this affective limbo that I describe as a crisis in the humanitarian structure of feeling, which indicates a crisis in the humanitarian imaginary. When analyzing contemporary humanitarianism a crucial task is therefore to understand the social life and cultural forms also of these inapt feelings. In what follows, I will focus my attention on two scenes, one comic, one tragic, in which a crisis of attachment to humanitarian optimism is made public even though the hesitation in each case is staged as private, even idiosyncratic, and embarrassing.

**Comic reluctance**

Every year since 2007 Danish television viewers have been invited by the main national broadcasting station and a selection of humanitarian organizations to participate in the nationwide, televised fundraiser, *Danmarks Indsamling*. Mobilizing families, the public schools, public and private workplaces, and the general population in the weeks preceding the broadcast, *Danmarks Indsamling*—in accordance with the genre of the aid telethon such as the recurring Red Nose Day in the UK by the charity Comic Relief and hosted by BBC—is a media format in which humanitarian emotion is not only cherished, but also so feverishly celebrated that it is as if the pride, humanity, and social cohesion of the nation was indeed dependent upon it. Elements central to these annual benefit events include entertainment, tales of suffering, celebrity participants, advertisements, and the donation race itself, as well as various forms of ethical shopping. As viewers we are here socialized and mobilized by the popular cultural practices of moral sentiments, and we may thus regard these events as important venues for the affective and moral education of the population vis-à-vis humanitarian concerns. Viewers are trained in feeling right when confronted with the suffering of distant others.

Looking closely, these jubilant media formats do, however, also register the unattractive feelings that are the unavoidable by-products of contemporary humanitarian culture. Such less noble feelings are typically represented in these shows as anti-social exceptions from the warm sociality displayed—as gremlins in the otherwise smooth workings of humanitarian emotion. The 2012 edit of *Danmarks Indsamling*, which raised funds in favor of child refugees in Africa, was no exception. Viewers were here offered “comic relief”, as has become something of a norm in humanitarian communication, in the shape of several satirical sketches interrupting the flow of four hours live transmission. The inclusion of humanitarian satire within a humanitarian media event is an example of what media scholar Lilie Chouliaraki has described as a general turn in humanitarian communication from grand emotions to ironic self-reflexivity. What interests me here is the fact that self-referential satire within a humanitarian media framework may serve as a meditation on the possibility of and reasons for not feeling what one is supposed to when watching the show. As elements of humanitarian communication comedy, irony, and satire are clearly meant, by way of self-reflexivity, to reinvigorate popular affective attachments to humanitarian ideology. Yet in registering reluctance and amoral feelings such elements risk inviting a host of anxious questions, questions to which everyday humanitarian action may not seem to constitute a sufficient response.

Let us have a closer look at one of the sketches in *Danmarks Indsamling* 2012. This sketch unfolds in what looks like a small and dusty living room. A young man and woman, Kitte and Johannes, sit on the couch watching the same show that we watch—*Danmarks Indsamling*. While gazing at their TV screen, which means at us, the viewers, the couple have this conversation:

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D. SHARMA
'How much are you going to donate to Danmarks Indsamling Johannes?'

'I don’t think I’m going to donate anything this year except wishing the Africans well.'

'But Johannes, you are a research assistant at the Faculty of Theology. Doesn’t the Bible say that we should help one another like that guy the Samaritan?'

'Well, Kitte, I don’t think a priori that the parable of the Good Samaritan should be understood as literally as you suggest. I think it’s more of a symbolic tale; I’d almost say an aphorism, an allegory.'

'To be honest, you are a cheapskate, Johannes, and that’s all there is to say about it. Anyway, at least I’ll be donating 150 DKK.'

'And I am wishing all the best for the Africans’ (Danmarks Indsamling 2012).

As a genre the sketch, or skit, usually denotes a brief theatrical piece with a comic, surprising culmination. However, in this particular sketch, the point does not really come as a surprise, since it dramatizes, in its own way, the parable discussed by Kitte and Johannes. The well-known, yet enigmatic, moral of the parable of the Good Samaritan here bears on the comically cold Johannes, who overlooks the suffering of the African children just like the priest and the Levite passed by the beaten man in the ditch. We are made to understand that Johannes’ dry academic knowledge is but an alibi for no charity. Instead, help for the African children in need comes from an unexpected source, namely Kitte, whom we are to see as a youthful, apparently unemployed woman, who, as Johannes declares with astonishment, has only ten dollars left for the rest of the month.

