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**The Visual Politics of Corruption**  
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## **Abstract**

Despite the fact that corruption is essentially invisible, communication campaigns by the global anti-corruption industry regularly feature photographic images. The paper here, by applying a semiotic framework, develops two broad arguments regarding this visual imagery. First, photographs play an important role in helping the anti-corruption industry construct a 'regime of truth' that privileges a particular way of knowing—specifically, in relation to what corruption is and why it needs to be controlled. Second, as the analysis will show, the anti-corruption industry uses visual images to draw a stereotypical dualism between a 'clean' North and a 'corrupt' South, thereby justifying external intervention in developing countries.

# The Visual Politics of Corruption

*[...] corruption is so invisible that it leaves little documentary evidence.*  
World Bank publication 2007

*‘Seeing is believing’ means that ‘I’ll believe it when I see it’, but it also means that ‘what I see, I’ll believe’.*

Zygmunt Bauman

## ***Introduction***

The fact that corrupt exchanges are typically organised in secret and through verbal agreements seems to suggest that corruption cannot be captured by photography. Yet, communications material from the global anti-corruption industry—comprising non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Transparency International and intergovernmental organisations such as the World Bank—is full of photographic imagery. These photographs, by visualising social exchanges that are essentially invisible, construct and structure knowledge about corruption. That is to say, the imagery used by anti-corruption organisations—given that objective evidence of corruption is generally sparse—plays an important role in producing a ‘regime of truth’ about what corruption is and why it is important to fight it.<sup>1</sup> This visual ‘truth’ distinguishes true from false statements about corruption, thereby (de)legitimising certain courses of political action and thus shaping relationships of power between political actors.

This paper analyses the anti-corruption industry’s imagery through a semiotic framework to arrive at two findings. First, photographs included in communications material reflect the ideological assumptions on which the anti-corruption industry rests: (i) there is an epistemologically objective ground from which we can observe corruption; (ii) corruption has harmful effects on economic and social development and thus needs to be controlled; and (iii) citizens support the fight against corruption. Second, by producing a binary opposite between a ‘clean’ North and a ‘corrupt’ South, photographs justify the anti-corruption industry’s intervention in developing countries. This is mainly achieved through three means: (i) images do not feature blue-collar crime, which means that corruption is mainly presented as a problem of the developing world; (ii) developing countries are visualised as anarchic wastelands; and (iii) corruption is depoliticised and dehistoricised—in particular, in relation to the North’s role in institutionalising and maintaining corrupt practices in the developing world. In short, the anti-corruption industry contributes to the formation of visual knowledge that perpetuates Northern hegemony over developing nations.

## ***Analysing corruption imagery***

The analysis that follows is based on two separate frameworks, which will be set out in this first section. To begin with, it is important to outline the basic ideological assumptions that

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<sup>1</sup> On the ‘regime of truth’ concept, see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

underpin the global anti-corruption industry. Moreover, we will briefly discuss the importance of visual images for political analysis and introduce the tool kit of visual semiotics.

### ***The anti-corruption paradigm and its critics***

The global anti-corruption industry, according to Sampson, is built on ‘a set of postulates about what corruption is, how it emerges, why it needs to be controlled, and how to control it.’<sup>2</sup> Essentially, the dominant anti-corruption paradigm that underpins this industry follows the conventional rational choice assumptions of economics.<sup>3</sup> Modelled against the backdrop of the so-called principal-agent problem, economists argue that corruption occurs when an agent (for example, a civil servant or a politician) reneges on the ‘contract’ with the principal (for example, a polity’s citizens) and follows his own private interests (for example, by accepting a bribe in exchange for providing privileged access to public resources) rather than acting strictly on behalf of the principal. In other words, corruption is defined as ‘the abuse of public office for private gain.’ Furthermore, economists claim that corruption is mainly the product of poorly designed institutions. Conversely, the key to control corruption is to design institutions in such a way that minimises the agent’s control and discretion over public resources, and maximises the risk of being found out and punished for engaging in corrupt acts. It is important to fight corruption, the economists’ argument continues, because—by diverting public resources and creating perverse investment incentives—corruption has devastating effects on economic growth and the public welfare.

Each of the assumptions that underpin the dominant anti-corruption paradigm can be criticised both from a *positivist* perspective and an *interpretivist* perspective (see Table 1). The positivist critique is mainly articulated by the neo-institutionalist approach to corruption, which argues that corruption can grow into an informal institution that creates behavioural incentives incompatible with rules and regulations codified in formal institutions. The interpretivist critique of the anti-corruption industry, on the other hand, is largely shaped by the work of anthropologists, who have investigated the cultural relativism of corruption, and critical theorists, who have developed arguments about how the dominant anti-corruption ideology helps to consolidate global power relationships.

To begin with, the anti-corruption industry can be condemned for its conceptualisation of corruption. As neo-institutionalist scholars point out, corruption should not be thought of as a *one-off* particularistic exchange; rather, corruption in the developing world tends to be organised by patron-client networks in a repeated fashion. Crucially, the successful repetition of corrupt exchanges over time leads to the build-up of trust and know-how within these networks, which, in turn, lowers the risk of corruption being a detected—a factor that has no place in the dominant anti-corruption paradigm.<sup>4</sup> Anthropologists, on the other hand, have stressed that the public-private distinction—on which the anti-corruption industry’s definition of corruption is based—is largely a Northern idea and carries little meaning in other cultural settings. More specifically, what may look like forms of corruption from a Northern perspective (for example, bribery or nepotism) may simply reflect moral norms in local webs of obligation

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<sup>2</sup> Sampson, “The Anti-Corruption Industry,” 262.

