

Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. 248 pp. GBP 16.99 (pbk).

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This is an impressive book for many reasons, not least because Chouliaraki manages to navigate through a range of critical debates about humanitarian communication without becoming mired in postmodern negativity, and emerges on the other side with a commitment to social justice intact and some formulations for the future.

Her mission in the book is explicit from the outset: to defend the role of humanitarianism in sustaining an ethos of solidarity with suffering others, whilst simultaneously mounting a critique of the “neoliberal hegemony” that has brought about an instrumentalisation of the aid sector, and effected a mode of communication with audiences that emphasises pragmatism, privatism and self-gratification. Her focus, then, is explicitly on the ways in which ‘the humanitarian imaginary’ is produced through the representation, mediation and construction of spectacles of suffering, in order to show how “particular moral imaginations of solidarity come to be articulated as public norms at different points in time” (46). In other words, she is interested in how humanitarian communication (charity appeals and celebrity interventions, for example) brings about particular constructions of moral agency in audiences and concomitant modes of engagement. Her overarching argument, which gives the book its subtitle, is that we are in an age of post-humanitarianism, or irony: “In the spirit of a neoliberal ethics of pragmatism...ironic solidarity ceases to rely on the moral imperative to act on vulnerable others without asking back and asserts a new post-humanitarian morality that combines action on others with benefits for the self” (52). Underpinning the discussion is a commitment to the moral pedagogy of the classical theatre, and Chouliaraki argues that there has been a shift in the ‘humanitarian imaginary’ away from the authority of the theatrical mode of communication (and the associated constitution of moral subjects) towards ironic distance. By the end of the book she seeks to recuperate a theatrical model in order to suggest how it might implicate audiences more genuinely as moral agents.

Her methodological strategy draws out the ways in which particular moral imaginations of solidarity are articulated and performed at particular historical moments, and in each of the four case study chapters – ‘Appeals’, ‘Celebrity’, ‘Concerts’ and ‘News’ – a historical contrast is highlighted in order to support the thesis that the tensions of the imaginary can be seen to be only provisionally, and temporarily settled. This is a strategy based on notions of historicity and performativity – an “informed agnosticism” which entails approaching “...the humanitarian imaginary as a space of regulated undecidability – a space where the links between [politics, the market and technology]...cannot be fully predetermined and...depend upon the specific historical contexts of their emergence and use” (46). Chouliaraki suggests that analysis each of these types of ‘performance’ requires a specific set of tools, although all are scrutinised in terms of their respective claims to authenticity. She argues that the last 40 years (the ‘post-colonial’ era), is a period of particular interest and that by contrasting *emergent* and *contemporary* performances of solidarity in specific genres we can identify significant shifts.

The ‘emergent moment’ in the genre of appeals, for example, is shown to have been caught between ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ types of image both of which have operated in a ‘photo realistic’ mode, and both of which have evoked suspicions regarding the authenticity the ‘pitiabile spectacle’; the mobilisation of the colonial gaze arguably dehumanises the object of this gaze, whether it is a crying child or a smiling child, and in both cases the mode has been critiqued for commodifying the image. Chouliaraki argues that images of suffering do not automatically nurture the moral imagination, but rather it is the “structure of the theatre” (49) that through separation produces relationships of moral identification. This mobilisation of ‘pity’ is contrasted with the ‘irony’ in more recent appeals in which textual juxtaposition and manipulation is foregrounded in a ‘hyper-realist’ mode (such as the Oxfam ‘humankind’ appeal). All of these appeals maintain a claim to truth, but Chouliaraki shows us how the meaning of ‘authenticity’ shifts and congeals at different historical moments, producing the difference between, on one hand, an “affective performativity” and on the other a “reflexive performativity” in the audience. And, crucially, she shows how this contemporary reflexive performativity is characterised by technologically facilitated, low-commitment responses, such as clicking a link on a website, through which the performance of ‘brand loyalty’ becomes more significant than moral agency.

