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## **The visual rhetoric of self-advocacy organizations on poverty: All about courage?**

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# The Visual Rhetoric of Self-Advocacy Organizations on Poverty: All about Courage?

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## Abstract

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At the beginning of the 1990s, several European welfare states installed a policy on poverty that explicitly recognised the voice and life knowledge of people in poverty. The idea of talking ‘with’ the poor came to prominence instead of talking ‘about’ or ‘to’ people in poverty. Beresford and Croft (1995) proclaimed a possible paradigm shift from advocacy to self-advocacy. In Belgium, in the aftermath of the General Report on Poverty (1994), grassroots organisations such as ATD Fourth World and BMLIK (Movement of People with Low Income and Children ) gained recognition as ‘organisations where people in poverty take the floor’. BMLIK launched the photobook *Courage* (1998) which contains prominent black and white photographs portraying families in deep poverty combined with oral testimonies. The central question we ask is whether and how this photobook can be considered an emblematic case for the framing of poverty as a violation of human rights, and for the way the self-advocacy paradigm has been materialised in this. Through a visual-rhetorical analysis (Foss, 1994) of *Courage* we present our research findings wherein the ‘pedagogical aesthetic’ (Trachtenberg, 1990) of socially engaged photography comes to the fore, as well as how this contributes to social change and justice.

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**Keywords:** visual rhetoric, pedagogical aesthetic, poverty, self-advocacy, (social) photography



# La Retórica Visual de la Autodefensa Contra la Pobreza: ¿Se Trata de Valentía?

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## Abstract

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A principios de los 90, diversos estados de bienestar europeos implementaron políticas sobre la pobreza que reconocían explícitamente la voz y el conocimiento procedente de la vida de las personas en situaciones de pobreza. La idea de hablar “con” las personas pobres alcanzó mayor notoriedad que hablar “sobre” o “a” las personas en situaciones de pobreza. Beresford y Croft (1995) proclamaron un posible cambio de paradigma de la defensa hacia la autodefensa. En Bélgica, a raíz del Informe General sobre pobreza (1994), organizaciones de base como ATD Fourth World y BMLIK obtuvieron reconocimiento como “organizaciones donde las personas en situaciones de pobreza toman la palabra”. BMLIK lanzó el fotolibro *Courage* (1998) que contiene destacadas fotografías en blanco y negro que retratan a familias en situaciones de pobreza profunda combinadas con testimonios orales. La cuestión central que nos planteamos es si este fotolibro puede ser considerado como un caso emblemático para enmarcar la pobreza como una violación de los derechos humanos y sobre cómo y de qué manera el paradigma de la autodefensa puede ser materializado en él. A través de un análisis visual-retórico de *Courage* presentamos los resultados de nuestra investigación donde la “estética pedagógica” (Trachtenberg, 1990) de la fotografía socialmente comprometida aparece en primer plano, así como su contribución al cambio social y la justicia.

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**Keywords:** retórica visual, estética pedagógica, pobreza, autodefensa, fotografía (social)

There is no education without ethics; and,  
precisely because ethics walks constantly very close to aesthetics,  
because there is a certain intimacy between beauty and purity,  
education is also an aesthetic event.  
(Paulo Freire, 2014, p. 25)

At the beginning of the 1990s, several European welfare states installed a policy on poverty that explicitly recognised the voice and life knowledge of people in poverty (Beresford, 2002; Beresford, Green, Lister, & Woodard, 1999; Bouverne-De Bie, Claeys, De Cock, & Vanhee, 2003; Dobbernack, 2014; Holman, 1999; Krumer-Nevo, 2005, 2008; Lister, 2002; Vranken, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Emphasis was laid on talking ‘with’ people in poverty instead of talking ‘about’ or ‘to’ the poor (ATD Fourth World, 1996; GRP, 1994; Krumer-Nevo, 2005, 2008; Lister, 2002). In that regard, Beresford and Croft (1995) even proclaimed a paradigm shift from *advocacy*, which implies that non-poor allies advocate ‘for’ the poor, to *self-advocacy*, emphasising the agency of people in poverty to speak for themselves (Holman, 1978; Jenkins & Northway, 2002; Read & Wallcraft, 1993). In this process, policy makers were heavily influenced by the many grassroots organisations that had emerged throughout Europe from the 1950s onwards, and which contributed to the so-called rediscovery of poverty within Western Welfare States during the 1960s and 70s (Reinecke, 2015). Starting from a structural analysis of poverty and adopting a human rights perspective, these grassroots organisations criticised the role of the welfare state and of public social services in failing to eradicate poverty, as well as the paternalism of public social work that was held responsible for reinforcing the powerlessness and welfare dependency of people in poverty (Dobbernack, 2014; Lister, 2004; Reinecke, 2015; Townsend, 1970; Valentine, 1968; Van Robaeys, Dierckx, & Vranken, 2005).