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive overview of this paradigm, see Kunicová, “Democratic Institutions and Corruption”; and Rose-Ackerman, “The Institutional Economics of Corruption.”

<sup>4</sup> See Hellmann, “The Historical Origins of Corruption in the Developing World”; and Della Porta and Vannucci, *The Hidden Order of Corruption*.

—for example, the practice of *kola* gifts in Sahelian countries or the moral duty to look after one's own kin in southern Nigeria.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the anti-corruption industry can be criticised for exaggerating the need to fight corruption. As a growing body of positivist literature has shown, whether corruption has a negative effect on social and economic development depends very much on how corruption is structured. For example, a number of scholars have highlighted that neo-patrimonial forms of elite rent-sharing can have a stabilising effect on political systems and help prevent civil conflict.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, positivist scholars have put forward evidence that corruption can be a catalyst for growth, provided that rent-seeking is institutionalised in particular ways—for example, in a highly centralised fashion.<sup>7</sup> Anthropologists, meanwhile, have shown that corrupt practices are often embedded in wider networks of social reciprocity. Put differently, at the local level, corrupt practices may not be seen as deviant behaviour; instead, corruption may be considered a normal part of everyday exchange processes.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, let us turn the spotlight onto the anti-corruption's industry policy interventions. Here, positivist scholars have raised two main criticisms. First, reforming formal institutional with the aim to increase the risk for corrupt behaviour is unlikely to work in contexts where corruption is systemic, as the newly reformed institutions will simply be 'hijacked' by corrupt interests.<sup>9</sup> Second, anti-corruption interventions may even have unintended negative effects, such as undermining citizens trust in state authorities and the political process.<sup>10</sup> In the interpretivist camp, on the other hand, critical theorists argue that the anti-corruption industry's interventions are designed to primarily serve the economic and geopolitical interests of the North—for example, by forcing free trade on developing economies or by weakening states in the global South through programmes of structural adjustment. An important tool in this regard are the anti-corruption industry's quantitative corruption indicators—such as Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank Governance Indicators—which typically show corruption to be mainly a problem in the developing world, thus allowing the North to dominate the global 'good governance' discourse.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See De Sardan, "A Moral Economy of Corruption in Africa?"; and Smith, "Kinship and Corruption in Contemporary Nigeria", respectively.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of the 'corruption buys peace' argument, see Le Billon, "Buying Peace or Fuelling War."

<sup>7</sup> Kelsall, *Business, Politics, and the State in Africa*; Rock and Bonnett, "The Comparative Politics of Corruption."

<sup>8</sup> Lazar, "Citizens Despite the State"; Auyero, "The Logic of Clientelism in Argentina."

<sup>9</sup> Persson et al., "Why Anticorruption Reforms Fail."

<sup>10</sup> Andersson and Heywood, "Anti-Corruption as a Risk to Democracy."

<sup>11</sup> Graaf et al., "Constructing Corruption"; De Maria, "Measurements and Markets." For a more general argument of how the global anti-corruption programme is driven by a neo-liberal agenda, see Hindess, "Investigating International Anti-corruption."

Table 1. Criticising the anti-corruption industry

|  | <i>Anti-corruption industry</i>  | <i>Positivist critique</i>   | <i>Interpretivist critique</i>   |
|--|--|--|--|
| What is corruption?                                      | breach of the public/private divide through a one-off particularistic exchange | corruption often facilitated by informally institutionalised networks (i.e. repeated exchange in a clientelistic fashion)              | distinction between public and private is a product of cultural norms  |
| Why does corruption need to be controlled?               | devastating socio-economic effects   | positive effects of corruption (e.g. on political stability, economic development) are overlooked                                      | ‘corrupt’ practices are embedded in larger networks of social relations, (i.e. they are not necessarily deviant behaviour) |
| Why does corruption emerge and how can it be controlled? | design of political institutions   | reformed institutions can be ‘hijacked’ by corruption networks; anti-corruption campaign can undermine citizens’ trust in institutions | anti-corruption interventions are designed to weaken developing countries and consolidate the North’s global dominance     |

### ***Taking the ‘visual turn’ in corruption studies***

Having outlined the main points on which the anti-corruption industry has been criticised, it can be observed that this critique has mainly focused on the ideological assumptions that underpin the anti-corruption industry as an institution. Very little, if any, attention has been paid to the question of *how the anti-corruption industry has been able to maintain its knowledge regime*. The subsequent analysis will tackle this question, paying particular attention to visual means of communication. In other words, the remainder of the paper will follow the ‘visual turn’ that has recently developed in international relations (IR) and political studies, thereby closing the methodological gap between corruption analysis and other sub-fields.<sup>12</sup>

At the broadest level, it has been argued that ‘the visual turn should enable [...] scholars to better understand how power and political responsibility function through contemporary forms

<sup>12</sup> Lisle, “Learning How to See”; Bleiker, “Pluralist Methods for Visual Global Politics.”

