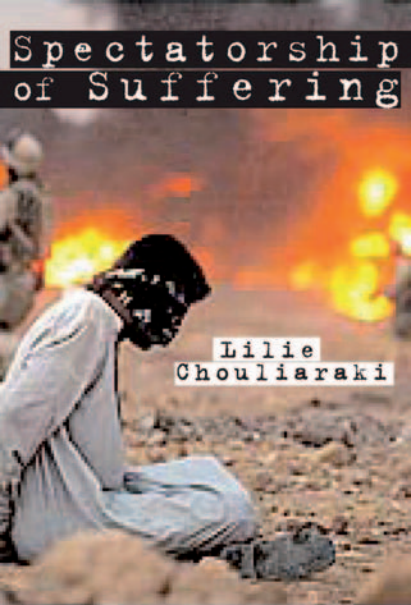


Spectatorship of Suffering

A photograph of a person in a white garment kneeling in a field of rubble. In the background, there is a large fire or explosion, and a soldier in a helmet is visible on the left. The text 'Lilie Chouliaraki' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

Lilie
Chouliaraki

The Spectatorship of Suffering

Lilie Chouliaraki



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To Daphne

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INTRODUCTION: DISTANT SUFFERING ON TELEVISION

This is a book about the relationship between us as spectators in the countries of the West, and the distant sufferers on our television screen – sufferers in Somalia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, but also New York and Washington DC. How do we relate to television images of distant sufferers? Do we switch off, shed a tear or get angry and protest? Do we forget about them or seek to do something about their suffering? Such questions touch on the ethical role of the media in public life today. They address the issue of whether or not the media can cultivate a disposition of care for and engagement with the far away other; whether or not television can create a global public with a sense of social responsibility towards the distant sufferer.

These issues have always been on the agenda of public debate and the social sciences. Nevertheless, we know little about the role of the media in shaping an ethical sensibility that extends beyond our own ‘neighbourhood’. On the one hand, as television news constantly bombards us with humanitarian emergencies, arguments about the compassion fatigue of the general public abound. On the other hand, the Asian tsunami emergency turned out to be ‘a unique display of the unity of the world’, as the Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, put it.¹ Never before had the international community responded to distant suffering as it did in the event of the catastrophic tidal wave along the Indian ocean coastline, which swept away more than a quarter of a million people in December 2004.

The Secretary General explained the unique international response to tsunami-hit nations as being due to two factors:

- global footage – the whole world saw this human tragedy
- global suffering – over 40 countries lost their own citizens in the disaster.

This response tells us something important about the spectacle of suffering in the media. It tells us that witnessing the event and its disastrous aftermath on screen is important in evoking emotion and, thereby, a sense of care and responsibility for the distant sufferer. It also tells us how important is the fact that 40 nations, many of them Western, not only witnessed but also experienced the feeling of loss.

Even though the UN Secretary General was quick to celebrate the response to tsunami survivors as a display of global unity, a number of

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questions still beg a response. Is it enough to witness the scene of distant suffering, in all its intensity and drama, in order to engage with suffering? What forms can our engagement with distant suffering take? Is charity enough to make a difference in the life of the sufferer and what about traditional forms of public action? Do political protest and social solidarity have a place in television's mediations of distant suffering? Finally, it is crucial to turn the UN Secretary General's assertion into a question: under which conditions is it at all possible for the media to induce displays of global care for people we know nothing about and will never meet?

This is what this book is about: the conditions under which it is possible for the media to cultivate an ideal identity for the spectator as a citizen of the world – literally a cosmo-politan.² Central to this issue is the problem of public action as action at a distance. Public action has always been action at a distance – at least in modern times – but the mass media have intensified the tensions involved in the enactment of public action because they constantly confront us with realities that occur too far away from everyday life for us to feel that we can make a difference to them. No other spectacle can raise the ethical question of what to do so compellingly as suffering. The most profound moral demand that television makes on spectators, Ellis claims, is to make us witnesses of human pain without giving us the option to act on it (2000: 1).

