

Book review: Lilie Chouliaraki: The Spectatorship of Suffering

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book as well. Although certainly ambitious in its scope, its aim is not to provide all the answers, but the 14 chapters and the introduction challenge us to move beyond deconstruction and think strategically about ways to destabilize existing power grids, and for this reason alone it would make inspiring reading for anyone concerned with the politics of belonging today. While the sales 'blurb' for this book suggests a readership of 'scholars working in the areas of multiculturalism, globalization and culture, race and ethnic studies, gender studies and studies of post-partition societies', it should have an even wider application, as the politics of belonging affect us all.

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Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage, 2006. 237 pp. ISBN 13: 9-78076-197039-2 (hbk) £60.00; ISBN 13: 9-78076-197040-8 (pbk), £19.99.

In September 2006 Archbishop Desmond Tutu said to the BBC:

The harsh truth is that some lives are slightly more important than others ... If you are swarthy, of a darker hue, almost always you are going to end up at the bottom of the pile (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5344890.stm>).

Tutu was talking about the Darfur atrocities and the United Nations' reluctance to enter the Sudan region with a peacekeeping force. But he could also have been talking about the way in which television mediates suffering such as that of the Darfurians, or about the hierarchy of relevance that the suffering and lives are given in relation to western viewers. Lilie Chouliaraki cleverly identifies this hierarchy of relevance in the news genres of televised suffering, which she divides into three categories: adventure news, emergency news and ecstatic news. With these three categories Chouliaraki challenges traditional media analysis, whose focus often is on the societal construction of mediation rather than on the function of content. She seeks to investigate how television shapes the 'norms of the present by staging our relationship to the far away "other"' (p. 13). Thus, she examines how this 'other' – or slightly less important life – becomes a life worth saving, and in some cases rather than others, calls upon humanitarian action.

The Spectatorship of Suffering is roughly divided into three parts. The first establishes the crossroads of mediation. Discussing the social theories of mediation founded on the Habermasian concept of society and the postmodern theories of Baudrillard, Castell and Lash among others, Chouliaraki finds that they lack an explanation of how connectivity happens and can generate a cause of action. Often, technology is argued to be the barrier which separates the spectator from the sufferer and so keeps the spectator from acting on the suffering. But Chouliaraki argues that a



cosmopolitan citizenship (understood as ‘an orientation, a willingness to relate with the “Other”’, quoting Hannertz and not to be confused with a universal citizenship) looks at a politics of pity, which incorporates a dimension of distance in its choice of action. That is, instead of looking at technology as either taking the spectator too far away from the sufferer in order to be able to act (the pessimistic view), or seeing the spectator as being brought into the proximity of the sufferer through the use of technology (the positive view), media analysis needs to integrate distance as a ‘mode of managing meaning’ (p. 46). The limiting effects of the social theories are grounded in the fact that the public is seen as an empirical entity corresponding to a linguistically homogenous population or national borders. Instead, Chouliaraki argues, public life should be seen as always already articulated within situated practices. Chouliaraki opts for a view of mediation as sets of ‘tensions’ rather than ‘paradoxes’. In this way, she wants to open up a space of creativity instead of discarding the possibility for action.

The second part of *The Spectatorship of Suffering* analyses the three core categories of television news, adventure, emergency and ecstatic news, through a grid of three regimes of pity. The regimes are ‘multimodality’, which analyses the properties of language and image that construe the spectacle of suffering on screen; ‘space–time’, which represents the proximity or distance to the scene of suffering; and ‘agency’, the representation of action on the sufferer’s misfortune. The three categories of news give different responses within the regimes of pity and these responses are positioned on a gradual scale showing different balances of modality, space–time and agency. From the factual, distant and paralysing adventure news (exemplified by televised news productions on floods in Bangladesh and shootings in Indonesia), to the more complicated narrative and space–time structure of emergency news (exemplified by televised news production on the rescue of illegal African migrants, famine in Argentina and the death sentence by stoning of a Nigerian woman) to ecstatic news (exemplified by televised news coverage of the September 11 attack in 2001), all are represented with multiple narratives and various degrees of affective power, which enables the spectators to reflect and empathize. All three categories fall short, however, as ‘it is only when the spectator takes up the proposal of television and join[s] a broader public of deliberation and action that the founding act of cosmopolitan reflexivity can be accomplished’ (p. 218).