of global communication.<sup>13</sup> More specifically, Hansen (2011), by synthesising key arguments made in the ‘visual turn’ literature, highlights three points that determine the specificity of images compared to verbal forms of communication.<sup>14</sup> First, images possess the ability to evoke an *immediate, emotive response* in the viewer—much more so than non-visual means of communication. Visual immediacy, in turn, derives from two distinctive features of photography: the viewer’s epistemological experience of authenticity—that is, the widely prevalent belief that photographs accurately depict reality—and the viewer’s identification with the depicted subjects. Second, the specificity of visual images also arises from their circularity; in other words, their *capacity to transgress linguistic boundaries*. Third, photographic images set themselves apart from other forms of communication through their high degree of *ambiguity*. As such, they are open to political interpretation and can be effectively used to justify specific courses of political action. Or, to put it in Bleiker’s succinct words,

[i]mages often work more indirectly, by performing the political, by setting the ‘conditions of possibility’ through which politics takes place. They have the potential to shape what can and cannot be seen, and thus also what can and cannot be thought, said and done in politics.<sup>15</sup>

For the critical analysis of the anti-corruption industry, this framework throws up a number of questions. First, what visual strategies does the anti-corruption industry employ to generate an emotive response from targeted audiences? Second, what universal narrative themes are drawn upon to ensure that photographs’ intended reading can ‘travel’ to different cultural contexts? Third, and this is the most crucial question, what ‘conditions of possibility’ does the anti-corruption industry set through its visual strategies and narrative themes? In other words, how does the use of photographs make some forms of political action possible and legitimate, while constraining others?

To answer these questions, the remainder of this paper will apply the method of *visual semiotics* to a selection of photographic images used in the anti-corruption industry’s communication efforts. Broadly speaking, visual semiotics is an interpretive method that is concerned with how images convey meaning.<sup>16</sup> Key to visual semiotics is the idea that meaning is layered: firstly, through *denotation* (‘What, or who is being depicted’ in the image?) and, secondly, through *connotation* (‘What ideas and values are expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?’).<sup>17</sup> The first step in analysing photographic images thus ‘involves careful scrutiny of what is in the photo’ (e.g. people, place, objects) and identifying ‘details that are missing.’<sup>18</sup> At the second stage, semiotic analysis then requires the researcher to explore how visual details in the image connote cultural associations, ideas, and symbolic meanings. Mirroring the framework applied at the level of denotation, common carriers of connotation include individuals and groups of social actors, lifeless objects,

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<sup>13</sup> Weber, “Popular Visual Language as Global Communication,” 153.

<sup>14</sup> Hansen, “Theorizing the Image for Security Studies.”

<sup>15</sup> Bleiker, “Pluralist Methods for Visual Global Politics,” 884.

<sup>16</sup> For more detailed summaries of visual semiotics, see Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, ch. 6; and Lacey, *Image and Representation*, ch. 2.

<sup>17</sup> van Leeuwen, “Semiotics and Iconography,” 94. The concepts of denotation and connotation were originally developed in Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*.

<sup>18</sup> Tinkler, *Using Photographs in Social and Historical Research*, 21.

contextual settings, and photographic style (for example, how the viewer is positioned in relation to people inside the image).<sup>19</sup>

Of course, semioticians acknowledge that viewers' connotative reading of an image may be strongly influenced by both cultural and personal experience. As Lacey puts it in the wider context of textual analysis,

[i]t is no surprise that people of different national and cultures may make divergent readings of texts. It is also likely that any sub-cultural group to which we belong will also influence our reading of texts.<sup>20</sup>

However, image-makers—knowing about the subjective and personal associations of connotation—can 'rely on established connotators, carriers of connotation, which they feel confident their target audiences will understand (whether consciously or not).'<sup>21</sup> That is to say, in order to get their ideas across, image-makers can tap into particular discourses to which their audiences have access to. This will significantly increase the likelihood that audiences decode what Hall calls the image's 'preferred' reading.<sup>22</sup>

When selecting images for analysis, semioticians typically do this 'on the basis of how conceptually interesting they are.'<sup>23</sup> Whether images are statistically representative of a wider population of images is not of concern. On the basis of this logic, the subsequent analysis will focus on sets of images related to two photography competitions run by Transparency International: the 2013 Youth Photo Competition and the 2015 Capture Corruption Competition. The latter was judged in two categories: photographers aged between 18 and 30, and photographers aged 31 years or older.

These photography competitions are conceptually interesting for a number of reasons. First, Transparency International 'is the major non-governmental player in the anti-corruption industry'<sup>24</sup> and as such of particular relevance for addressing the research questions set out earlier. Second, the call for entries for each of the competitions allows us to say something about the type of image that Transparency International hoped to see submitted. Third, Transparency International shared both shortlisted and winning images online, which provides an opportunity to gain an insight into the judging process. In particular, why were the winning images chosen over other submissions? Fourth, both shortlisted and winning images have widely been used in Transparency International communication, such as the 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index report or the 2014 'Curbing corruption in public procurement' publication. In other words, the pool of images generated through the photography competitions has played an important role in how Transparency International visually communicates about corruption.