We might, however, wish to reverse the claim. We might wish to assume, instead, that the spectacle of suffering puts under pressure not the spectator per se, but the norms that dominate the ethics of public life today. The ethics of public life insist that suffering invites compassion, it must be acted on and on the spot if it is to be an effective response to the urgency of human pain. Its ideal moral citizen is the figure of the good Samaritan. This dominant discourse is, evidently, out of pace with our contemporary experience of suffering, which is thoroughly mediated and impossible to act on in a compassionate manner. One of the key problems that surrounds the debate on cosmopolitan citizenship, I argue in this book, is that public action is still understood as compassion – that is, on-the-spot action on suffering – but now needs to be acted as pity that is action that incorporates the dimension of distance.

Mediation and discourse

The mediation of suffering is an important focus of study precisely because it problematizes the nature of public action under conditions of mediation. The question of how distant misfortune becomes a story to be told throws into relief the strategies of discourse that accommodate the demand for action on suffering given that, for the majority of us, physical closeness to the sufferer is impossible. These strategies of discourse – what Boltanski (1999: 7) calls a 'politics of pity' – refer to the ways in

which television uses image and language so as to render the spectacle of suffering not only comprehensible but also ethically acceptable for the spectator. This book, it follows, is neither about news production (the chain reactions between the site of suffering, news room and broadcast studio), nor news interpretation (audience responses to the news). This book is about the news text that reaches our living rooms.

What I seek to study is the choices made when creating the news text concerning how the sufferer is portrayed on screen and how the scene of suffering is narrated. Even though such choices are part of everyday journalistic routines rather than ideologically motivated calculations, they always carry norms as to how the spectator should relate to the sufferer and what we should do about the suffering. It is these ethical values, embedded in news discourse, that come to orientate the spectator's attitude towards the distant sufferer and, in the long run, shape the disposition of television publics vis-à-vis the misfortune of far away others.

This is not a new insight. Social and political theories of the public sphere emphasize the crucial relationship between media discourse and the norms of public life.³ We have yet to comprehend, however, just how news texts shape public ethics, by shaping the spectator's encounter with distant suffering. What we need to do, as Corner (1995: 143) proposes with respect to the documentary, is to 'develop closer and better micro-analysis, of the language and image of the media' and locate media texts within broader contexts of social practice and public conduct.⁴

The concept that connects the media as discourse and text with the media as institution and technology is the concept of *mediation*. As Silverstone argues, the study of mediation requires giving attention to both the institutions and technologies via which the circulation of news discourse takes place (2004a). The institutional perspective deals with the practices of news production in the journalistic field and seeks to understand how media organizations link up to transorganizational networks (notably in the political field) or other transnational media. In insisting on news making as the activity of organisations and networks, what the institutional perspective often fails to appreciate is the nature of news discourse itself. However, in so far as both perspectives address the social production of news, the news as discourse perspective is itself an indispensable component of institutional analysis. It couples the study of media institutions with that of mediated discourse and the technologies that disseminate it across the globe.

Chapters 1 and 2 – 'Mediation and public life' and 'The paradoxes of mediation' – take as their point of departure on social theory seeking to understand the impact of media and their discourse on public life today. These chapters show that, in order to talk about how public norms change as a result of mediation, we should focus on mediation as not only institutionally driven but also technologically driven discourse. In fact, Chapter 1 argues, the ethical question of how television shapes the disposition of the

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spectator vis-à-vis the distant sufferer always stumbles over this troubled relationship between discourse and technology. Either celebrated for expanding discourse beyond the here and now or criticized for undermining the authenticity of discourse, the spectre of technology deeply haunts the visions and hopes, but also misconceptions, of social theory about the moral citizen and the cosmopolitan public.

Mediation and power

If it is news discourse that concerns me here, this is because our relationship with distant suffering is made possible, or thinkable at all, by means of this discourse. To be sure, questions of discourse depend crucially on money and technology – on the transnational networks that enable news flows across the globe.⁵ The development of satellite technologies, for example, lies behind every picture of Banda-Aceh, Baghdad or Darfur that reaches our home. Despite the instantaneous and global reach of visibility that such technologies have achieved, the optimistic celebration of our planet as a global village or the satellite viewer as a new cosmopolitan should be held in check.⁶

Current regimes of television viewing are not simply unified by technology. Rather, they embed new transnational technologies of communication in existing and relatively stable transnational relationships of power and these map out an asymmetrical and unjust landscape of news flows. The consequence is new divisions rather than simply new unifications. The parallel to the digital divide in new media is the satellite divide in global news flows.⁷

