“Some stories are factual. All stories are true.”

In his memoir, A Long Way Gone, Ishmael Beah writes about having a new life in New York after having been a child soldier in Sierra Leone. “These days,” he writes, “I live in three worlds: my dreams, and the experiences of my new life, which trigger memories from the past.” After capturing in vivid detail a nightmare he had experienced, in which he saw his own face on the body of a victim he pushed in a wheelbarrow through a blood-soaked field, Beah writes of awakening from his dream state and his subsequent struggle to disentangle one world he occupies from the others:

I lay sweating for a few minutes on the cool wooden floor where I had fallen, before turning on the light so that I could completely free myself from the dreamworld. . . . A shudder racked my body, and I tried to think about my new life in New York City, where I had been for over a month. But my mind wandered across the Atlantic Ocean back to Sierra Leone. I saw myself holding an AK-47 and walking through a coffee farm with a squad that consisted of many boys and a few adults. . . . As soon as we left the coffee farm, we unexpectedly ran into another armed group at a soccer field adjoining the ruins of what had once been a village. We opened fire until the last living being in the other group fell to the ground. . . . [Now awake,] I got up from the floor, soaked a white towel with a glass of water, and tied it around my head. I was afraid to fall asleep, [so] I stayed awake all night, anxiously waiting for daylight. . . .

This dilemma for former child soldiers after having undergone rehabilitation—of distinguishing reality from unreality, fact from fiction, truth from untruth—provides a jumping off point at this conference on ethics and aesthetics to enter into the poster campaign developed in 2007 at TBWA, Paris by creative director Erik Vervroegen, art directors Ingrid Varetz and Javier Rodriguez, and photographer Michael Lewis for Amnesty International (France). The team produced three photographic ads, documentary in style, as posters for Amnesty International’s campaign to raise awareness about child soldiers. In one, boys play in noose-shaped swings alongside two hanging corpses; in another, children play soccer with a human skull; in still a third, three children armed with fully loaded machine guns use skeletal chips as game pieces gathered, it is implied, from the dead bodies mounded in a pile behind them. At the bottom right of the photographs, the posters include Amnesty International’s logo and address to its webpage in French, as well as the tag line: “300,000 child soldiers dream of simply being children.” These images, with their interplay between reality and unreality, fact and fiction, truth and untruth, raise intriguing questions related to Miroslav Volf’s concern for “remembering rightly,” particularly when considered within the framework of theological aesthetics.

Medieval theologians, beginning with Augustine and culminating in the thought of Thomas Aquinas, thought the transcendentals: the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, to befitting names for the Trinitarian God, insofar as human language is able to express such a magnificent Mystery. Among the earliest to suggest that the transcendentals might constitute, in an analogical sense, what can be known about the very Being of God (acknowledging that they, by their nature, transcend our experience of them: thus, they are “transcendent”), Augustine contributed enormously to the Christian tradition and its sense that earthly experiences of truth, goodness, and beauty have a relationship with these perfections of Being, albeit to varying and lesser degrees. From there, it was not far for Augustine to make his acclaimed argument about the nature of evil. Recognizing the problem of talking about evil as having its own substance (because then from what does
Augustine understood human experience of evil to be a privation of the good. Thus, he thought there to be something of a continuum between Absolute Goodness (the very Being of God), and nothingness, with evil located somewhere in between as a degree of corruption of absolute goodness. Although Augustine did not extend the concept to the true and the beautiful, the same could be said of these: the human experience of deception and of deformity is located somewhere along that continuum between Absolute Truth and Absolute Beauty and nothingness. Deception and deformity are not experiences of something, per se, but they are experiences of privation, or corruption of being—a corruption of Truth, a corruption of Beauty. Truth entirely corrupted (that which is absolute deception) has no Truth in it: it has no being. Thus, absolute deception doesn’t exist: it is nothingness. Beauty entirely corrupted (that which is deformed absolutely) has no Beauty in it: it has no being. Thus, absolute deformity is nothingness. Humans experience what they call deceptive and deformed but, properly understood, these are not experiences of something, but rather are experiences of corruption, of a lacking of Truth, of a lacking of Beauty, to varying and often horrifying degrees but, so the argument goes, never to such an extent that the True, Good, and Beautiful are entirely overcome. Indeed, in such a theological view, in situations of abject horror, such as where children are expected to participate as “soldiers” in massacres, the True, Good, and Beautiful are present, even if only to confirm that what is happening is objectively wrong.