### ***The photographer as an anti-corruption activist***

Before analysing the shortlisted and winning images, it is worth exploring the call for entries for each of the competitions, which themselves featured photographic images and are thus available for visual analysis. As this analysis will show, Transparency International aimed to

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<sup>19</sup> Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*.

<sup>20</sup> Lacey, *Image and Representation*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Hall, "Encoding/Decoding."

<sup>23</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 110.

<sup>24</sup> Sampson, "The Anti-Corruption Industry," 274.

paint photographers as anti-corruption activists with the ability to uncover corrupt behaviour and shed light on issues of social injustice. Generally speaking, the idea of the photographer as an activist has a long history in photography, dating back to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when, for example, Christian missionaries used cameras to document the human atrocities committed in the Belgian Congo.<sup>25</sup> Bogre defines the activist photographer as

an engaged citizen with a camera, ever vigilant for those times when fairness and equity are being violated by the state. Rather than using the power of the camera to ‘punish’ the crime, an activist photographer captures it, freezes it, and immortalizes it so it becomes evidence of the crime, showing the thing that has to be corrected.<sup>26</sup>

This depiction of the photographer as an anti-corruption activist not only sets out constraining parameters for photographers’ submissions but it also constructs a particular narrative about corruption.

To begin with, by picturing the photographer as an activist, Transparency International places the competition squarely within the field of *documentary photography*. Crucially, documentary photography is based on epistemological ideas of ‘bearing witness’ and ‘being there’—or put differently, documentary photography generally assumes that there is an objective reality out there that can be captured through photographic means. This contrasts starkly with the postmodern approach to photography, which sees photographic images as subjective constructs and criticises documentary photography for contributing to the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses.<sup>27</sup> Ergo, the message that Transparency International communicated through the call for entries is that we can have objective access to the concept of corruption—an idea for which, as discussed earlier, the anti-corruption industry has been criticised strongly by anthropologists and other interpretivists.

Second, by speaking primarily to the activist photographer, Transparency International portrays corruption as a problem that *needs to be corrected*. Not only was this communicated through images that were used for the call for entries (as will be shown below) but also through accompanying text.<sup>28</sup> In 2013, the call read: ‘Corruption has scathing effects that can be difficult to illustrate. So we are looking for photos to give a powerful image of how corruption affects people’s lives.’ Similarly, in 2015, Transparency International called for images that capture ‘the devastating effect that corruption has on people’s lives.’ Thus, the photography competitions run into the same criticism as the anti-corruption industry as a whole, in the sense that they over-exaggerate the need to combat corruption.

Third, the portrayal of the photographer as an anti-corruption activist conveys the message that corruption is *an issue that citizens want to tackle*. Put differently, in Transparency International’s call for entry, the concerned citizen picks up the camera to expose corrupt practices and social injustice. However, as discussed above, citizens may not necessarily see anything wrong with what the anti-corruption industry labels ‘corruption.’ Instead, ‘corrupt’

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<sup>25</sup> On humanitarian photography in the Belgian Congo see Grant, “The Limits of Exposure.”

<sup>26</sup> Bogre, *Photography as Activism*.

<sup>27</sup> For more on this, see Price, “Surveyors and Surveyed.”

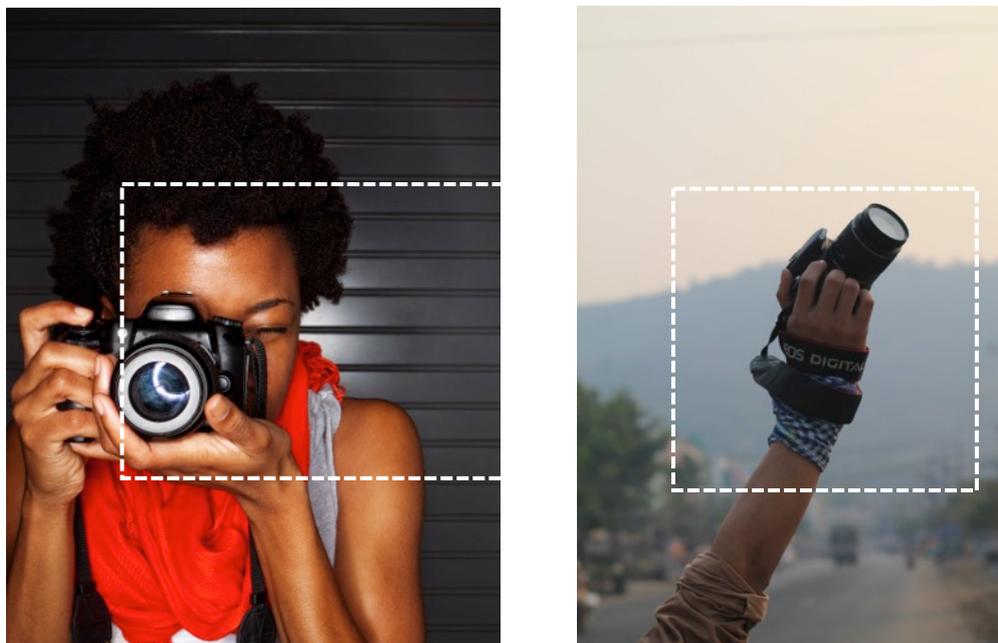
<sup>28</sup> For a general discussion of image-text relations and—in particular—of how text can anchor the meaning of images, see Bateman, *Text and Image*, 34-36.

practices may simply reflect moral norms of obligation and reciprocity that are deeply embedded in social networks at the local level.