The division between safety and suffering captures a fundamental aspect of this asymmetry in the viewing relationships of television. This is the asymmetry of power between the comfort of spectators in their living rooms and the vulnerability of sufferers on the spectators' television screens. The viewing asymmetry of television does not explicitly thematize the economic and political divisions of our world but reflects and consolidates them. Who watches and who suffers reflects the manner in which differences in economic resources, political stability, governmental regimes and everyday life enter the global landscape of information. Similarly, who acts on whose suffering reflects patterns of economic and political agency across global zones of influence – North and South or East and West. Safety and suffering, then, are apt categories for understanding television's power to represent the world to the world, its power to map information flows in terms of geographical neighbourhoods, cultural affinities and political alliances and, by this token, to 'other' those who live in poverty or with war.⁸

In this politics of discourse over who belongs where and who cares for whom, the contemporary relationships of viewing are neither identical nor

radically different from previous critical accounts of world divisions and global relationships of subordination. Echoing Hall's work on the exercise of white power over colonized people, contemporary relationships of viewing reflect a similar symbolic struggle for power, territory and identity. In the same spirit, Said would call this viewing asymmetry a contemporary mutation of the old divide between the West and the 'orient'.⁹ It is to both the unique quality of contemporary relationships of power and their continuity with historical relationships of power that I repeatedly return in this book.

At the same time, the representation of suffering in terms of hierarchical zones of viewing construes the space of safety as a homogeneous space – the space of routine everyday life, predictability, relative prosperity.¹⁰ Media theory is responsible for the legitimacy of this construction. Theories on the mass media as devices for the re-enchantment of the world or agents for the enhanced reflexivity of our societies acknowledge the suffering 'others' only in their role of forging the togetherness and sociality of Western audiences.¹¹ However, this aggregate function of television – often celebrated as evidence of a new 'communitarian' ethic – is only possible on the condition that it separates itself from the zone of suffering and deprives the suffering 'others' of their own sovereignty as human beings.¹² Instead of making the disturbing spectacle of distant sufferers the object of critical reflection, much theory on the media places the content – ethical and political – of mediation outside the agenda of research and debate.

Chapter 3 – 'Mediation, meaning and power' – takes issue with this attitude found in theory. It deals with theories on the media that understand media discourse in a simplified manner, as image only. Despite their critical spirit towards the society of the spectacle or the culture of the simulacra (disappearance of the real into a mirror image of reality, which is the only reality for today's spectators), these aesthetic narratives of mediation have more to say about the life of spectators than the ethical dilemmas that the life of the distant sufferers may press on our societies.

Chapters 1 to 3, together, point to a crucial weakness in contemporary theory on the media. This is the tendency of theory to hover unproductively between the 'paradoxes' or 'impossibilities' of mediation. Does technology facilitate an ethical public life or undermine this possibility? Does media discourse deliver the promise of a reflexive and active public or seduce and disempower spectators? This dilemmatic approach to mediation does not help us, I believe, to understand the question of ethics and public life in its full complexity. Importantly, it does not help us find ways to redress the bias and inequality in current practices of mediation.

Phronesis in social research

Questions about the ethical role of the media and the power of public action are, indeed, 'grand' questions. They are usually dealt with in 'grand'

theory. They become the topic of philosophical arguments on the existence of universal moral standards or political debates about the rise or decline of communitarian and cosmopolitan values. The perspective I adopt in this book is different. I approach these 'grand' questions by means of particular examples.

Drawing on Aristotle's advice that our enquiries into social life should be driven by the practical consideration of what 'is good or bad for man', I focus on the ways in which particular news texts present the sufferer as a moral cause to western spectators.¹³ This concrete engagement with values – what Aristotle calls *phronesis* (prudence) – grasps the question of ethics from the pragmatic perspective of *praxis*.¹⁴ This is the perspective that takes each particular case to be a unique enactment of ethical discourse that, even though it transcends the case, cannot exist outside the enactment of cases. Does the news text construe the misfortune of distant sufferers as a case of action – whose action or with what effects – or does it construe the scene of suffering as being of no concern to the spectators?