Her treatment of celebrity is limited to two examples – Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie – but through theoretical frameworks provided by star and celebrity studies, their respective articulations of authenticity are revealed to be historically situated. Chouliaraki begins by assessing the critical discourses in this area – the ‘sceptical’ and the ‘optimistic’ – the former of which questions both the validity of the celebrity voice, and the ideological import of a sovereign western subject ‘heroically’ acting for impoverished peoples. The optimistic discourse, in contrast, is pragmatic and suggests that celebrities possess power for good and can often legitimately use their ‘marginal’ origins to claim kinship with suffering people. For Chouliaraki though, it is more significant to examine the ‘essentialist fallacy’ by which the moral self of the celebrity and the communicative practice of celebrity are conflated. Through the examples of Hepburn and Jolie she shows how particular norms precede and circumscribe the performance of the celebrity persona, particularly their “strategies of witnessing” in the context of humanitarian communication. Hepburn’s authenticity, for example, is construed through depoliticised motherhood and controlled articulation, whereas Jolie’s engagement with suffering is constructed as part of a trajectory of self-fulfilment – emotional and ‘raw’.

Similarly, after arguing that the positive/negative dyad is too impoverished as a critical response to concerts, such as Live Aid and Live 8 (on one hand their potential to inspire genuine commitment, and on the other their profound inauthenticity and commodification of humanitarianism), Chouliaraki proposes a comparative approach which makes it possible to problematise the concept of authenticity itself. Neatly avoiding the cul-de-sac of critiques of the spectacle, she makes vivid the ‘enchantment’ of, for example, Bob Geldof’s Live Aid charisma, which is constituted, paradoxically, by the “romanticism of solidarity” and the “commercialism of the industry” (119), and contrasts this with the “disenchanted enchantment” of Live 8, with its adoption of the vocabulary of political and economic power.

The section on news is, perhaps, overburdened with material, in its attempt to deal with BBC archive stories of major earthquakes from the past 35 years, as well as develop a theory of “post-television news” and analyse the discursive characteristics of live blogging. However, the argument is most compelling when anchored in the concept of ‘modes of witnessing’, whereby news is shown to have shifted from a ‘dramatic’ mode into an ‘aporetic’ mode – that is, a shift from a coherent, single-authored narrative, to a fragmented “proliferation of truth claims” (171). There is probably another book’s worth of ideas here, but the key points emerge clearly: that news has become more ‘multi-medial’; that objective accounts of the world have become more subjective; that this fragmentation into multiple stories has undermined the ‘theatricality’ of the genre; and, overall, that this all contributes to the ‘post-humanitarianism’ that characterises the other contemporary examples of the communication of solidarity.

Ultimately Chouliaraki asserts that the public discourse of solidarity has shifted away from a morally-grounded ‘theatricality’ towards ‘cool capitalism’, self-reflexivity and gratification, and, although she acknowledges that the theatrical model was not without its problems, we have lost something of the ‘giving without any return’ ethos that characterised it. The argument is meticulously structured, signposted at every turn, and with multiple perorations, so that when the destination is reached her proposals for the future feel fully supported. Critiquing the “neoliberal conception of humanitarianism that replaces conviction with consumption” (180) and “the civic disposition that may be hinting at a vocabulary of justice, yet ultimately remains incapable of going beyond the promise of pleasurable consumption” (186), Chouliaraki proposes a new theatrical model that could bring about a greater, more tangible sense of moral agency. In short, she argues for the need for a new theatrical mode based on ‘estrangement’, or critical distance, characterised by exposure to otherness and engagement with argument. This, she writes, could bring into being a responsive state characterised by three crucial elements: empathy, judgement and action – an “agonistic solidarity” in which the vulnerable take centre stage as historical agents, multiple perspectives are included, and the spectator is implicated as an ‘actor’. She acknowledges that it is “not an easy task”, but believes that the moral pedagogy of this theatrical mode “may turn us from utilitarian altruists to cosmopolitan citizens” (205). Analysing Amnesty International’s ‘We Unsubscribe’ appeal on torture, she shows how in two respects it fulfils her ‘estrangement brief’ – the theatrical portrayal of realistic suffering produces empathy, and the representation of a Western torturer forces the viewer to problematise their judgments regarding good and evil. But it falls short in its “minimal invitation to e-activism” (201) and fails to contextualise torture within global forms of governance, thus failing to implicate or position the spectator as a potentially active agent. In this last example Chouliaraki brings us back to the power of the theatre and the necessity of moving beyond a position in which we may congratulate ourselves on “being good”.

As with much work on discourse (my own included), the empirical work focuses on the form of communication without examining ways in which actual audiences engage with it and respond to it (the audience is 'figured' through the analysis of texts and discourse) – it is ultimately about how the conditions of the possibility of engagement are produced, rather than an analysis of engagement itself. This, however, is not a criticism – it is for future researchers to explore Chouliaraki's thesis with actual 'moral actors' in order to understand more fully the complexities of 'ironic spectatorship'.