The intention of Transparency International to cast the photographer in the role of the anti-corruption activist becomes evident when we compare two versions of the photograph used in the call for entries: the original image and the digitally altered version.

To advertise the 2013 Youth Photo Competition, Transparency International used a stock photo available on the iStock platform (see Figure 1). The image is a close-up portrait of a woman of colour with an Afro hairstyle standing close against a black roller shutter. She is holding a DSLR camera to her face and looking through the viewfinder. We are made to believe that she is taking a photograph of something or someone in front of her. The scene appears to have been shot at night. The flash only illuminates the woman and a small section of the roller shutter behind her. The harsh light of the flash reflects in the woman's camera lens and makes the red colour of her scarf pop against the black background.

Figure 1. Calling for entries



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*Notes:* The original images used to advertise the 2013 and 2015 photography competitions. The dotted line rectangles indicate how Transparency International cropped the images.

*Acknowledgements:* digitalskillet/iStock (left) and Le Thanh Ha/Towards Transparency (right)

While this stock photo does not feature strong signifiers of activism, the Transparency International communications team altered the image in such a way so as to bring out the ‘photographer as an anti-corruption activist’ narrative. Most notably, the image was cropped to landscape and now tightly focuses on the woman’s face, meaning that much of the black background and the woman’s red scarf were cut from the image. Moreover, colours were desaturated—an editing step that is particularly pronounced on what remains of the woman’s

scarf, which turned from bright red to a dusty orange. In addition, the flash's reflection was removed from the woman's camera lens.<sup>29</sup>

Taken together, these editing steps are meant to create a very different reading of the image. In particular, there are now no details that suggest that we are looking at a 'lifestyle' image, as one of the keywords describes the photo on the iStock website. First, the use of desaturated colours is meant to make the image more realistic and authentic.<sup>30</sup> Second, the scene now appears to be set in a dark corner—such as a back alley—rather than at night. Third, by cropping the woman's upper body off the photograph and thus placing her hand on the camera lens at the bottom edge of the image, the image conveys the feeling that the woman could be hiding behind something. Fourth, by cropping the photograph more tightly and desaturating the colours, the woman's scarf is no longer discernible as a fashion accessory.

In their sum, these editing decisions make it look as if the young woman's safety could be put at risk if she was caught taking photographs. More importantly even, due to the change in atmosphere, two objects within the image are now imbued with 'activist' symbolism.<sup>31</sup> For one, the woman's scarf is transformed into a functional item, making reference to images of protesters using scarves to hide their identity or protect themselves from teargas. In addition, and perhaps more significantly, the young woman's Afro hairstyle recalls iconic images of the 1960s black power movement. Within this collective movement, the Afro or *au naturel* style was 'sported by rock-throwing black males and black-leathered militants armed to the teeth,'<sup>32</sup> and thus became a global symbol of political resistance. Building on this history, black women around the world have, in the last decade, 'grown a movement centred on validating, celebrating and caring for their hair in its natural kinky-curly state.' As Johnson explains, '[f]or these women, natural hair politics often takes the form of individual resistance.'<sup>33</sup> In other words, the Afro hairstyle is globally recognised as an icon of struggle—a symbolic value that is being emphasised by Transparency International's editing decisions and transferred onto the young female photographer in the image.

The 2015 call for entries, too, was based on a visual icon of protest and resistance. As can be seen from Figure 1, the competition advert featured a close-up shot of a hand lifted into the air and clinging a DSLR camera.<sup>34</sup> It does not require any specialist knowledge to understand that this particular composition is meant to invoke an association with the raised fist as a global symbol of collective solidarity and protest. The raised fist has been used by uncounted social movements and grassroots groups around the world, and its iconic symbolism can thus be read by audiences in very different cultural settings. As Goodnow explains, the global nature of the fist sign stems from the fact that it is broad enough to be used in conjunction with an undetermined range of collective goals:

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<sup>29</sup> The post-processed image can be seen at <https://flic.kr/p/23QXSxN>.

<sup>30</sup> On the theory of this, see Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*, 55-56.

<sup>31</sup> Semioticians generally stress that the symbolism of particular image elements depends on their relation with other signifiers in the image. For example, see Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 124-127.

<sup>32</sup> Kelley, "Nap Time," 344.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, "Kinky, Curly Hair."7a

<sup>34</sup> The actual image used in the call for entries can be seen at <https://flic.kr/p/EeFt6v>.

The meaning of a fist is unmistakable; a fist illustrates power and force, but the real power of the symbol lies in its ambiguity. While the strength is certain, whose strength is open to interpretation so that the ambiguity in the fist's possessor allows the symbol to be possessed by a variety of movements and campaigns.<sup>35</sup>

Returning to the 2015 call for entries, it can also be observed that—held by a clenched fist—the camera turns into a ‘weapon.’ More specifically, with the fist alluding to iconic images of protest and resistance, the camera takes on the meaning of an improvised missile, such as a paving stone or a Molotov cocktail. Transparency International’s message is thus unmistakable: photography allows ordinary citizens to fight corruption.<sup>36</sup>

Transparency International’s intention becomes even more apparent when we include the original image—that is, the image before digital reworking—into the analysis. As can be seen from Figure 1, the image used in the call for entries is a tight crop of the original image, focusing only on the raised fist and the camera. Crucially, it excludes the context in which the photograph was taken, thereby—through the symbols of resistance just identified—creating the illusion that this scene took place during a public protest. However, as the original image shows, this was not the case. Instead, the person holding the camera was standing next to a relatively quiet urban road and there could have been many reasons for why they raised their hand—perhaps to hail a bus or a taxi, keep the camera lens away from road dust, or the scene could have even been staged. Whatever the reason, what is clear is that, in the original image, the clinched fist does not carry any connotations of protest or resistance; this connotative reading was only achieved through a tighter crop.