The nine news texts that I look into in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 tell us different stories about their sufferers and about what we can do for them. Some of them tell stories that we are bound to forget as soon as we turn away from the television set. An accident in the remote Indian state of Orissa, ambush killings in West Papua and floods in Bangladesh do not present suffering as a cause for the spectators' concern or action. Some other pieces of news tell stories that beg for, and get, our attention, even if it is momentarily. Reports on how illegal African immigrants fought the stormy Mediterranean, how starving children pay the price for Argentina's economic crisis, or the imminent death by stoning of a Nigerian mother present us with suffering as a cause for concern, if not practical action. There are those rare pieces of news also, such as the tsunami catastrophe or September 11th attacks, that linger on our television screens, with their urgent demand for engagement, and will haunt our lives with their lasting impact. In a *phronetic* spirit, I take each of these nine news texts to be, at once, a discursive event 'reporting the news' and a practical logic that reflects a specific ethical value about how important this particular sufferer is and what there is to do to about his or her suffering.

The practical perspective on ethical value is important because much social science today formulates the question of ethical value in either/or terms. In foundationalist epistemologies, ethical value is either a general rule or a universal truth, while in relativist epistemologies, it is solely embedded in particular cases without the possibility of generalization. The result is that such either/or epistemologies do not respond to the Aristotelian question of 'what is good or bad for man?'. They are particularly weak when confronted with issues of power and inequality because they cannot tell the difference between news narratives that block spectators' capacities to engage with suffering – such as the accident in India or

the floods in Bangladesh – from those that cultivate this capacity, such as the news about the Nigerian woman who has been sentenced to death by stoning. They cannot address questions of how hierarchies of human life are reproduced in the news narratives of television or how a more egalitarian representation of the ‘other’ can take place in these narratives. Foundationalism and relativism cannot, in other words, adequately serve as critical epistemologies.

The phronetic perspective, in contrast, can. This is because it avoids both types of ‘-isms’ and considers every particular action to be informed by a ‘universal’ principle of what is the right thing and the wrong thing to do. Far from being an ahistorical constant, the principle that informs particular action represents nothing more than those public values and norms that, at a particular moment in time, happen to be dominant in social life – hence their ‘universal’ status. As Flyvbjerg puts it, phronetic researchers ‘realize that our sociality and history is the only foundation we have, the only solid ground under our feet’ (2001: 130).

The critical spirit of phronetic research comes, then, from the study of how everyday news texts in television’s output mundanely enact ethical values that, ultimately, come to shape our present as a particular historical moment. In asking how news texts participate in shaping the ethical norms of the present, the phronetic perspective is fully harmonious with contemporary poststructuralist enquiry. In fact, the ‘how’ question, as Foucault poses it, not only addresses Aristotle’s concern with ‘what is good or bad for man’ but also pushes this concern further in order to find out under which conditions a particular practice may turn out to be ‘good or bad’ for a specific category of human beings. This is the focus of Foucault’s concern with power.

The term *analytics* of power – which Foucault borrows from Aristotle to distinguish his approach from a *theory* of power – aims at describing in detail the complexities of practice and discourse that place human beings in certain relationships of power to one another within a specific social field, such as the field of media and mediation.¹⁵ The ‘how’ question opens up the study of news discourse to a mode of inductive reasoning that uses the example in order to demonstrate its properties in detail and reach a new conclusion as to why this example possesses these properties and which effects of power these properties might have on people.¹⁶

How are certain scenes of suffering construed as being of no concern to Western spectators or capable of arousing the spectators’ emotions? Do visual properties – such as the absence or presence of moving images – play a role in the construal of these scenes? How can we differentiate between representations of suffering that may simply bring a tear to a spectator’s eye and those that may actually make a difference in the sufferers’ lives? Is the presence or absence of public opinion and expert deliberation in the news important in rendering distant suffering a moral cause for the media public? The question of how, in other words, engages with

news discourse in order to define the choices made that mean distant suffering is presented as worthy or unworthy of the spectators' attention.