But why is Johannes so stingy with his charity and money? How are we invited to perceive his reluctance? One way of grasping his resistance to the affective and ethical claims of the fundraiser show could be the depiction of cynicism offered by philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in his Critique of Cynical Reason. According to Sloterdijk, we ought to understand contemporary cynicism as a kind of calm negativity, a constitution of consciousness afflicted with enlightenment that, having learned from historical experience, now refuses cheap optimism: "New values? No thanks!" Today, the cynic has become a mass type, not just because there are lots of cynics, but also, and more importantly, because cynicism is no longer perceived to be something extraordinary. It figures no longer as an individualizing trait. Sloterdijk describes today’s cynicism as an unconcealed immorality and radical irony towards ethics and other social conventions: the cynic does not recognize his own angry-clear attitude as an immoral feature, rather, he sees himself as representing a common realism. This modern version of cynicism often appears as a chic kind of bitterness, and Sloterdijk thus finds that being cynical is also a way of not being among the ordinary, dim-witted people.

In contrast to the chic cynic decried by Sloterdijk, Johannes the research assistant does not flaunt an angry-clear assessment of the naïve morals of others. Rather, we may discern a certain vagueness that could perhaps turn into discomposure, should Johannes have to openly defend his resistance to what Kitte recognizes as the merciful act in the mediated humanitarian situation with which they are invited to engage. This is crucial to understanding Johannes’ character: his function in the pedagogy of the sketch is one of ethical and affective inadequacy. He is not chic, nor is he ironic. On the contrary, we are the ones who should find his immoral and asocial disposition ludicrous. The reluctance of Johannes is therefore better understood, I propose, in light of Ngai’s account of ugly feelings and their aesthetics. In her 2005 book, Ugly Feelings, Ngai studied a range of amoral and non-cathartic feelings to which neither virtue nor redemption attach. Taking her point of departure from Melville’s Bartleby, the Scrivener—and the opacity of Bartleby’s dismissive attitude, his perpetual "I would prefer not to"—Ngai asks, how are we to comprehend this kind of affective negativity? Ngai goes on to suggest that such non-cathartic, negative affect occurs when our agency is obstructed one way or another, when we experience an impasse. Such experience has, Ngai notes, political significance, regardless of the impasse being real or imagined, individual or collective.

On the one hand, it seems clear that we are to recognize the stinginess of Johannes as an expression of, if not of cynicism, then at least some form of self-sufficiency. Our, the audience’s, affective response to the emotional refusal of Johannes should be ridicule or embarrassment on his behalf. Presuming, as does philosopher Charles Taylor, that our affective response always involves an affective interpretation of the specific situation to which we respond, we may say that Johannes feels improperly, in the moral universe of the sketch, because he incorrectly interprets his responsibilities as a subject of global privilege. On the other hand, we must relate Johannes’ version of Bartleby’s "I would prefer not to" to the broader scene of charitable behavior in which he is asked to act. Presuming again that Johannes’ emotional reluctance is a result of his (unfitting) interpretation of the situation, his affective disengagement must necessarily also be a result of the particular appearance of this situation on his TV screen. Viewers of the show could perhaps speculate that Johannes’ ugly and asocial reluctance is influenced by the specific framing of vulnerable African children, a framing that involves its own kind of calculating self-righteousness, with its clear focus on
commercials and consumption. While watching the sketch, we see at the bottom of the screen a headline with the names of Danish companies and political parties that have donated to the fundraiser, as well as the size of their donations. Above this running advertisement is another heading instructing us how to win a VW Beetle, since Volkswagen Denmark has contributed three cars to the fundraiser, which we therefore may conceive also as a lottery of sorts. When Johannes excuses himself from contributing anything but wishing the Africans well, he not only declines to engage with the plight of African children, but also with the spectacular and disaster capitalistic celebration of the production of affects, the circulation of goods, and the accumulation of money. The reluctance of his is aimed, then, also at the affective recruitment of a certain kind of self-congratulating spectacle. This is not to try and save the Johannes character by casting him somehow as a revolutionary character, nor frame his affective attitude as a fruitful critical attitude. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that even a format as compassion celebrating as the humanitarian fundraiser can not help but register the crisis in humanitarian emotion, because it operates, as it must, with an acute awareness of the common hesitancy towards the humanitarian discourses, practices, and emotions.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is, as we know, about the paradoxical identification of “the neighbor.” A lawyer knows that God commands him to love his neighbor as he loves himself. But who is my neighbor, the lawyer, who wants to justify himself, inquires. Jesus answers him with the parable about the man who was attacked by thieves and left dying. Two well-respected members of the Jewish community, a priest and a Levite, pass by the man, whereas a Samaritan has compassion for him and helps him.

Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?

And he said, He that showed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.\(^{31}\)

The parable is intriguing as an answer to the lawyer’s question. At the time of Jesus’ life, Samaritans were despised members of a sect that was considered non-Jewish. The lawyer who is asking for a designation of those most worthy of his charity is thus given a description of mercy and charity that is not aimed downwards from a privileged position to the suffering man in the ditch. Your neighbor is not only the person on his knees, the parable seems to suggest, but also the one who is standing next to you, and whom you despise. At the same time, the lawyer is encouraged to become the neighbor himself.\(^{32}\)

In a similar way, the sketch in Danmarks Indsamling, as well as the show in its entirety, is more concerned with a certain distraught self-perception, as both globally privileged and globally good, rather than the actual people living in the African continent. This implies that we also have a need to justify ourselves. How do we know that we are good? Who among us is good?\(^{33}\) Who is worthy of our charitable feelings? How do we go about living our materially good lives and still be good people? These emerge as the most urgent kinds of questions in Danmarks Indsamling and similar fundraising campaigns. This awkward anxiety produced by the interaction between our privileges, our morality, and our self-perception is a predicament of the humanitarian sensibility. According to Ngai, ugly feelings have diagnostic potential because they tell us something about social experience. As I understand them, the amoral feelings embedded within the contemporary humanitarian structure of feeling, and the questions they give rise to, testify to a fundamental uncertainty when it comes to humanitarianism as a moral and political order.

To return to the sketch with Kitte and Johannes, it points us to some of the misgivings and vague feelings often blurred by the optimism of humanitarian reason. For example, the sketch is a testimony to a perplexed understanding of the relationship between affect and thinking. Clearly, words like “aphorism” and “allegory” are meant here to convey that thinking may function as a pacifying, relativizing, and self-legitimizing activity. According to this logic, coldness follows from reflection, and in so far as thinking equals paralysis, spontaneity must, conversely, testify to the quality of my goodness. In this way, the sketch is also about the relationship between emotion and intention, on the one hand, and virtuous action on the other hand: we cherish our good feelings and our good intentions, and so we must have faith that the actions fostered by our good feelings are actually good. Despite this, it might not be so self-evident to the viewing audience that sending a text message qualifies as a virtuous action when confronted with the suffering of others. If the Kitte and Johannes sketch seems inconclusive, it is, perhaps, because its invitation to understand Kitte as the Good Samaritan of our time appears to be a desperate one.

The seemingly assured moral of the sketch is thus “flawed” with anxious questions familiar to the contemporary humanitarian imaginary. Questions such as, is donating 150 kroner the ethical claim falling on me as a privileged person? If not, what is? Can my ethical consumption constitute an ethical act? Is it enough to have the appropriate feelings? Thus comic relief may be a somewhat poor description of the effect of this sketch. The ambivalent feelings conveyed and produced by such questions may, rather, be understood as an expression of a feverish ethical reflection in the midst of the apparently self-assured affective-moral format that the humanitarian...
fundraiser represents. The fact that such questions are felt to be ugly, embarrassing, altogether improper, and thus only rarely addressed directly by humanitarian cultural products, does not mean, however, that they are without social or political relevance.