To sum up, the images used to advertise the 2013 and 2015 photography competitions—by painting the photographer as an anti-corruption activist—set tight parameters for submissions. Specifically, Transparency International called for images that would support the anti-corruption industry’s ideological agenda: documentary-style photographs that highlight the negative effects of corruption and/or citizens’ dissatisfaction with corruption.

### ***The developing world as a lawless dystopian wasteland***

Not surprisingly, the ideological themes pushed for by the call-for-entries images are also replicated in the three winning and twenty-seven shortlisted photographs.<sup>37</sup> For one, all images fall into the category of documentary photography; there are no images that critically engage

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<sup>35</sup> Goodnow, “On Black Panthers, Blue Ribbons, & Peace Signs,” 171.

<sup>36</sup> The image used in the 2015 call for entries also features a *khăn rằn* scarf, wrapped around the wrist below the clenched fist. The *khăn rằn* is traditional clothing item in the Mekong delta and was worn by different armed resistance groups—most notably, the Viet Cong and the Khmer Rouge—as a way to identify themselves. The *khăn rằn* thus constitutes yet another symbol of bottom-up struggle. However, reading this symbol requires specialist knowledge of Southeast Asian culture and history. It is thus unlikely that Transparency International intended the *khăn rằn* to play a key role in the image’s preferred reading.

<sup>37</sup> The 2013 shortlist is available at: <http://bit.ly/2tGit7I>. The photographs shortlisted in 2015 can be seen at: <http://bit.ly/2tq9bBr>.

with the very concept of corruption.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, all the images except one (a shot of a money lender's office in Bangladesh) either depict the negative effects of corruption—for example, on economic development, health, environment, and human rights—or show citizens engaged in protest activity.

In addition, the winning and shortlisted images predominantly frame corruption as a problem of the developing world. Out of a total of thirty photographs, only two are *not* set in the global South: an image of riot police in the United Kingdom and an image of anti-government protest in Azerbaijan. In other words, Transparency International's shortlist of images—both in 2013 and 2015—reflects an issue for which the anti-corruption industry as a whole has been criticised by critical theorists: shaping a discourse that distinguishes between a 'clean' North and a 'corrupt' South. The three winning images, in particular, paint a very strong contrast between the developed world and the developing world—which is what the following discussion will focus on.

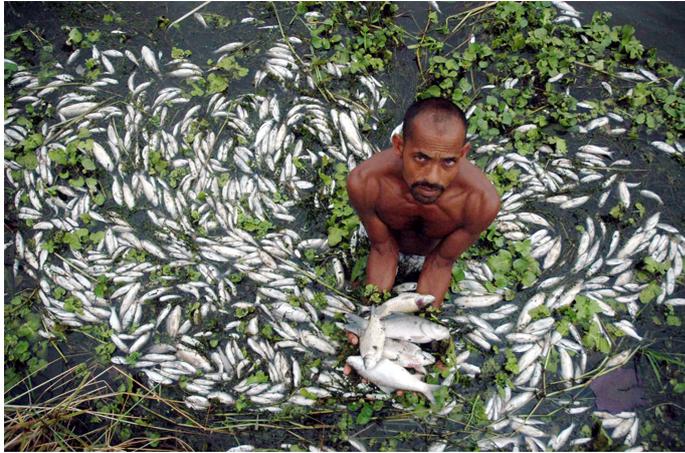
What is immediately striking about the three winning images is how similar they are in terms of participants, setting and composition (see Figure 2). To begin with, all three images feature people doing manual labour: a fisherman (Bangladesh), two children working in a plastic recycling yard (again Bangladesh), and three young men scavenging an open-face garbage dump for salvage and metals (Haiti). Moreover, in all three photographs, the subjects find themselves within a setting of severe environmental degradation and pollution: the fisherman is standing hip-deep in a lake littered with floating dead fish, the children are sitting on a mound of plastic bottles, and the three young men are posing in midst of a vast landfill. These toxic landscapes do not seem to support life; they offer no refuge and no shelter. Finally, all three photographs are composed in such way so as to place the subjects in the middle of the frame and make it seem as if there is no end to the tainted landscape. The contaminated matter seems to spill out of the bottom of the images and fills the frame up to the horizon—in fact, two of the images do not have a horizon at all.

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<sup>38</sup> For examples of more conceptual photographic work on the issue of corruption, see Paolo Woods and Gabriele Galimberti's photobook *The Heavens* (2015), Daniel Mayrit's *You Haven't Seen Their Faces* project (2015), or the author's own *Paraíso* project (available at: <http://www.ollihellmann.net/paraiso>).