However, the analytics of power do more than this. Rather than just seeing suffering on television as a reality of our times, connected exclusively to the technological possibilities of mediation, the analytics of power also demonstrate how news discourse draws on historical themes and genres that have come to define our collective imaginary of the 'other'. This element of historicity is important because it connects the question of how with the question as to why news discourse today shapes the ways in which we see the world via television in a fundamentally biased way. It is this element of historicity that many contemporary accounts of media and mediation lack. According to Boltanski (1999), however, the aestheticization of human pain and the portrayal of the scene of suffering as populated by benefactors or evil-doers are crucial effects of discourse that originate in Hellenic and post-Enlightenment genres of public representation. In their reappropriation by electronic media, these historical effects of discourse do not cease to operate as strategies of power but still continue to produce and reproduce hierarchies of place and human life.

In Chapter 4 I develop, as the title 'The analytics of mediation' suggests, a method of studying each news text that uses three categories inherent in the public exposition of suffering:

- *multimodality* – the properties of language and image that construe the spectacle of suffering on screen
- *space-time* – the representation of proximity/distance to the scene of suffering
- *agency* – the representation of action on the sufferer's misfortune.

Through the grid of the analytics, I identify three *regimes of pity* – that is, three distinct fields of meaning that cluster around three groups of news texts, which, as I will explain shortly, are *adventure*, *emergency* and *ecstatic news*. All the regimes of pity construe suffering as an aesthetic spectacle, but each offers the spectator a different quality of emotional and practical engagement with the distant sufferer. Hierarchical as these regimes of pity may be, they are, nevertheless, neither fixed nor immutable – they have certain conditions of possibility that can be reflexively revised and changed.

The contribution of the analytics of mediation to the debate on public norms today is that it demonstrates in a practical way the contingency of these regimes of pity, their human-made nature, and so offers us the language we need to revise them, to make them 'good for man'.

The merit of example

The idea that hierarchies of place and human life are reproduced in Western news is not new in social research. Nevertheless, no language of

description has been developed so far to show us just how specific regimes of pity are actually shaped by news discourse and how they may begin to change. This is, again, a consequence of the either/or divisions in epistemology. Just as the study of ethics as a field of knowledge hovers between foundationalist truth and relativist doubt, so, in nomothetic science, the choice of example as a methodological tool is too context-dependent to yield generalizable results or, in idiograph science, too unique and idiosyncratic to require validity.¹⁷ Against these unproductive either/ors, *phronesis* reminds us that the example bears the power of particular knowledge that always articulates with theoretical insight, with a 'universal' claim.

Phronesis, Aristotle says, produces knowledge that goes beyond the individual case, but it is not simply about 'universals'. Rather, *phronesis* 'must also take cognizance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances' (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 70).

The nine broadcasts in this book constitute, in the *phronetic* sense, a strategic group of *particular circumstances*. They consist of ordinary and extraordinary pieces of news that fall into the genres of scheduled broadcast and live footage.¹⁸ The category of live footage consists of three different extracts from the 24/7 coverage of the September 11th attacks. The scheduled news items cluster around short-duration and medium-duration pieces of news. The killings and floods in India, Indonesia and Bangladesh constitute the cluster of short pieces, whereas the rescuing of illegal African immigrants in the Mediterranean or the 'death by stoning' sentence for a Nigerian mother make up the cluster of relatively longer pieces of news.¹⁹

All the broadcasts come from European television, but as they draw on two national television networks – from Denmark and Greece – and on a global but UK-based broadcasting service, BBC World, they simultaneously reflect different national and cultural trends within Europe.²⁰ All the pieces of news, with the exception of two BBC World items, consist of moving images received via satellite and local voiceovers, which work to domesticate the satellite image to the national broadcast. The decision to include examples from BBC World news that have no moving images is not to be taken as representative of the network's broadcasting ethos but, rather, as illustrative of the possibility of a global network reporting on suffering without visualizing the scene of suffering. The BBC, in fact, regularly includes on-location reports from scenes of suffering and often accommodates the demand for action in its news stories.²¹ As a whole, these nine news items are representative of a transnational flow of instances of suffering that are subsequently articulated in various local contexts of transmission.