**The waning of conventions**

As a second example of a cultural reflection on humanitarian crisis that is simultaneously a reflection on a crisis of humanitarianism, I will sketch a reading of Norwegian dramatist and author Arne Lygre’s 2011 play, *I Disappear*. This play is manifestly about the contemporary crisis imaginary, yet the various layers of crisis alluded to throughout *I Disappear*—crisis in intimacy, in friendship, in ethics, in ecosystems, in the notion of the political—appear rather abstract and generalized, because we are nowhere presented with coordinates of time and place. Not much is going on in terms of plot or traditional drama. The four characters, I, My friend, My friend’s daughter, and My husband, imagine a range of crisis scenarios in which they themselves then perform the various roles. Rather than psychologically and affectively coherent individuals these characters are more like human switchboards for various frequencies of the social crisis imaginary. Crisis haunts also the primary level of Lygre’s text, the scenic real so to speak, but what is most dramatic is embedded in the stories of crisis imagined by the characters. In my reading, what is in fact in jeopardy in the play is a certain comfortable relation to the world. The sense that in the end things will turn out right is put under some heavy pressure.

*I Disappear* is about the waning of conventions in the face of crisis—intimate, social, moral, affective, and political conventions—and in Lygre’s theater the waning of societal conventions are registered also in the waning of certain aesthetic conventions. Crisis is a question also of form. To some extent *I Disappear* is staged as traditional dramatic theater, insofar as it unfolds on a stage in a theater, not in, say, a mall or a courtyard. While much contemporary theater and performance priorities scenic elements such as bodies in motion, light, and sound on behalf of an authoritative dramatic text, Lygre’s is a highly literary theater. Still I would suggest we understand *I Disappear* as a piece of postdramatic theater. The term ‘postdramatic’ has proved useful to practitioners and critics alike to describe contemporary theater and performance in which elements such as stage, character, and plot have been dispensed with, or at least redistributed, in order to produce something different from conventional dramatic theater with its promises of a causal line of action adding up to a fictive cosmos. Too encompassing to designate a genre as such, the postdramatic usually entails a mode of performance, a mode in which traditional dramatic conventions of psychologically credible characters representing an authoritative dramatic text are reworked. In its conventional definitions drama is "in a state of crisis," suggest the editors of *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political*. Rather than naming something entirely new within theater and performance, postdramatic theater gives name to a further development of the crisis of drama that runs through most of the 20th century with highlights such as Antonin Artaud’s ‘theater of cruelty’ and epic theater’s favoring of montage, fragment and *verfremdung*. One sense of the postdramatic that is not often commented upon, however, is its affective implications. With the term postdramatic we may wish to point also toward performances whose overall affective tonality is not made up of grand emotions. It is in this sense that I propose to regard *I Disappear* as a tragedy in the postdramatic mode. The play is structured like a tragedy with irresolvable conflicts, human suffering, hubris, nemesis as well as an occasional chorus. The affective response of characters and spectators alike to what is tragic in the scenarios involves neither shock, pity nor catharsis, but, rather, an experience of extended crisis time and something akin to what Lauren Berlant calls *crisis ordinairiness*.

One of the fantasies that reveals itself to be in disarray is the fantasy of a humanitarian community that will respond appropriately to humanitarian crisis. Allow me to cite at some lengths one scene of *I Disappear* in order for us to get a sense of the multiple subject positions and layers of crisis involved here. In this particular scene we witness the two protagonists of the play, I and My friend, feeling saved and then not so saved. They probe the status of a humanitarian community that will protect them and their precarious relation to the world, and they come to realize that this community, and the imaginary that underlies it, is loosening. I propose to read the scene as a reflection on this humanitarian imaginary that it simultaneously conjures up. In the text the various levels are
I
We did it. We got away.

MY FRIEND
We’re saved.

I
We’ll sit here and wait for daylight.

MY FRIEND
Somewhere else there are eight women. They have just waded the last few metres to the beach after it got too shallow for the boat. […]

MY FRIEND
They’re talking about us.

I
Are they?

MY FRIEND
It’s terrible, they tell each other. […]

I
I can’t get it out of my head.

MY FRIEND
There’s nothing we can do.

I
No.
Nothing but donate.

MY FRIEND
Well yes.

I
Now. If everyone rings the donation lines at the same time. Then we’ll have it over with.

MY FRIEND
Yes well.

I
Then we can forget this for a while. Just have a good time.
One woman doesn’t ring the number. She pretends, fakes an enthusiasm she doesn’t feel, while she instead dials her own number and gets her voicemail, listens to a message her daughter has left for her.

**MY FRIEND**
The others hear a voice asking them to hold the line for a few seconds so they can support an organisation in its fight against a deadly illness.

I
They’ve called a wrong number?