Figure 2. The winning photographs

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*Notes:* Winning photos from the 2013 competition (top), the 18-30 competition in 2015 (middle) and the 31+ competition in 2015 (bottom).

*Acknowledgements:* Sony Ramany (top), A.M. Ahad/AP Photo (middle) and Giles Clarke/Getty Images (bottom).

From this denotative reading, we can—first of all—deduce that the three winning images are meant to invoke the sublime—a recurrent theme throughout the history of landscape paintings and photography. To put it simply, the sublime ‘relates to a feeling of being displaced by, or being at the mercy of, a force greater than ourselves.’<sup>39</sup> Or as summarised by Bate,

[t]he sublime is something that threatens to overwhelm you and causes fear, but for the spectator the threat is at a level that can be tolerated. It is about the capacity to experience being fearful, but not absolutely overwhelmed, of still being able to tolerate and contain fear.<sup>40</sup>

Specifically, Transparency International’s three winning images capture what photography critics have termed the ‘man-made’, ‘toxic’ or ‘apocalyptic’ sublime.<sup>41</sup> As Peeples explains, ‘in contrast to the sublime in nature, which functions to improve moral character [...], the horror of the toxic sublime calls to question the personal, social and environmental ethics that allows these places of contamination to exist.’<sup>42</sup> That is to say, Transparency International wants viewers to (i) feel threatened by the toxicity of the landscape and (ii) establish a cognitive link between corruption and the menace of environmental contamination, thereby (iii) comprehending corruption as an unethical behaviour that undermines the social fabric. The ‘man-made’ or ‘toxic’ sublime is a particularly powerful theme to get viewers to think about the social costs of corruption because environmental degradation is a concern that worldwide audiences can relate to. In other words, by choosing photographs that focus on a global rather than a localised issue, Transparency International aimed to ensure that the intended ideological message (corruption is a problem that needs to be controlled) would be understood as widely as possible.

To further strengthen this ideological message, the three images identify individual victims of corruption within the toxic landscapes. This is achieved mainly by showing the photographs’ main protagonists engaging in manual labour, which tells the viewer the following: you are looking at hardworking people living in extreme poverty; they suffer under the yoke of corruption, they do in no way profit from corruption. The viewer, moreover, is encouraged to sympathise with the plight of the people depicted and take their side in the battle against corruption. For one, the images’ participants were photographed at a close distance, which compels the viewer to share the toxic landscape with its ill-fated inhabitants. In addition, in all three photographs, the subjects look straight at the viewer. Generally speaking, pictures in which subjects make eye contact with the audience establish an imaginary relationship between the two sides.<sup>43</sup> In the particular case of the three winning photographs, the subjects’ gaze—in combination with their non-threatening facial expressions and bodily postures—creates a friendly and compassionate interaction (albeit only symbolic) between the subjects and the viewer.

While setting and participants—as semiotic carriers—thus convey the anti-corruption industry’s ideological message that corruption is a problem and needs to be tackled, the photogenic composition of the three winning images helps to make the case that developing

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<sup>39</sup> Alexander, *Perspectives on Place*, 74.

<sup>40</sup> Bate, *Photography*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> Feldman, “Visualizing the Ends of Oil”; Diehl, “The Toxic Sublime”; Peeples, “Toxic Sublime”; Nurmis, “Visual Climate Change Art.”

<sup>42</sup> Peeples, “Toxic Sublime,” 380.

<sup>43</sup> Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis*, 110-111.

countries require external assistance in fighting corruption. First, by filling the entire frame with toxic matter, none of the three photographs offers a pathway out the polluted landscape. Instead, the participants in the images—even though their work and perseverance endow them with a certain degree of agency—seem to express a sense of entrapment and hopelessness: no matter which way they walk, they will not be able to escape the devastating effects of corruption. Second, all three photographs place the main protagonists in the centre of the composition. In theoretical terms, a symmetrical, centred composition lends the image a static, rather than dynamic, feel.<sup>44</sup> Hence, in the case of Transparency International’s three winning images, viewers are left with the impression that corruption in the developing world will not go away unless these countries receive help from the outside.

Moreover, the justification for external intervention also emerges from the binary opposition—or stereotypical dualism—constructed by the three winning images. As Hall explains more generally, by visualising the developing world in a certain way, the North becomes defined as everything that the developing world is not—in other words, the North becomes the developing world’s mirror image.<sup>45</sup> In the case of Transparency International’s winning images, the developing world is visualised as an anarchic dystopian wasteland: the photographs contain no signs of institutions that would enforce law and order, and citizens are left to their own devices, searching the toxic barren land for scraps of sustenance. This particular representation then draws up an antinomy with the North, which—despite the fact it does not feature in any of the images—is imbued with opposite meanings: civilised, prosperous, and liveable. More importantly, the binary anarchic/civilised opposition articulates an unequal power relationship: Northern governments’ success in maintaining law and order places them in a position from where to lecture the developing world on anti-corruption interventions.