Important as local differences may be to understanding how news discourse works, it is not difference that I am interested in here. Rather, it is similarity that concerns me. If transnational news flows do not unify but redivide the world into hierarchies of place and human life, then the point

is to show how patterns of media discourse participate in this symbolic work of division and classification. To this end, I extend the argument that television construes the nation as an 'imagined' community by homogenizing differences internal to the nation state and, similarly, I argue that transnational news flows construe a 'beyond the nation' community by establishing a sense of a broader 'we'.²² This 'we', I assume, is the 'imagined' community of the West, which inhabits the transnational zone of safety and construes human life in the zone of suffering as the West's 'other'.

It is obvious that these examples of news discourse are not pure particulars but stand in a relationship of tension to theory. They do not claim to articulate an eternal truth nor to have 'universal' applicability, but neither are they random. They demonstrate a regularity in their features that, nationally grounded as it may be, comes to construe a broader repertoire of public identities for Western spectators vis-à-vis distant sufferers. These examples also demonstrate a systematicity in their effects, in so far as their features contribute to reproducing the Western equilibrium of viewing between zones of safety and suffering.

The three clusters of news in this study, then, constitute paradigmatic cases of research, in so far as they highlight more general characteristics of the societies they come from and, when subjected to principled analysis – the analytics of mediation – yield a redescription of the public values of these societies as ones that watch the rest of the world suffer.²³ It is on the basis of these paradigmatic clusters that I develop the typology of Western news discourse in this book as adventure, emergency and ecstatic news. Chapters 5 to 7 provide the 'thick descriptions'²⁴ of these three types of news, with adventure and ecstatic news occupying the two ends of the hierarchy of pity in this typology.

'Adventure' news, covered in Chapter 5, is news of suffering without pity – for example the instances of news from India, Bangladesh and Indonesia. The lack of pity in these news texts is related to the fact that they consist of only short reports accompanied by maps – a very simple multimodality. This leads to singular space-times, which maximize the distance between spectator and the scene of suffering, and a void of agency – that is, the absence of benefactors or persecutors acting in the scene of suffering. As a consequence of these features, the sufferer of adventure news is an Other, with a capital 'o': there is no possibility of human contact between the other and the spectator.

'Emergency' news, the focus of Chapter 6, is news of suffering with pity – the news about the illegal African immigrants, Argentinean famine victims and a Nigerian woman falling into this category. The presence of pity as emergency in these pieces of news is related to their multimodal texts, which articulate image and language in various forms of aesthetic realism. This means that the space-time dimensions of these news pieces also become progressively complicated and their agency options involve

the spectator in increasing possibilities of action on the suffering. The sufferers of emergency news, then, may still be 'others' but now lie within the spectators' horizons of relevance and their capacity to act.

'Ecstatic' news, the subject of Chapter 7, is news such as that of the September 11th attacks, where the politics of pity is played out in a multimodal text with incredible complexities and representational possibilities. As a consequence, each of the three news stories explored in this chapter entails its own distinct aesthetic qualities – sentimental empathy, political denunciation and reflexive contemplation – but the space–time and agency possibilities in each extract bring the United States' sufferers as close to the European spectators as possible. The 'we are all Americans' headline (front page of *Le Monde*, 12 September 2001) is an act of identification made possible by the fact that these attacks were mediated as attacks in what is normally a zone of safety.

The concept of the 'public'

In begging the question of how the spectacle of suffering reaches our living rooms, phronesis also takes the relationship between spectator and sufferer as the paradigmatic relationship by means of which our public values are instantiated. Around these two figures, the description of news discourse becomes, at the same time, a description of acts of identity. The spectators of the news are themselves part of the news narrative, in so far as it puts spectators in the position of voyeurs of the pain of the 'other', philanthropists or activists who exercise some form of effective speech vis-à-vis the suffering they watch. Similarly, sufferers enter the news narrative in various forms of identity, ranging from a number without further specification to a human being almost like 'us'.