My own understanding of Beauty as a name for the divine Being is indebted to these concepts, Platonic in origin, though introduced into Christianity by Augustine and advanced by Thomas it is also informed by the contemporary movement of theological aesthetics inspired by von Balthasar among others, and also by contemporary science, both biological and physical. I have written elsewhere about how I understand Beauty to be “existence stripped of everything superficial.” Indeed, like the medieval theologians who understood God to transcend creation as its ultimate cause, I understand Beauty to be existence’s ultimate source, insofar as we are able to name it, cohering with Ultimate Reality, or the Ground of Being, to use Tillich’s terminology. However, rather than imagining with ancient cosmologists that Beauty is somewhere “out there,” the highest Existence in a ladder that climbs ever higher until one arrives at Beauty Absolute—rather than thinking about a God who sort of “bends down” to share the divine nature with earthly life, I understand experiences of truth, goodness, and beauty to be participatory reflections of the ultimate cause of all that exists. They are “immanentals”: the True, Good, and Beautiful are deeply within all that exists, as Uncreated Existence opens up a place within Being for a universe or multiverse to emerge, a creation that bears witness to the divine in the elegance of its very structure. The True, Good, and Beautiful become evident in nature, both biological and physical, as its history unfolds in evolutionary processes. So deeply within the structure of material existence, they once again transcend materiality, meeting their origin in existence’s very source. Beauty, a name for God, is Being—the source of all being, who continually brings being into being out of Being through something of a “microcosmic” expression, breaking into time and space, birthing all that is in a complex web of life that lacks God’s perfection but which continues to testify to Existence’s Being: to the Being of the Ultimate “I am.” If the Ultimate Being is Trinitarian, it is appropriate still to think of the True, Good, and Beautiful as names for the Being of God—with the true revealed by the Holy Spirit, expressed through wisdom, and studied by logic; with the good revealed by the Creator, expressed through justice, studied by ethics; and with the beautiful revealed by Christ, expressed through compassion, literally “suffering with,” and studied by aesthetics. If the True, Good, and Beautiful are to be identified with the persons of the Trinity: coequal, distinct but not separate, intrinsically relational, and interpenetrating one another in an eternal perichoresis, we could tweak Jacques Maritain’s phrase just a mite to say that “the splendour of all the transcendentals together” is Love, rather than beauty—Love the superabundant expression and creative energy behind Being’s revelation in creation.

Given such a philosophical construct, when we consider the “truth” and “untruth” of Amnesty International’s campaign, there is automatically a theological
dimension to the conversation, where the ethical and aesthetical are inevitably implicated. These images are staged, their children actors posing on an unreal set to raise awareness about a nonetheless very real and tragic human rights disaster unfolding in our own time. To what degree, then, can these images be said to be “true”? In what way are they true, even if fictional? Does the degree to which they are “untrue” corrupt also their “beauty”? To what extent can they be said to participate in Existence, bearing within them the power to transform viewers into reflections themselves of that which is more perfectly True, Good, and Beautiful still? As a Christian theologian invested in the development of a political theological aesthetics, in thinking about these sorts of questions in relation to this campaign, in particular, Miroslav Volf’s concept of “remembering rightly” emerges in my mind, to which we will turn shortly, to suggest that Amnesty International’s project succeeds by giving us a “higher art,” trying to connect us all in a universal aspiration that transcends “otherness,” but which ultimately fails by reifying racist perceptions of Africa precisely as “other”—an impression that is statistically false and intentionally made.

In his memoir, Ishmael Beah records his memories of how war first touched his life when he was twelve. He had travelled with friends on foot to a neighboring town to participate in a talent show when word came through that rebels had attacked his village. The next eighty pages recount how Ishmael struggles for weeks to find his family, sneaking into villages avoiding rebel fire to steal food, freezing in forested areas through the nights, only to rummage again the next day. Finally Ishmael met someone who recognized him, and insisted that she knew that his family was in the next village, about a two days’ walk from where they were. They headed for their destination and, on their way, Beah recalls meeting Gasemu, a former neighbor, who shared, “‘Your parents and brothers will be happy to see you. They have been talking about you every day and praying for your safety. Your mother cries every day, begging the gods and ancestors to return you to her.’” He guided them to the village where they all were staying. As they approached, Ishmael recalls:

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I \text{ heard gunshots. And dogs barking. And people screaming and crying. We dropped the bananas and began running in order to avoid the open hillside. A thick smoke started rising from the village. At the top of it, sparks of flames leapt into the air.} \\
\text{We hid in the nearby bushes and listened to gunshots and the screams of men, women, and children. . . . The gunshots finally ceased, and the world was very quiet, as if listening. I told Gasemu that I wanted to go to the village. He held me back, but I shoved him into the bushes and ran down the path as fast as I could. I didn’t feel my legs. When I got to the village, it was completely on fire and bullet shells covered the ground like mango leaves in the morning. I did not know where to begin looking for my family. . . .} \\
\text{“They stayed in that house,” Gasemu said to me as he pointed toward one of the charred houses. The fire had consumed all the door and window frames, and the mud that had been pushed in between the sticks was falling off, revealing the ropes through which the remaining fire was making its way.} \\
\text{My entire body went into shock. Only my eyes moved, slowly opening and closing. I tried to shake my legs to get my blood flowing, but I fell to the ground, holding my face. On the ground I felt as if my eyes were growing too big for their sockets. I could feel them expanding, and the pain released my body from the shock. I ran toward the house. Without any fear I went inside and looked around the smoke-filled rooms. The floors were filled with heaps of ashes; no solid form of a body was inside. I screamed at the top of my lungs and began to cry as loudly as I could, punching and kicking with all my might into the weak walls that continued to burn.”}
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In her report for the UN copyrighted by Unicef under the title *The Impact of War on Children*, Graça Machel begins her chapter on child soldiers with the words, “The increasingly widespread exploitation of children as soldiers is one of the most vicious characteristics of recent armed conflicts.” With the UN, she defines “[a] child soldier [as]

any child—boy or girl—under the age of 18, who is compulsorily, forcibly or voluntarily recruited or used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defense units or other armed groups,” and reports that “most are adolescents, though many are 10 years of age and younger. The majority are boys, but a significant proportion overall are girls.”

Given such a reality, Vervroegen’s team at TBWA in Paris had a difficult assignment when Amnesty International approached its company to design a poster campaign to raise awareness about child soldiering. How does one, in three posters, lift up the issue in such a way as to compel people to learn more—particularly through Amnesty International’s website as a means to encourage support of its work on this issue? In the end, the team decided to shoot three documentary-style images set in sepia tone for dramatic effect juxtaposing a sense of a “normal” childhood kicking a soccer ball, swinging, or playing Jenga, with elements from lives of child soldiers: weapons, ammunition, skeletons, hanging corpses. The creative team’s tag line, “300,000 child soldiers dream of simply being children,” in combination with imagery, completes a campaign both visually striking and emotionally engaging. Therefore, it is not surprising that the creative team has been widely recognized for its work on this project, receiving numerous advertising awards for technique, social responsibility, and public awareness.

The campaign is successful in terms of “representing reality” because, while there are certainly grounds upon which to argue that it is misleading to use a photojournalism style photograph in a project that is not, finally, documentary, the campaign captures a deeper truth than documentary photographs might. In terms of the notion of a “deeper truth,” I defer to Hemingway, and translate his argument about books to images: “All good books,” he wrote, “are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you; the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.” There is a truth that is captured in the photographs by Michael Lewis for the Amnesty International campaign that is gripping and poignant. By constructing a set and inhabiting it with actors, the team perhaps arrives at a deeper truth about aspirations universal, about childhoods stolen, about nature’s dignity and the tragedy of its violation. Therefore, the creative license to use the documentary vocabulary to express humanity’s lament for a childhood lost was effective, at least to a degree. But are the images also in some way untrue—and, as such, unsuccessful in evoking the response they intend?

Ishmael Beah becomes a child soldier in chapter twelve of his memoir. Losing hope of finding his family, exhausted from weeks of hiding in the cold without food or shelter, he and his companions are captured. His report is succinct: “Suddenly two men put us at gunpoint and motioned with their guns for us to come closer.” They took Ishmael and his companions to a village occupied by the military, and gave them sanctuary for several weeks. However, as the rebels came closer to the village, the lieutenant informed the orphans, Ishmael among them, that

‘[W]e need strong men and boys to help us fight these guys, so that we can keep this village safe. If you do not want to fight or help, that is fine. . . . You are free to leave, because we only want people here who can help. . . . [W]e need the help of able boys and men to fight these rebels. This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families.’

Some of the boys, though not Ishmael’s companions, tried to leave the village. The lieutenant used them in his speech to help the boys make their “decision.”

‘The rebels shot them in the clearing. My men brought them back, and I decided to show you, so that you can fully understand the situation we are in.’ The lieutenant went on for almost an hour, describing how rebels had cut off the heads of some people’s family members and made them watch, burned entire villages along with their inhabitants, forced sons to have intercourse with their mothers, hacked newly born babies in half because they cried too much, cut open
pregnant women’s stomachs, took the babies out, and killed them. . . . [The Lieutenant said of the enemy:] They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country.’”