**MY FRIEND**
They’ve mixed up the various donation numbers.

I
What do they do when they realise they’ve called the wrong number?

**MY FRIEND**
They laugh. They look questioningly at the woman who gave them the number, pretend to scold her, letting the whole thing end in a joke. Well, that’s a good cause too, they say and smile to each other and ring the same fundraiser twice.

I
And not ours?

**MY FRIEND**
No.

I
What did the daughter want with that woman? The one who left a message?

**MY FRIEND**
There’s been an accident. She called her mother, mentioned something about it, cried, but didn’t quite explain what had happened before she was cut off.

I
What does the mother do?

**MY FRIEND**
She didn’t want to give herself away at once, let the others know that she didn’t ring the number they’d agreed on. She sat there, laughed at all the others who called the wrong number, said something that stressed that she herself had done the same, counted the minutes, thinking she had to wait for a while, then ring her answering machine again.

I
And she does?

**MY FRIEND**
She’s ringing now.

She says a few words to the others, to make them understand what she’s doing?

**MY FRIEND**
Yes.

I
I just have to check my messages, she says. She’s met with a chorus of protests. Now we’re just going to enjoy ourselves, the others call out, but she waves them off, tries to smile, stands up and walks a few steps away, what am I going to do? she thinks, how am I going to react when I hear the message?37

If we read this scene as a record of the humanitarian imaginary we are made to realize the host of promises that humanitarian reason still holds out to a community of crisis responders. The group of friends wishes to do good. They wish to help vulnerable people, whose suffering they feel uncomfortably stuck with. They can’t get it out of their heads. Humanitarian reason and the practices it supports provide them with an answer to this pressing concern of theirs: what to do? Or, better, it assures them that there is in fact not nothing they can do. This promissory function of humanitarian reason and emotion seems important to the community. It allows them to move on from a distressing situation of not knowing what to do, how to respond, what to think. It allows them to be un-stuck from the imprint of humanitarian crisis that we assume they have somehow witnessed. However, the scenario also brings out a host of questions and anxieties regarding humanitarian ethos and its imperatives. As a technology of social belonging the humanitarian framework is not working smoothly. Some within the group of friends do not feel like proper humanitarian subjects, and the situation turns awkward, when the group realizes the randomness of their benevolent act by calling the “wrong” number. These anxieties are experienced by community members, friends amongst friends, as socially frustrating, thus signaling that the community as of now possesses no other commonly accepted means of responding to crisis than to donate. No new norms of collective response are apparently being imagined or forged. Thus, in order to be morally intelligible and coherent, those in the community who for some reason are not attached to the humanitarian logic are left with no other options than to nevertheless pretend their affective and financial investment in it. This scenario thus reminds us of a strange fact about social and political norms: they can be simultaneously very strong and very weak.

I and My friend fantasise about a humanitarian community that could possibly rescue them and their
optimism in the midst of an extended crisis time that they experience. However, their attempt at building and maintaining such a fantasy instead turns into a situation in which the vulnerability of this community becomes clear. The humanitarian norms in which I and My friend invest their hopes for a durable future are in disarray. This dissolution of humanitarian conventions in the face of crisis is in *I Disappear* recorded also in the formal dispositions of the play. For instance, if humanitarianism is constituted not least by a certain global distribution of humanitarian benefactors and beneficiaries, of a humanitarian here and there, North and South, in its scenic world-making *I Disappear* disrupts this distribution. The here and there, then and now, beneficiary and benefactor, come together in a confusing overlapping of times and places marked by crisis in which the characters strive to find some kind of footing. If humanitarianism is constituted also by a certain optimism on behalf of humanitarian agency, of doing something, *I Disappear* withholds this optimism from its characters as well as from its audience. If crisis still typically registers aesthetically in various forms of melodrama and its attending feelings of hope *I Disappear* is not a typical performance of crisis.