It is these acts of identity, engaging the spectators and sufferers in various relationships of proximity and agency to one another, that ultimately construe some sufferings as being worthy of our pity and others as unworthy of it. The concept of regimes of pity suggests, then, that spectators do not possess 'pure' emotions vis-à-vis the sufferers, but their emotions are, in fact, shaped by the values embedded in news narratives about who the 'others' are and how we should relate to them. Pity, by this token, is not a natural sentiment of love and care but a socially constructed disposition to feeling that, in Boltanski's words, aims to produce 'a generalized concern for the "other"' (1999: xx).²⁵

By this token, the concept of the public is not a 'pure' concept that pre-exists our stories and narratives of it. This is because scientific discourse, just like media discourse, is implicated in the process of creating the public at the moment of referring to it – either by numerical evidence or ethnographic stories. Deciding to conceptualize the public as national or transnational and political or cultural, is a matter of perspective as well as

historical reality.²⁶ In this sense, every research perspective chosen is, at once, a bias against the study of certain aspects of the historical world and a privileging of the study of others. To put it in Aristotle's terminology, every particular choice of research brings with it its own 'universal' of theoretical context and explanation. Inevitably, which news texts are chosen as examples of a Western discourse on suffering may reduce the value of differences across national news that play on the formation of a cosmopolitan public.²⁷ However, at the same time, what has been chosen gives us access to the symbolic conditions of cosmopolitan identity in the Western world as the moral mechanism of pity.

In this respect, the category of 'nation' in comparative research is less relevant when the focus of study is similarity, as is the case here, rather than difference. As Hannertz claims, even if the nation has been, in the past, a major resource for cultural resonance, the question today is whether or not we are being confronted with alternative resources that construe 'beyond the nation' modes of resonance and homogenize new configurations of people: 'How does the "new supranational restructuring" affect the generation and distribution of cultural resonance in the world?' (Hannertz, 1996: 83).

If we take this question seriously, which I believe we should, we also need to take into account that a new collective resonance – the 'we' of a transnational spectatorship, particular as it may appear on national television – maps itself on to a more general repertoire of existing public identities across Western societies.

The crisis of pity today, I would strongly argue, is inextricably linked with the history of Western public life and, specifically, with the narrow repertoire of participatory positions that this public life makes available for the ordinary citizen.²⁸ As we shall see, the spectator of ordinary television news can be, at worst, an indifferent listener of distant suffering and, at best, a potential activist, subtly encouraged to relate to the cause of the suffering. It is this relatively weak potential for public identifications in Western media that raises the key question of how transnational flows of visibility actually cultivate a 'beyond the nation' cultural resonance among Western audiences.

We need, therefore, to see the 'public' not as an empirical entity, corresponding to linguistically homogeneous populations or national borders, but, primarily, as a symbolic act of cultural identity. As Warner argues, 'When we understand images and texts as public, we do not gesture to a statistically measurable series of others, we make a necessarily imaginary reference to the public as opposed to other individuals' (1993: xviii).²⁹ This study makes its 'imaginary reference to the public' in the textual practices of news, which, in telling stories about the suffering 'other', always carve their own sense of 'we' out of a collection of watching individuals. The phronetic assumption here is that the ethical values of our public life become more amenable to critical evaluation when we

study how the humanity of the sufferer emerges in the subtleties of image and fleeting wordings of voiceovers rather than when we look for the universal pragmatics of television. Far from implying that theories of the public sphere, such as Habermas's that the media are responsible for its 'refederalization', are not useful in the debate on public action, my point is this: we may better understand the conditions for ethical reflexivity in our societies if we turn our analytical attention away from the abstract rationalities of the public sphere and towards how television shapes the norms of the present by means of staging our relationship to the far away 'other'.

If my conception of public life is closer to Arendt's and Sennett's than Habermas's, this is because I take aesthetic spectacle, private emotion and public action to be constitutive elements of contemporary sociality, that are always already articulated with one another in situated practices but need to be tactically separated in order to be analysed.³⁰ Talking about public identity and cosmopolitanism in analytical rather than 'grand' theoretical language has an impact on our current conceptions of the 'paradoxes' of mediation. These 'paradoxes' cease to be seen as static impossibilities of modernity and become instead creative tensions of the present that always find a temporary resolution in contexts of situated practice.

In Chapters 8 and 9 – 'Mediation and action' and 'The cosmopolitan public' – I address some of these creative tensions of the present. I argue that cosmopolitanism today cannot be associated with physical proximity, embodied action or virtuous character. All of these are attributes of a public life that thrives on copresence, the Athenian polis, and must no longer haunt our political and cultural imaginaries. Under conditions of mediation, we should think of cosmopolitanism as a generalized sensibility that acts on suffering without controlling the outcomes or experiencing the effects of such action. Cosmopolitanism is now more than ever a radically undecidable regime of emotion and action. Yet, cosmopolitanism is possible.