The most well-known and oldest grassroots organisation acting within this context is ATD Fourth World, which was founded in 1957 in Noisy-le-grand near Paris and soon became an international movement the militancy of which was explicitly pinned on the assumption that poverty was a violation of human rights (Dean, 2015; Lister, 2002). We refer to ATD

Fourth World as a (*self-*)*advocacy organisation* as they radically condemned the misrecognition of the agency of people in poverty to speak for themselves and only aimed at representing the Fourth World “to an extent that they themselves are hampered to take their own defence, and with the conviction to enable them to do so as soon as possible”, for the people of Fourth World have the right “to advocate for their own case” (De Vos Van Steenwijk, 1977). The Belgian branch of ATD was established in 1971 (Mels, 2001), but in Belgium the paradigm shift is particularly reflected in the appearance of the *General Report on Poverty* (GRP, 1994). This white paper commissioned by the Belgian Government (Dehaene, 1992) has been recognised as the first policy document in Belgium in which the importance of the life knowledge of people in poverty was emphasised and direct dialogue with people in poverty was embraced (Bouverne-De Bie et al., 2003; Roets, Roose, De Bie, Claes, & van Hove, 2012; Van Robaey et al., 2005).

Due to the active role the Belgian branch of ATD Fourth World played during its construction process, grassroots organisations suddenly gained political and public recognition as “organisations where people in poverty take the floor” (GRP, 1994, p. 5). In the aftermath of the GRP, another (self)advocacy organisation influenced by ATD Fourth World (Vanhee, personal communication, 2016), the Ghent based ‘Beweging van Mensen met Laag Inkomen en Kinderen’ (Movement of People with Low Income and Children) produced and launched the photobook *Courage* (BMLIK, 1998).<sup>2</sup> With this book, BMLIK explicitly touched upon the GRP by highlighting its relentless social activism that aimed at realising human rights in situations of so-called ‘deep poverty’.<sup>3</sup> The organisation embodied the self-advocacy paradigm, and called both the non-poor and the poor to social action. The photobook was considered an educational instrument that could sensitise the non-poor as well as present BMLIK to people in poverty.<sup>4</sup>

*Courage* then could be considered an attempt to reframe poverty as a socially unjust violation of human rights by means of the visual (on framing see, e.g., (Van Gorp, 2007; Benford & Snow, 2000), as a reaction against certain photographic traditions that “seek out poverty and create a miserabilist picture of life” and against the “strategies of domination and disempowerment” that characterised documentary photography (Connell & Hilton, 2014, p. 9; Phillips, 2009, p. 54). The question, however, remains

whether and how BMLIK succeeded in this venture and whether the book can be considered an emblematic case for the framing of poverty as a violation of human rights, and for the way the self-advocacy paradigm has been materialised in this. In order to answer that question, we will analyse the visual rhetoric of *Courage*. As an object or an artefact, the book doesn't escape the common form of photobooks, as it is basically presenting images that could be "conceived in terms of a narrative within an organized framework" (Koetzle, 2016, p. 543). The photographs are reproduced within an ensemble of images and words and derive their form from their "function" (Trachtenberg, 1990, p. 168). According to Susan Sontag, the understanding of photographs is indeed based on how they function, or to put it another way: "Only that which narrates can make us understand". This understanding, however, is contextual, since "functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time" (Sontag, 1979, p. 23; see also Blair, 2004; Kjeldsen, 2015).

As a consequence, do we want to answer our question we will have to scrutinise the function of the photographs. In order to do that, we rely on the rhetorical schema Sonja K. Foss proposed to engage in a critical analysis of visual imagery (Foss, 1994). Foss argues that the photograph's function is not the function the photographer intended but rather the "action the image communicates" (Foss, 1994, p. 216; cf. Koetzle, 2016, p. 4). According to her, three primary kinds of judgments are involved when evaluating the function as communicated in the image itself: (1) the "identification" of the function; (2) an "assessment" of how well that function is communicated and the support or means available; and (3) the scrutiny of the function itself that is conducted in an "evaluation" of its legitimacy or soundness determined by the implications and consequences of the function (Foss, 1994, p. 216). We followed this schema to analyse *Courage*, and use the threefold approach to structure our paper. The first section starts from a description of *Courage* in order to identify the book's nature. This also allows us to connect our case with a long-standing tradition of socially engaged photography, and to make one critical remark towards Foss's anti-intentionalist stance. The assessment will be central in the second section and is organised around the categories of (a) the materiality of the book, (b) the subject matter of the book and (c) the craftsmanship of the photographer in order to assess the book's visual rhetoric. In the third and final section the

photobook's visual rhetoric is discussed along with the concepts of (the violation of) human rights, self-advocacy and the social ambiguity that, as we will argue, is inherent to the pedagogical aesthetic of socially engaged photography.

### **Identifying Courage: Poverty and Socially Engaged Photography**

While I learned her to write the names of her children,  
she learned me how to understand people like her,  
to see their efforts and to choose their side.  
(André De Cock in *Courage*, BMLIK, 1998, our translation)<sup>5</sup>

With these words, André De Cock, a Belgian teacher and philosopher and the founder of BMLIK, opened *Courage*. It was not the first book the organisation produced (see, e.g., BMLIK, 1988) but certainly different as compared to previous publications, taking into account both the visual and material aspects of the book. While anonymised oral testimonies of families in deep poverty prevailed in older publications and no images were used, *Courage* contains oral testimonies combined with images portraying families in deep poverty in their everyday life environment and the intimacy of their homes. The book contains 120 pages which encompass three distinct sections: 10 introductory pages, a main body with 96 pages containing oral testimonies and photographs, and 24 pages explaining BMLIK's *raison d'être*.