In the literature on humanitarianism tragedy typically connotes the tragedy of someone’s suffering and the more or less spectacular representations thereof. The sense of tragedy in Lygre’s crisis theater has nothing to do with such a notion of humanitarian tragedy. Nor has *I Disappear* much to do with the muscular quakes of social, political or existential norms described by much tragedy theory as that which tragedy is made of. Here is not the time and place for a recapitulation of the theories of tragedy from Aristotle to Nietzsche, Hegel, and Benjamin, but a few words on a recent conceptualization of post-dramatic tragedy is in place, namely Hans-Thies Lehmann’s discussion in “A Future for Tragedy? Remarks on the Political and the Postdramatic” of the kinds of aesthetic that may today evoke and shape tragic experience. Here Lehmann holds that tragic experience has to do with transgression, with a shaking of the basic grounds of our shared social existence, and he argues that tragedy may come about only in those aesthetic practices which shuttle between the aesthetic domain, in its appearance of autonomy, and “real actuality”. Only when aesthetic articulation is interrupted by the social real can tragic experience take place and find a form. Then and only then will the audience possibly experience the shaking of social and cultural norms that is, according to Lehmann, the precondition of the tragic today.

In my understanding, Arne Lygre reinterprets with *I Disappear*, tragedy for a time not of ongoing normalcy interrupted by the occasional disastrous event, but of crisis ordinariness. In Lygre we experience no transgression, no shaking, no catharsis, no pity, and no upsetting interruption of our experience as aesthetic experience. What justifies the term tragic here is, rather, the experience of a waning of familiar intimate, social, moral, affective, and political conventions including the conventions associated with humanitarian reason. The scene in question is no exception, structured as it is around what we may see as humanitarian hubris and nemesis. Is it not tragic, but in a postdramatic way, to call one’s answering machine as a cover up for not participating in the communal act of humanitarian donating and then being confronted with another crisis, a message from one’s daughter about an accident? The hubris of not answering to the humanitarian call to action is here followed by the nemesis of finding personal crisis where one hoped to find a temporary hideout. There is even a chorus in the scene, the chorus of protests that calls for communal enjoyment, for relief. In contrast to the ancient Greek tragedies this tragic conflict is infused with ordinariness in the midst of crisis. In the end we learn that the daughter is in fact all right.

The scene is thus aesthetically structured as a tragedy, with chorus, hubris, nemesis, and multiple suffering, but the emotions it represents and produces are less than grand and “tragic”. Here tragedy is not a perspective on an event, but on a certain eventlessness. The conflict in the humanitarian community is evident enough, but since everything about the humanitarian affective and moral conventions seems to be in jeopardy, no-one in or outside the scenario seems genuinely surprised by the manifest crisis of these conventions. I and My friend simply note the fact that they will not be saved by this group of friends that thus fails to constitute a humanitarian community. To both insiders and outsiders of the scene at the beach doing good in this particular way appears like a broken fantasy, a broken promise, a broken imaginary. However, this brokenness comes as a shock to no-one. This does not mean, of course, that the subjects involved, just like subjects in other scenarios of suffering and crisis, will not need a frame of reference for their notions of action, of justice, of solidarity, of collectivity. It means merely that to this community the humanitarian framework barely does the job.

* Within the social sciences, a rich mapping of the politics of humanitarianism is currently taking place. The issue appears prominently in disciplines such as political science, legal studies, and anthropology, as well as in more recently developed fields such as refugee studies and peace and conflict studies. Within the humanities attention to the humanitarian
order and its cultural support has been focused mainly through the well-established study of visual and literary representation of suffering, and the production of empathy possibly involved in such representations. However, the range of cultural studies stretching across the humanities and the social sciences are, I believe, well equipped for a more ambitious undertaking with regard to probing humanitarianism as a formation of cultural, social, and political genres, genres whose intelligibility, credibility, and sustainability are perhapswaning. In this article my main argument has been that if humanitarian reason “occupies a key position in the contemporary moral order,” as Didier Fassin holds, then it remains relevant to understand also the uglier affects generated by and around this global reasoning, because they signal a crisis in a logic that may otherwise appear morally and politically unassailable. Needless to say, arts and culture comprise not the only sphere of the social real in which latent evaluations of humanitarian reason are recorded. The aesthetic may provide us with a map of collective affective experience in the way that it registers support for, but also the dissolution of, fantasies and ideologies of the good life including those that describe to us what doing good involves.