What is more, the three winning images further sharpen this binary opposition by dehistoricising and decontextualising corruption—in particular, in relation to the role played by the North in institutionalising and maintaining corrupt structures in the developing world. To begin with, in many cases, Northern colonialism laid the foundation for the systemic perpetration of corruption, especially when colonial authorities exercised political authority through indirect rule and tied local strongmen into extensive patronage networks.<sup>46</sup> Second, since the end of decolonisation, Northern governments have continued to support kleptocratic autocracies and tolerate systemic levels of corruption to advance their geopolitical interests and economic.<sup>47</sup> Third, Transparency International’s photographs push aside the fact that Northern banks and financial centres perform a key part in laundering corrupt proceeds and facilitating the flight of dirty capital from developing countries.<sup>48</sup> Finally, despite the fact that the global anti-corruption industry—dominated by Northern governments and non-governmental organisations—has been prescribing institutional antidotes since the mid-1990s, these

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<sup>44</sup> Lacey, *Image and Representation*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Hall, “The West and the Rest,” 308.

<sup>46</sup> For example, see Lange, *Lineages of Despotism and Development*.

<sup>47</sup> A perfect example is the Mobutu regime in Zaire (1965-1997); see Young and Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*. Similarly, see Hanlon, “Do Donors Promote Corruption?” on how donors are willing to turn a blind eye on corruption in recipient countries if domestic elites comply with externally imposed market reforms.

<sup>48</sup> Otusanya and Lauwo, “The Role of Offshore Financial Centres in Elite Money Laundering Practices.”

interventions have shown very little effect.<sup>49</sup> In other words, Transparency International's photographs obscure the reality that the anti-corruption industry itself has been unsuccessful in charting a pathway out of systemic corruption in the developing world.

Before concluding the analysis, it should be emphasised that the photographers of the three winning images did not knowingly contribute to the construction of this binary opposition. To begin with, as already briefly mentioned earlier, they portrayed people as subjects with agency rather than helpless victims. Moreover, in the photographers' defence, it can be said that corruption is undoubtedly a serious problem in both Bangladesh and Haiti<sup>50</sup>, and that there is evidence for a link between corruption and environmental pollution.<sup>51</sup> In other words, Transparency International is solely responsible for drawing a dualistic of stereotypes of a 'clean' North and a 'corrupt' South through the shortlisting of images submitted to its photography competitions.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the invisible nature of corrupt transactions, corruption is difficult, if not impossible, to visualise. This means that photographic images featured in the global anti-corruption industry's communication—as rare visual 'evidence' of corruption—play a key part in the construction of knowledge about corruption and in structuring what constitutes legitimate action against corruption. The paper here analysed a small, theoretically informing sample of these images through a semiotic framework, thereby shedding light on the truth regime that these images help to sustain.

To begin with, the analysis found that photographic images reflect the ideological assumptions that underpin the global anti-corruption industry. First, due to the fact that photographs are documentary in nature, they support the anti-corruption industry's epistemological doctrine that the very concept of corruption can be accessed objectively. Second, by highlighting the negative effects of corruption on economic and social development, photographs present corruption as a problem that needs to be controlled through institutional means. Third, photographs suggest that citizens support the anti-corruption industry's efforts. This is achieved through different means: for example, photographs depict citizens engaging in anti-corruption protests or, as in the specific case of Transparency International's photography competitions, the photographer is portrayed as an anti-corruption activist.

Moreover, the paper explored the visual rhetorical strategies used by the anti-corruption industry to (i) generate an emotive response from targeted audiences and (ii) increase the circulability of photographs. As discussed, Transparency International has drawn heavily on the theme of environmental degradation, which not only 'travels' easily to different cultural context but—by invoking the 'man-made' or 'toxic' sublime—conveys a strong emotional experience. In addition, photographs identify individual victims in these tainted landscapes, thereby enhancing the emotional impact even further.

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<sup>49</sup> On the ineffectiveness of international efforts against corruption, see Heywood, "Corruption," 371-374; Hough, *Corruption, Anti-Corruption and Governance*, 29-30.

<sup>50</sup> On the systematic nature of corruption in Bangladesh and Haiti, respectively, see Alam and Teicher, "The State of Governance in Bangladesh" and Ramachandran and Walz, "Haiti: Where Has All the Money Gone?."

<sup>51</sup> For example, see Biswas et al., "Pollution, shadow economy and corruption."

Finally, by producing a binary opposite between a ‘clean’ North and ‘corrupt’ South, the anti-corruption industry’s imagery sets certain conditions of possibility in relation to anti-corruption interventions. Specifically, photographic imagery participates in the formation of a discourse that perpetuates Northern hegemony over developing countries. Of particular importance in this regard are the following features: photographs are almost exclusively set in the developing world; the global South is visualised as an anarchic, barren dystopia; and corruption is dehistoricised and decontextualised, thus erasing any evidence of Northern involvement in the institutionalisation and reproduction of corruption in less developed countries.

To conclude, it is hoped that the findings presented in this paper will spark an image debate in the anti-corruption industry, similar to what the *Images of Africa* report did in the field of international development in the late 1980s.<sup>52</sup> Prior to this report, photographic imagery used by international development NGOs had been criticised for pushing stereotypical representations of the developing world as helpless and in need of assistance, and for depoliticising poverty and underdevelopment. Yet, after being confronted with criticism, organisations generally rethought their image policies and now paint a much less stark dualism between the developed and the developing world.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> van der Gaag and Nash, *Images of Africa*.

<sup>53</sup> For an overview of these developments, see Lidchi, “Finding the Right Image.”

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