The introductory section is devoted to the word 'courage' and its meaning in relation to poverty. The word is exactly the same in French and English, and is frequently used as a loanword from French in Flemish, a regional variant of Dutch, which is the language used in *Courage*. The title *Courage* only carries a subtitle on the title page inside the book, adding the message that "[p]overty is a violation of human rights" (BMLIK, 1998, pp. 3, 5). The book is addressed to "all defenders of human rights and civil liberties" (BMLIK, 1998, p. 4). The title is explained by making use of three oral testimonies, stating that "[p]eople of the Fourth World have a special connection [and] give each other courage and good advice to never give up. There is never a light at the end of the tunnel. Still, we carry on; there is no other choice. We have to encourage ourselves by repeating that we already

hit rock-bottom. The Movement [BMLIK] unites people with and without poverty experience. This allows us to move forward. It gives us courage” (BMLIK, 1998, p. 5). By gradually adding pieces of information on overall blank pages, the readers’ gaze is attracted to the essence of the book’s underlying message, which is to foster the bond between people in poverty and the non-poor in denouncing the violation of human rights.

The main body consists of six sequences of fourteen pages, containing two pages with oral testimonies followed by twelve pages that each carry a print of one black-and-white image without caption. Glancing through the book the photographs prominently come to the fore. Initially, BMLIK volunteers intended to make a montage (see, e.g., Grosvenor et al., 2016) with photographs and captions of oral testimonies, which was a familiar practice in the history of picturing poverty (see, e.g., Sontag, 1979). The photographer, Geen [Eugeen] Lettany, however, firmly rejected this idea and asserted that “[e]ach photograph has its own story to tell” (Lettany, personal communication, 2016). According to him, a photograph provokes a unique encounter that turns the viewers’ individual interpretation into a personal experience. Lettany, moreover, didn’t want any caption to restrict the meaning of a photograph. As a result, the testimonies have nothing to do with the photographs that “lived their own lives” while the testimonies were considered “breaks” in the collection of photographs presented (BMLIK, 1998, p. 6). From archival research we nevertheless know that the testimonies were clustered around six specific themes: “misery”, “solidarity”, “courage and power”, “expectations and rights”, “responsibility and awareness”, and “dignity and pride”.<sup>6</sup> The order of the themes reveals a narrative that starts from a framing that was common at the time, emphasising the misery of people living in dire straits, and which subtly makes way for a counter-narrative, stressing poverty as a violation of human rights.

The last section of the book introduces BMLIK as an organisation that brings together people in poverty and their non-poor “allies” (BMLIK, 1998, p. 101). By allowing people in poverty to regularly meet with their “companions”, the Fourth World is presented as “one family”, “one people” (BMLIK, 1998, p. 99). By means of home visits, the organisation also reaches out to those companions who live in isolation and fear the spotlights. The poor who already engage within BMLIK might become “tutors” to



others (BMLIK, 1998, p. 100). BMLIK cherishes “solidarity” and “respect” through fostering “dialogue” between poor and non-poor. They constantly seek to establish “partnerships”, particularly with policy makers (BMLIK, 1998, p. 101), as is witnessed in a series of photographs showing people in poverty engaged in a discussion with politicians (BMLIK, 1998, pp. 102-103). The people in poverty at BMLIK desire “appreciation” and “understanding” instead of being confronted with “compassion”. They want non-poor “standing at their side” as “friends” and “collaborators” and not as “masters” whose only intention is to “lead” or to “help” them (BMLIK, 1998, pp. 101, 104). BMLIK puts people in poverty on a pedestal and aims at social change by means of what they call a “civilisation project”: “We chose for a democratic society that guarantees citizenship to all and therefore commits itself to a society in which each individual could fully participate and to the development of which everyone could contribute” (BMLIK, 1998, p. 114). As a consequence, the colophon explicitly presents *Courage* as a book that is made by people in poverty. Each family that contributed to the project had to be able to identify with it. They not only participated in their own name, but also on behalf of “other people living in dire straits” allowing the images to become real symbols of “their struggle for securing a better future, a dignified life and respect for all” (BMLIK, 1998, p. 6).

Identifying the nature of the book, which is to emphasise the importance of human rights and self-advocacy as an answer to the persistent character of deep poverty, it is obvious that *Courage* uses photography as a vehicle for social action and change. It thus subscribes into the tradition of socially engaged photography, also referred to as (social) documentary or humanist photography, that dates from around 1880 and is called one of the most long-standing categories in photography (Phillips, 2009, pp. 54, 64; see also, e.g., Grosvenor & Macnab, 2015; Finnegan, 2003; Koenig, 1998; Trachtenberg, 1990). The pioneering work of “the quintessential social documentary photographer” Lewis Hine (1874-1940) and the collective work by the Farm Security Agency (1935-1943) are among the most renowned examples (Phillips, 2009, p. 65; see also, e.g., Walther, 2016; Trachtenberg, 1990). Taking into account both social photography’s social reform ideology and BMLIK’s civilisation project, *Courage* could be described as a photobook that essentially calls upon the viewer to “cross an imaginary social boundary” by presenting a “pedagogical arrangement of

images” within a “macro-structure of social meaning” (Trachtenberg, 1990, pp. 200-201). The goal of the “civilisation project”, then, could be read as “to teach an art of *social seeing*” (italics in original; Trachtenberg, 1990, pp. 192). Following Alan Trachtenberg, we would like to call this the photobook’s “pedagogical aesthetic” (Trachtenberg, 1990, p. 230). It implies that the photographs carry an “aesthetic mission” that is inextricably bound to the photobook’s “moral mission” (Sontag, 1979, p. 115).<sup>7</sup>