Notes

1. Fassin, Humanitarian Reason, 244.
2. Barnett, Empire of Humanity.
3. See the “State Of the Humanitarian System” reports at ALNAP: http://www.alnap.org/resource/21236.aspx.
4. I take the phrase ‘the moral sentiments of humanitarianism from Fassin, Humanitarian Reason, 1–17. Fassin defines humanitarianism as a form of governmentality; it is “a mode of governing that concerns the victims of poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and exile, as well as of disasters, famines, epidemics, and wars—in short, every situation characterized by precariousness” (Fassin, x).
5. For a description of the historical differentiations between empathy, sympathy, and compassion, see, for instance, Frevert, Emotions in History.
6. Williams, Marxism and Literature, 128–135.
7. Ngai, Ugly Feelings.
8. Danmarks Indsamling 2012. DR 1. Aired February 3.
9. Lygre, I Disappear.
10. Apart from Humanity, see, for instance, also Journal of Human Rights and Qui Parle, 22, no.1 (2013) for this critique of humanitarianism.
11. See Hunt, Inventing Human Rights. The (cultural) history of humanitarianism and the question of its modernity is, of course, the subject of several recent publications, including Moyn, The Last Utopia, Barnett, Empire of Humanity, and Paulmann, “Conjunctures in the History of International Humanitarian,” 215–238.
12. Depoliticization as a contemporary phenomenon is discussed in depth by Brown in her Regulating Aversion.
13. See for instance Berlant, “Compassion (and Withholding),” 1–13.
14. Badiou, Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil, 12.
15. Demos, ‘Poverty Pornography, Humanitarianism, and Neoliberal Globalization.”
16. Ibid., 2.
17. Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others.
18. There are many sources within the field of visual culture studies that engage with Susan Sontag’s work. See in particular Sliwinski, “A Painful Labor,” 150–162, Linfeld, The Cruel Radiance; Azoulay, The Civil Contract of Photography, and Butler, Frames of War. For a discussion of some of these sources see my “The Predicament of Spectatorship.”
19. Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling.”
20. Fassin, Humanitarian Reason, 252.
21. In a Scandinavian context I would here point out to works as different as the literary fiction by Kirsten Hammann and Victory Boy Lindholm, Kristian von Hornsleth’s Uganda Village, and the Norwegian Radi-Aid campaign. In a broader context the hesitation, mistrust, and satire is of course readily detectable in explicit humanitarian satire such as comedian Trevor Noah’s UNICEF spoof, but it became evident also in several of the discussions in the wake of the Kony 2012 video by American charity Invisible Children, most notably perhaps in an essay by author Teju Cole, “The White-Savior Industrial Complex,” The Atlantic, Mar 12, 2012, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/ (accessed May, 2017).
22. Brassett, “British Irony, Global Justice,” 219–245.
23. For a discussion of the role of compassionate consumption and celebrity advocacy in international development, see Ann Richey and Ponte, Brand aid. and Brockington, Celebrity Advocacy and International Development.
24. For an analysis of the functions of irony in these events see Christiansen, and Olwig, “Irony and Politically Incorrect Humanitarianism.
25. Chouliaraki, The Ironic Spectator.
26. This sketch in Danmarks Indsamling 2012 was written and performed by the Danish satire collective Krysters Kartel, well-know to a large segment of Danish TV-viewers.
27. Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason.
28. Ibid., 6.
29. Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 1–37.
30. Taylor, Philosophical Papers 1, 45–76.
31. King James Bible, Authorized version, Cambridge edition, Luke 10, 36–37. See website www.kingjamesbibleoneline.org (accessed 30 June 2015).
32. Reading this parable is, of course, an ongoing task of biblical exegesis. For a reading of the parable in the context of compassionate conservatism in the U.S., see Garber, “Compassion,” 15–27.
33. Often, the plot of such shows is a competition between different groups of the donor country to raise the most money for the cause. Accordingly, in 2013 Danmarks Indsamling was staged as a competition between different parts of the country. Political scientist Thomas Olesen has described
how such media events carry within them elements of national community construction, see Olesen,
"Televised Media Performance for HIV/AIDS Sufferers in Africa," 99–119.
34. The "waning of genre" is Lauren Berlant's insightful description. See her Cruel Optimism.
35. Hans-Thies Lehmann deployed the term in his 1999 book Postdramatisches Theater. The term has since then enjoyed a wide currency.
36. Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism, 7–9.
37. Lygre, I Disappear, 34–37.
38. Lehmann, "A Future for Tragedy?" 98.

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