The lieutenant’s speech, and its manipulation of the children’s desire to avenge the pain inflicted upon them, is among the kinds of problems upon which Miroslav Volf reflects in his autobiographical narrative, The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World. Having himself been traumatized at the hands of interrogators during the conflict in Yugoslavia, Volf appreciates the injunction that we remember—but he worries about a grave potential to “remember wrongly.” For him, the central question “was not whether to remember.” He knew that he “most assuredly would remember and most incontestably should remember. Instead,” for him, “the central question was how to remember rightly. And given [his] Christian sensibilities, [his] question from the start was, How should [he] remember abuse as a person committed to loving the wrongdoer and overcoming evil with good?” In other words, how could he remember in such a way as to foster a genuine reconciliation rather than vengeance?

Despite its truthful yet fictional juxtaposition of child soldiers depicted playing, sporting, and gaming, the Amnesty International Campaign fails to remember rightly. In his 2002 article: “UN Report on Child Soldiers Ignores Worst Offenders,” journalist Thalif Deen investigates how even the UN “fail[ed] to name the world’s top three offenders” in their report on child soldiers, choosing instead to focus “on the use of child soldiers in Africa.” Casey Kelso, then coordinator of the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, referred rather to Myanmar, Colombia, and Sri Lanka as among the worst offenders. “This is not simply an African problem but takes place in Asia, Latin America and elsewhere,” Kelso said. Deen reported that “Other countries where child soldiers are deployed either by governments or armed groups include: Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Israel, the Palestinian Occupied Territories, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Uganda and the former Yugoslavia.” Clearly, then, the choice by the creative team at TBWA to include only African children in its three posters is a particularly blatant violation of “remembering rightly.” Indeed, the choice reifies racist perceptions of Africa as site of misery, forever dependent on whites (to whom the advertisements are directed) for assistance.

Binyavanga Wainaina, a Kenyan intellectual, has written prolifically about how stereotypes about Africa are harming the very Africans Western organizations purport to assist. Wainaina wrote a mock “tip sheet” for Western journalists called, “How to Write About Africa” for a British literary magazine. His satire is particularly uncomfortable when reflecting on the Amnesty International campaign:

Never have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book, or in it, unless that African has won the Nobel Prize. An AK-47, prominent ribs, naked breasts: use these. . . . In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. . . . Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from . . . Ebola fever or female genital mutilation. . . . Establish early on that your liberalism is impeccable, and mention near the beginning how much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place and can’t live without her. . . . Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed. . . . Broad brushstrokes throughout are good. Avoid having the African characters laugh or struggle to educate their kids or just make do in mundane circumstances. . . . Describe in detail dead bodies. Or better, naked dead bodies. And especially, rotting naked dead bodies. Remember, any work you submit in

16. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
which people look filthy and miserable will be referred to as “the real Africa,” and you want that on your dust jacket. Do not feel queasy about this. You are trying to help them to get aid from the West.”

When applied to Amnesty International’s campaign to end the use of child soldiers in war, a consideration of the photographic images against the backdrop of Volf’s concern and Wainaina’s satire suggests that they fail to “remember rightly” by reifying racist attitudes against Africa, and by failing to establish a context whereby the viewer might begin to understand how the situations developed that children as young as seven have fought as soldiers in war. The campaign implies those who prevent these children from having their childhoods are monsters, thereby escalating rather than diffusing the dehumanization that perpetuates conflict, without implicating the structures and we who perpetuate them as partly to bear for the atrocities unfolding in so many places throughout the world. While the campaign may lift us to a higher reality, juxtaposing concepts of an idyllic childhood with childhood lost, the greater danger is that the ads leave us baffled by Africa’s perceived proclivity to violence. They may leave us to pity “them,” wishing desperately that something could be done to help. They may leave us overwhelmed, given the tagline’s reminder of the enormity of the (perceived predominantly African) problem. They may confirm, in the end, that we are a compassionate people because we are disturbed by what we see, requiring of us nothing more, thereby paradoxically justifying our complacency.

So, in the end, is Amnesty International’s campaign an effective one that successfully raises to public awareness the scope of the problem of the use of child soldiers? Or does it fail against the directive to “do no harm” by showcasing Africa, further underscoring racist perceptions that those with dark pigmentation in their skin are forever requiring assistance from Europe and America for survival?

In our complex world, the answer is in my view, tragically and unsatisfyingly: probably both.

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