Because of this pedagogical aesthetic, that foregrounds the social agenda as well as the relation between the photographer and the viewer, it becomes difficult to step into Foss’s anti-intentionalist stance, that we in this case judge to be too radical. Moreover, since we have access to biographical and historical evidence about the intentions of the makers, we acknowledge the relevance of the author’s intentions. Indeed, even when the photographer claims that the photographs “live their own lives”, the identification of the subject of a photograph always dominates the perception of it (Sontag, 1979). Although Foss argues that the function has to be distinguished from “purpose”, which involves an effect that is intended or desired by the photographer (Foss, 2004, p. 308), it could also be said that the photographer “discloses” the possible meanings of an image (Sontag, 1979, p. 92). On the other hand, privileging the photographers’ intentions over the interpretations of viewers closes off possibilities for new ways of experiencing the photograph (Foss, 1994, p. 215). The latter creates bias, insofar that the “knowing gaze” of the makers of the book might become a “blinding gaze” (Van Gorp, 2011, p. 511). It is however impossible to isolate the oral testimonies and the book’s last section from the photographs, even without the juxtaposition of testimonies-as-captions and photographs on one page. The oral testimonies therefore could be defined as “extended captions” that “frame” the photographs by limiting their “potential openness (polysemy)” (Sontag, 1979, p. 108). It implies that we can ignore neither the interaction between words and images nor the creators’ intentions but that we equally have to be cautious in our attempt to analyse them.

### **Assessing Courage: A Visual-Rhetorical Analysis**

#### **Materiality of the Photographs: The Importance of Print, Paper, Format and Design**

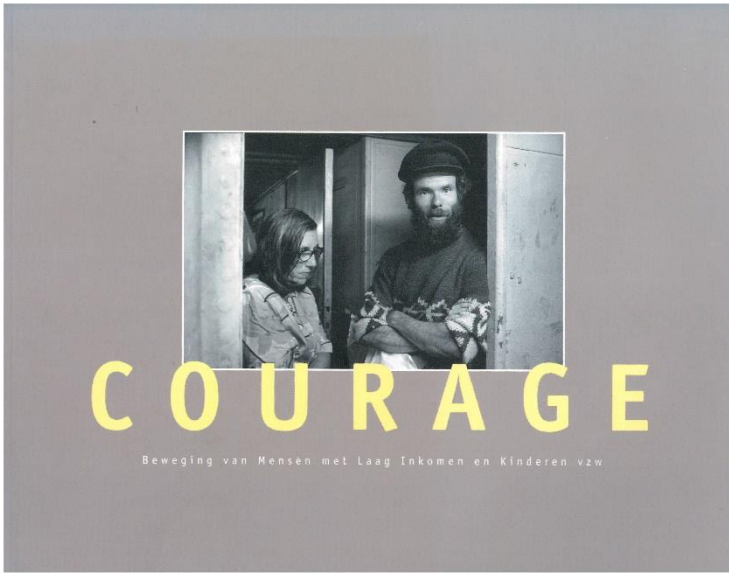
The materiality of the photobook, including its format, paper choice, print quality and overall design, influences the visual experience and the interpretation of both the photographs and texts (Finnegan, 2003). With its landscape orientation and its page size that is bigger than A4 (300 mm x 235 mm), *Courage*'s form demands attention. The cover (Figure 1) is not a hard cover, but feels silky smooth and solid. The design is composed as a stylish grey frame and a thin white border around the photograph, with a clean letter font used for the word 'courage' in light yellow. The pages within the book are shiny white and thick, colours are minimalist (shades of grey, white and black) and white space is used in abundance to frame the one-photograph-pages and testimonies. This format was chosen because of Lettany's preference to photograph in landscape position as well as his preference to print, in his own dark room, on 240 mm x 180 mm photo paper. The 72 photographs are accordingly printed in that size, with the aim to resonate the immediacy of the poverty issue with the experience of viewers.

All these aspects of the materiality of *Courage*: the big, unusual format; the shiny, thick paper; the quality of the photoprints and the minimalist design elicit a rather luxurious and aesthetic appreciation. Jan Vanhee, the project leader and president of BMLIK at the time, especially contracted extra budget of a charity organisation to make a luxurious print possible, and to underline the underlying message that costs nor efforts were spared to trigger their interest in the lives of families living in poverty. One cannot ignore, however, the tension this luxurious abundance in materiality creates as poverty, in the cultural imaginary, is predominantly related to assumptions of shortage, lack, misery, and a dark side of life (Lister, 2004). Some readers-*cum*-viewers even openly criticised the print choices of the book and wondered "whether the money used for the luxurious print could not be better spend?" (Vanhee, personal communication, 2016). Vanhee's main reasoning was that, exactly because it were photographs of people in poverty they were entitled to be presented in ways that do justice to their human dignity, as this was often not the case in mainstream newspapers or

on television. Therefore, he compared the project with existing artistic photobooks and concluded that BMLIK should do the same: “It is not because it are photographs of the poor that they should be printed poorly!”, he firmly stated (Vanhee, personal communication, 2016).