In the last part of *The Spectatorship of Suffering* Chouliaraki goes on to discuss how the communitarian public interested in ‘us’ rather than the distant ‘other’ can experience the possibility of cosmopolitanism. Chouliaraki’s project is to look at television news differently – as a dynamic mediation process inspired by Foucault’s technology of governmentality – so as to envision an affirmative use of suffering shown on television, which she calls cosmopolitan. If used wisely and with the right balance



of proximity and distance (empathetic feeling and distanced watching), televised suffering can mediate a cosmopolitan response, Chouliaraki argues. However, televised suffering presents itself as a mix of ‘universal’ facts while simultaneously dividing events into different news categories and, as such, builds a hierarchy of suffering and values of lives. It is, of course, a false universal claim which is mediated through the mix of impartial facts and partial weighing of suffering, construing a hierarchy of the value of human lives. Realizing this construction, ‘mediation must seek to expand the spectator’s emotional concerns beyond the limits of their existing intimate world and cultivate a moral sensibility beyond an ethics of proximity’ (p. 212). How this is achieved without imposing a universal moral claim upon the ‘other’ and making them all western (Gilroy, 2004[2000]) seems to rest on Aristotle’s understanding of the grounded knowledge claim *phronesis*, which argues that every particular case brings with it its own ‘universal’ value system. But to this reader it remains slightly unclear how Chouliaraki avoids the universalizing effects of cosmopolitanism when operating with moral justice.

By way of concluding, Chouliaraki makes a call for reflexivity on the western notion of ‘universality’ through an assertion of the public as a potential agency in the tensions between emotions and rationality, rather than a static empirical entity. This is an important call and one substantiated through Chouliaraki’s findings in her in-depth analyses. However, the notion of the cosmopolitan viewer begs several questions, and Chouliaraki’s argument could be developed further using those questions; for example, the critical call made for cosmopolitan connectivity against western universalism, which has been developed not only by post-colonial scholar Gayatri Spivak (1988) but also by feminist scholarship. The latter is especially relevant for Chouliaraki’s project insofar as it has struggled to combine a critique of the exclusionary power relations entailed by universalizing claims with serious efforts to reground knowledge and moral claims on new foundations. Whereas Chouliaraki turns back to Aristotle to find a solution to her moral dilemmas, many contemporary critical thinkers have developed new concepts and approaches. For example, Sandra Harding (1991) discusses a notion of strong objectivity through strong self-reflexivity, developed on the basis of science’s claim for objectivity. The scientific knowledge claim rests on an assumption which endows the western worldview with a universal quality. However, like Chouliaraki, Harding argues that this claim is false. Harding goes on to call for a grounded knowledge claim based on the lived experience of women’s lives, which leads to a re-evaluation of the situatedness of the scientific (mediated) knowledge claim (Haraway, 1991), so as to build a strong objectivity based in particularity. Chouliaraki’s argument can therefore be read alongside, and at times against, critical theorists in the feminist, post-colonial and cultural studies traditions, especially when she argues that cosmopolitanism emerges not as a universal structure of



western moralizing but ‘as a fleeting glimpse, as a temporary possibility’ (p. 93). She calls for a positive empowerment of the media and a new way of perceiving the mediated world, which is a necessary call in media scholarship.

Tutu’s harsh ‘truth’, that some lives are slightly more important than others, is proved through Chouliaraki’s grid of analysis of the politics of pity and the news institutions’ news criteria to be a media-constructed truth based on a false universal assumption in the western world. *The Spectatorship of Suffering* provides a valuable tool with which to examine the media in an empowering way and points towards the possibility of advancing analyses of media constructions.

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