### **Subject Matter and Craftsmanship: Throwing Light on Three Photographs**

In our visual-rhetorical analysis, we decided to present and discuss three images, for each photograph is essentially part of an ensemble of images and words, and could by its “social identification” thus evoke the whole for which *Courage* stands (Trachtenberg, 1990, p. 200). Therefore, the three photographs are selected for their representativeness in relation to the diverse functions as communicated through the entire body of photographs in *Courage*, particularly the aim to contribute to the overall message that poverty is a socially unjust violation of human rights which influences the lifeworlds, hopes, dreams and aspirations of parents and children in poverty situations. Specific attention was also given to the way the child is present (or not) and in which relations it is presented, since BMLIK’s main reason of existence is to advocate for the interests of people with a low income and children (being reflected in the name of the organisation). Also Lettany, who had a professional background within a Catholic youth Movement, had a clear preference to communicate “through” the child and did so by putting the child in “its context” (e.g., the house, the neighbourhood, or in relation to the parents and siblings) while photographing them during “everyday life activities” such as playing (Lettany, personal communication, 2016). This resulted in the following selection: Figure 1, the cover-photograph which is repeated on p. 12 as the kick-off of the main body, showing no children; Figure 2 (p. 29), showing a child in relation to its parents; and Figure 3 (p. 85), showing a child in relation to its surroundings.



*Figure 1. Cover reprinted from Courage (BMLIK, 1998)*

### **Subject Matter**

The cover-photograph presents a couple without any child, which is quite surprising as the main body of photographs (60 out of 72 images) show families with young children and the child appears as a powerful subject that might evoke sympathetic emotions of an audience (Grosvenor & Hall, 2012). This photograph, nevertheless, could be called emblematic for Lettany's style of social photography, which is intimate and tells an ambivalent story about poverty. In this case, the ambivalence is tangible in the way in which the man and woman are represented. At first sight, the attention of the viewer is drawn to the man, who with his eyes catches the light and looks directly into the camera, and as such connects to the viewer. Both Lettany and Vanhee (personal communication, 2016) affirmed that this photograph was chosen as cover image because of the self-conscious, proud

man who was perceived as, indeed, “courageous”. Moreover, they described the image as “very honest” and representative “for how people in poverty really live”. This interpretation is also elicited by the frontality of the man, which according to Sontag (1979, p. 36) signifies “solemnity, frankness, the disclosure of the subject’s essence”. In contrast, the woman seems to communicate the distress or shame of living in poverty, as her gaze is facing downwards, away from the camera. Her head bends down and with her cramped body position, the drooping shoulders and one hand firmly grasping the other, she looks immobilised.

### **Craftsmanship**

Lettany’s craftsmanship comes to the fore when analysing his aesthetic approach in relation to the developed rhetoric on poverty. The white lines of the wall, for example, are supportive in framing both figures: on the left-hand side the wall helps to partially hide the woman while on the right-hand side it does the reverse by supporting the man in his straight position, slightly standing in front of the hallway. However, also practicalities in creating the images are at stake. Whereas the intention was to photograph the families in their houses, this proved to be very difficult because of the confined dark place they lived in (Lettany, personal communication, 2016). As a consequence, the subjects are often portrayed near windows or in door openings. Although it was not intended, this specific position of the couple, on the edge of light and dark, elicits a more symbolic issue, namely the expectation of people in poverty to overcome poverty, to visually step out of the dark into the light (the man) and at the same time showing their restraints and anxiety to do so (the woman). This function is visually communicated but also verbally supported in *Courage*. One of the quotes reflects this, in that the verbal image represents that “[t]here is never a light at the end of the tunnel. Still, we (...) have to encourage ourselves” (BMLIK, 1998, p. 5; cf. *supra*). As such, the reader-*cum*-viewer interprets and gives meaning to the visual that encompasses the verbal. The visual and the verbal are inextricably bound with each other and support processes of meaning making and the production of knowledge and understanding in the cultural imaginary.

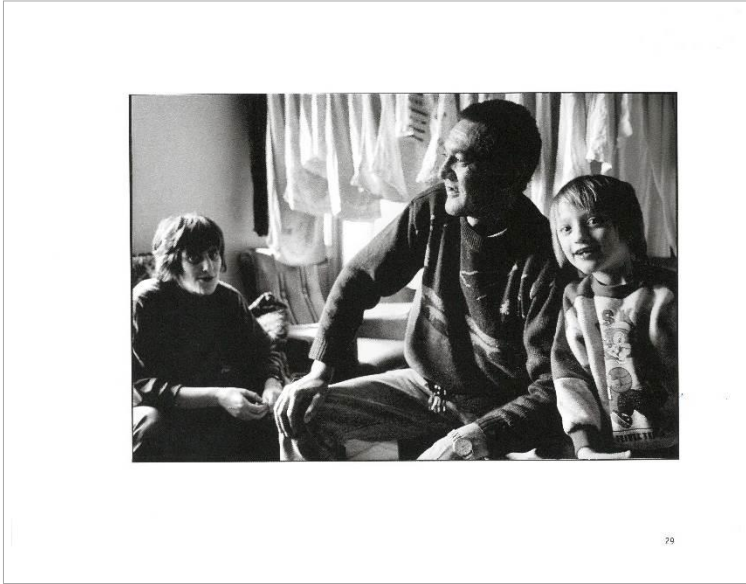


Figure 2. Photograph reprinted from *Courage* (BMLIK, 1998, p. 29)

### Subject matter

The majority of photographs is characteristic for the way poverty is *suggested* through subtle details that are *presented*. In order to actually ‘see’ poverty in this photograph, the viewer must follow visual suggestive clues, such as: the withdrawal and form of the man’s mouth (Is he missing teeth?); his sweater’s sleeves that are too short (lack of money/clothing?); the crate on which he apparently sits (lack of furniture?); the laundry hanging in front of the window (lack of space/lack of a dryer?). These rather subtle visual incentives all provide hints, but no visible proof. This visual embraces vagueness as a way to narrate poverty. The image might also communicate a particular constellation of the subjects, namely the ideal of the well-functioning family with the traditional role division: the father as leading

figure (central and on the foreground) and aiming for a better future (his gaze “assertively staring in the distance”/ into the light; cf. Van Gorp, 2011, p. 517); the mother (positioned lower and at the edge of the frame) as a good house wife stands by her man; and the child does what every child is supposed to do while playing around (doing peekaboo to the camera).

The function of the image that is reflected here might be the intention to reflect the traditional, *normal* family and to communicate respect to family life.<sup>8</sup> This function has to be understood within its historical context: since the launch of the GRP in 1994, the practice of out-of-home placement by social work with regard to children of families in poverty was heavily criticised in the public and political debate on poverty (Van Robaeyns et al., 2005). The GRP particularly expressed severe criticisms raised by people living in poverty and their allies since their collective experiences revealed that they were more often confronted with the pressure of child protection services, and particularly with the placement of their children in residential care: “The GRP focused particularly on the negative consequences of out-of-home placements for both poor parents and their children, based on their claim that their right to a family life was at risk of being violated by the system of child protection” (Bradt, Roets, Roose, Rosseel, & Bouverne-De Bie, 2015, p. 2163). Self-advocacy organisations such as BMLIK prioritised their political advocacy work to respecting the right to have a family life, and with the publication of *Courage* they also aimed to bring this in the public as well as the political realm.<sup>9</sup>

### **Craftsmanship**

By diminishing the expected visual clues in relation to extreme poverty situations, space might be opened up for an alternative framing of people in poverty. This choice was intentional as BMLIK aimed to represent families “in dignity and respect” (Vanhee and Lettany, personal communication, 2016), which was often lacking in popular imagery of the poor on television and in newspapers (Putman, personal communication, 2016). Moreover, Lettany stated that he was interested in what people had to tell about their lives and what happened between them. Therefore, he wanted to focus on their “experience” and “lifeworld” and not so much on the material side of



poverty which “would only distract viewers from the real message that these people have to tell” (Lettany, personal communication, 2016). Additionally, Lettany’s craftsmanship can be seen in the way he makes use of the spontaneous action of the child. Lettany presents the child not only as part of the story, but also as a storyteller, a lead that playfully invites the viewer to pause and take an interest in this family.



*Figure 3.* Photograph reprinted from *Courage* (BMLIK, 1998, p. 85)

### **Subject matter**

Also this image shows a child facing the camera, this time not in the intimacy of a home, but on a neighbourhood square in an urban context where children tend to play and adults to meet each other. The environment that is represented in the photograph communicates the decay of the 19<sup>th</sup>-

century industrial neighbourhoods around Belgian city centres that became hotspots for poor families in deep poverty, joined by the new poor immigrants families. This was a phenomenon known in many European welfare states, on different scales (Reinecke, 2015). The girl with the baby doll central in the front bites her lip while looking slightly upwards. She looks somehow isolated since neither the surrounding adults nor the other children show any interest to her. Only the photographer/viewer seems to notice her, as she catches the photographer's/viewer's gaze. This photograph elicits an intimate liaison between viewer and child, in which the viewer gets an almost voyeuristic view in the lifeworld of the girl. Within this gloomy environment, her careful smile and well-groomed appearance (pins in her hair and proper sandals and dress) might evoke positive feelings in the photographer/viewer.

Further analysing the subject matter, the mimicry between the girl and the woman sitting behind her is striking, for the woman holds a real, newborn baby while staring in the distance. Through this analogy, the function of the photograph could be related to the existence of extreme poverty and its causes and consequences as the viewers might see the consequences of deep poverty, or “generation poverty” as BMLIK calls it (BMLIK, 1998, p. 116). This is symbolised by the emotionally distant mother: her new born has done nothing more than being born, but is already affected, and the mother may not be able to connect emotionally to her child. Both are ‘trapped’ in generation poverty. The gaze primarily attracted to the girl, the photograph nevertheless expresses hope for the future. The photograph not only hints at the negative consequences of extreme poverty, but simultaneously opens up an opportunity for the viewer to be affected and to develop a sense of solidarity and social engagement.

### **Craftsmanship**

A trustworthy relation with his subjects was important to Lettany, and contributed to his craftsmanship. Lettany spent a lot of time with the families involved in the project. He patiently waited until the subjects had resumed “normal life” in order to capture that single moment he was looking for (De Cleen<sup>10</sup>, personal communication, 2016). He favoured spontaneity and an implicit relationship between him and the subjects photographed, “which is

an attitude that is more usually found in amateurs, [such as Lettany,] than professionals” (Gautrand, 1998, p. 615). The question remains nevertheless whether the camera is intervening or not, for “using a camera is still a form of *participation*” (italics in original; Sontag, 1979, p. 12).

### **Evaluating Courage: Concluding Reflections**

While following the analytical schema of Foss (1994) we aim in our concluding reflections to discuss more in particular how *Courage* might have been received by a wider audience in society and evaluated with reference to the implications of the action the images communicate (Foss, 1994; Koetzle, 2016). We therefore focus on the photobook’s pedagogical aesthetic, its visual rhetoric in relation to the question whether this alleged civilisation project might reinvigorate the framing of poverty as a socially unjust violation of human rights, and to what we could learn from this project in terms of notions of self-advocacy that obviously entail complexity in practice. We already mentioned that *Courage*, as an example of socially engaged photography, engenders a pedagogical aesthetic, which implies that the aesthetic mission of the photobook is intrinsically interrelated with a moral mission. As Trachtenberg argued, with reference to John Dewey’s influence on the work of Lewis Hine, the aim of socially engaged photography is “to teach the art of *social seeing*” (cf. supra), while endorsing a social process of education wherein viewers are stimulated to transcend their self-interest and a society with humanity and solidarity at its core can be established. While assessing *Courage*, this seems to be the case as readers-*cum*-viewers are both verbally and visually encouraged to primarily connect with people in poverty on the fundament of ‘shared humanity’ and thus on moral grounds like “freedom and equality in dignity” that underlie human rights (BMLIK, 1998, p 114).

Following Trachtenberg, one could argue that the ‘action’ of the photographs and testimonies hold the potential to create in the viewer the need to “place oneself in the picture in the imagined role of the photographer”, who acts through his camera as a “social worker” (Trachtenberg, 1990, p. 226). It could also be argued that both the “authorship” of the photographs and the “primacy of feeling” come to the fore in *Courage* (William Stott, 1973, quoted in Phillips, 2009, p. 65). In

teaching an art of social seeing, the purpose is to “educate one’s feelings” (William Stott, 1973, quoted in Phillips, 2009, p. 65). Indeed, displaying concrete situations and lifeworlds of people in poverty might create the opportunity to unite “the rational with the emotional”, by “sensing them in an immediate and aesthetic manner” (Kjeldsen, 2015, p. 202). Additionally, Blair (2004, p. 59) argues, on the extra dimension the visual brings to the process of persuasion: “It adds drama and force of a much greater order.” The visual can persuade an audience because of its “evocative power”, it argues “in the sense of adducing a few reasons in a forceful way” (Blair, 2004, pp. 51-52). In this educational process, “the emotional understanding” that influences action (Kjeldsen, 2015, p. 2012), or the “documentary affect” of *Courage*, might turn “upon the viewer’s emotional identification” with people in poverty (Phillips, 2009, p. 65) and lead to a critical reflexivity of the wider society and to a public and political debate on poverty and anti-poverty strategies.

The assessment of the visual rhetoric of *Courage*, however, also urges awareness about the “social ambiguity of the image” that is inherent to this pedagogical aesthetic (Trachtenberg, 1990, p. 225). Ambiguity emerges particularly when the assemblage of images contains a didactic or pedagogical dialectical dimension that complexity might be at stake (Blair, 2004). In that sense, based on the argument that we cannot simply capture linear lines of reasoning in the assemblage of verbal and visual images, and inspired by Clifford Geertz’ notion of “thick description”, Kjeldsen (2015, p. 201) introduces the term “thick representation”. Based on the identification of *Courage* as a civilisation project, and on a more concrete assessment of the functions of three exemplary photographs, we consider the social ambiguity of *Courage* as an essential feature of the photobook. Also in the case of *Courage*, the complicatedness of the dialectical interaction between its creators and interpreters might lead to “vagueness and ambiguity” (Blair, 2004, p. 59). As a (self-)advocacy organisation of families in extreme poverty, BMLIK attempts “to build a collective understanding of their situation as well as construct a sense of pride that counteracts their stigmatization and isolation” (Dean, 2015, p. 144; see, e.g., the sixth theme for oral testimonies, “dignity and pride”, in the identification of *Courage*). The ambiguity in the three photographs we assessed is tangible; while the photographs seem to indicate that extreme poverty is a form of symbolic

violence, an assault on a person's humanity and a violation of human rights that leads to a tragic position in life, people in poverty are also portrayed as resilient human beings who are capable of coping with their situation with a sense of pride. Moreover, in many occasions children are notably portrayed as still unstrained, hinting at a future filled with aspirations in contrast with their parents whose lifeworld seems to be already alienated and colonised (Grunwald & Thiersch, 2009).

Since visual rhetoric is "assumed to bring people into a state of affect", it becomes however relevant to ask whether thick representations "result in more harm than good" (Kjeldsen, 2015, p. 213). Visuals also often communicate unwanted or unintended functions, where the makers were not maybe even aware of (Foss, 1994). In the case of *Courage*, for example, some photographs (e.g., photo 1 and 2) have sometimes an unmistakable disempowering effect on women as they are subordinated in relation to the portrayed men, which is counterproductive to the overall aim of *Courage* to empower people in poverty, which is at the heart of the self-advocacy paradigm (Read & Wallcraft, 1994 in Jenkins & Northway, 2002, p. 10). This ambiguity might lead to a paradoxical and even counterproductive evaluation of the images. As Dean (2015, p. 144) asserts, "it is not possible for a person to take pride in their poverty", at least not when this is aligned to a rhetoric of a celebration of an identity. Poverty is something "to abolish, not celebrate", and therefore anti-poverty strategies require a particular kind of solidarity (Dean, 2015, p. 145). A main question therefore is which sense of solidarity and social engagement *Courage* actually enables when it affects the viewers in relation to how poverty as a social problem might be eradicated.

Although BMLIK (1998, p. 114) clearly states that the production of *Courage* shows how they prefer "a democratic society in which the citizenship of everyone is guaranteed", "a society in which all people act towards each other in the vein of solidarity", revealing solidarity and social engagement in the case of poverty is riddled with relationships of power and social inequality and therefore a tricky issue (Dean, 2015; Lorenz, 2016; Villadsen, 2007). As Lorenz (2016) argues, social solidarity can be defined and secured in very different ways. Enhancing social solidarity might equally well become "a matter of private concern" (Lorenz, 2016, p. 6) and incorporate a series of (neo-)philanthropic principles that entail returning

responsibility to the clients “to stimulate clients’ self-development” (Villadsen, 2007, p. 317) rather than revealing a shared public and political responsibility in the vein of a human rights-based solidarity rooted in the construction of the welfare state (Dean, 2015). In that regard, a very pertinent question is raised by Villadsen (2007, p. 321): “[W]hat is at stake, therefore, is the question of how we can visualize social problems. What do we see when we see a social client? Do we look for background structures and social determinants, or do we rather observe the client’s self-observation? Do we speak about socially produced capacity or inherent will-power?”

This ambiguity, however, might also do more good than harm, which implies that we also need to embrace this ambiguity as an opportunity (Roets, Roose & De Bie, 2013). Also Kjeldsen (2015, p. 202) emphasises that the challenge is to embrace the richness and semiotic thickness of visual representations rather than reducing them “to nothing more than ‘thin’ propositions” (Kjeldsen, 2015, p. 202). Representing layered and ambiguous images of how poverty interferes with the lifeworlds and situations of people in poverty as interpretative issues, might have the potential to stimulate a process of humanisation while turning poverty into a questionable issue that requires social justice and change (Freire, 1972; Schuyt, 1972). It is thought of that the self-advocacy paradigm could contribute to this process of humanisation as it ‘gives voice’ (Beresford et al., 1999; Freire, 1972; Krumer-Nevo, 2008) and – in the case of *Courage* also ‘gives face’ – to people in poverty.

As a concept, however, self-advocacy has different meanings, from “individuals gaining skills and confidence” in their self-advocacy organisations to organisations devoted to “collective action and campaigning” (Buchanan & Walmsley, 2006, pp. 134-135). In the case of *Courage*, both understandings are present visually as well as verbally. Moreover, it could be said that ‘advocacy of self-advocacy’ is central to BMLIK’s rhetoric on poverty in order to convince both the ‘blinded’ non-poor majority as well as the ‘silent’ poor majority to step forward and engage as ‘partners’ within the body of BMLIK. This *partnership* is conceived as the “touchstone for structural poverty alleviation” (BMLIK, 1998, p. 116). The ‘giving voice and face’ reminds advocacy organisations of the importance of acting on different levels, both individually and

collectively, both educationally and politically. One could therefore say that advocacy organisations become *self*-advocacy organisations when they recognise the need of a combined pedagogical-political approach to poverty. Only then the underlying power relations and social inequality will be questioned critically.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some examples of participation of people in poverty in policy making are: the *Wrésinski Report* of the Economic and Social Council in France (1987); the process leading up to the *Children Act* in the UK (1989); and the *General report on Poverty* in Belgium (1994, cf. *infra*).

<sup>2</sup> The organisation was established in 1983 and is subsequently referred to as BMLIK, an acronym derived from the Dutch name of the organisation.

<sup>3</sup> Deep poverty is also known as ‘persistent poverty’ or ‘generation poverty’ and refers to the situation of experiencing extreme poverty over generations within one and the same family. ATD Fourth World referred to it with the notion of ‘Fourth World’ to emphasize the existence and persistence of extreme poverty in the rich Western countries. (Tardieu and Rosenfeld, *Artisans of Democracy*, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> Jan Vanhee, [Description of the *Courage* project in an application form at the King Baudouin Foundation], 30 September 1997. BMLIK archives (unclassified).

<sup>5</sup> In this paper, all quotes from the book and interviews are translated from Dutch into English.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Vanhee, [Preliminary draft on the structure and content of the book *Courage*], 1997. BMLIK archives (unclassified).

<sup>7</sup> With which Trachtenberg actually neutralised the binary opposition that can be found in two strands that identify socially engaged photography as either “photographs-as-aesthetic-objects” or “photographs-as-social-instruments” (Grundberg, 1999, p. 171). While the first strand puts an emphasis on beautification (of poverty, for instance) and the social photographer’s subjectivity, the second stresses the truth-telling capacity as well as the objectivity that is assigned to documentary photography (Sontag, 1979).

<sup>8</sup> International Declaration of Human Rights, art. 16:

*(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.*

*(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.*

(3) *The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.*

Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., [Collection on newspaper articles on the topic of the GRP and the negative effects of out-of-home placement of children on family life], 1995-1996. ATD Fourth World Archives, Brussels.

<sup>10</sup> Lieve De Cleen was a BMLIK volunteer who did home visits with families in poverty and introduced the photographer to the families.

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