The symbolic conditions for cosmopolitanism lie, first and foremost, in a break with the current politics of pity on television. This is because pity produces narcissistic emotions about the suffering 'other' that cannot move the spectator beyond the reflex of caring only for those like 'us'. Instead of global care, therefore, pity produces a form of global intimacy.³¹ The emphasis on pity and emotion, I propose, should be combined with an emphasis on detached reflection, on the question of why *this* suffering is important and what we can do about it.

This is difficult.³² We live in a society where our own private feelings are the measure against which we perceive and evaluate the world and others.³³ The media reflect this. They are almost obsessively preoccupied with our 'interiorities' – our intimate relationships, fears and desires, homes, bodies and appearance. Reality television is one obvious manifestation of a

public culture that takes intense narcissistic pleasure in staging the private for all to see. The news genre, formal and detached from emotion as it often appears to be, becomes part of this culture of intimacy in so far as it, implicitly, reserves the potential for us to pity 'our' own suffering and leaves the far away 'other' outside our horizon of care and responsibility. In contrast to this, public discourse that combines the emotionality of pity with the concern for justice comes to remind spectators of this simple fact: our actions may be more relevant and effective when they are orientated towards those whose human needs have been neglected precisely because they do not share 'our' own humanity, rather than towards others like 'us'.³⁴

It is controversial to be normative about the public ethos that television should promote, but it is necessary. In so far as the world is divided by the radical asymmetry of distant sufferers and the spectators who watch them, the question of 'what is good or bad for man' is still dramatically timely. At the same time, normative is not the same as prescriptive. As Aristotle reminds us, the 'what should be' already lies in 'what there is'. It is thus in the particulars of existing media discourse that the 'universal' ethos of cosmopolitanism already resides.

Let us recall the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's, explanation of the international response to the Asian tsunami disaster: global visibility and global relevance. Indeed, if this response teaches us anything, it is not that the global public exists somewhere out there ready to show its willingness to act. Rather, it shows us that who we care for is a matter of whether or not their suffering is presented as relevant and worthy of our response.

It is, no doubt, good to celebrate global unity when it makes its rare appearances, but it is more useful to examine how and why the sufferings we watch almost always evoke pity for those like 'us'. In this critical examination, we may find a way of being public that avoids the narcissistic emotion of modern humanism, but does not abandon respect for the irreducible value of every human life.

Notes

- 1 Kofi Annan interview, BBC World, 9 January 2005.
- 2 I draw on a broad definition of cosmopolitanism as 'an orientation, a willingness to relate with the Other' (Hannertz, 1996: 103) that I subsequently elaborate on, in the contexts of social and political theory. See Tomlinson (1999) for a comprehensive discussion of the concept of cosmopolitanism in social theory of the media and Archibugi (2003) for a political theory approach to cosmopolitanism.
- 3 Notably Habermas (1989), Alexander and Jakobs (1998), Keane (1991), Dahlgren (1995).
- 4 See Schudson (1982), Silverstone (1984, 1999), Scannel (1991), Bondebjerg (2000, 2002), Schroeder (2002) for a similar argument from a media studies

- perspective; Fowler (1991), Bell (1991), Fairclough (1995), Wodak (1996), Scollon (1998) for similar arguments from a critical discourse analysis perspective; Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), van Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001) who write from a visual semiotics perspective.
- 5 If the political economy of the media highlights how the concentration of power in specific media networks privileges the selection and presentation of news, media institutionalism highlights the complicated transformations of public service broadcasting by market forces. Both perspectives, covering a vast literature, capture crucial components of the constitution of the present as an economic, political and institutional reality that shapes both global flows and local news. For overviews, see Hjarvard (2002: 91–7). See also Golding and Murdoch (1991), Thussu (2000), Volkmer (1999, 2002).
 - 6 Livingstone and van Belle (2005), Livingstone and Bennett (2003), and Higgins (1999) for research on the impact of breaking news that shows novel technologies of transmission, such as mobile satellite uplinks, mobile phones and the Internet, have indeed increased the number of reports on distant suffering on US television. Yet, the question remains, does this lead to an increase in spectators' sense of responsibility and care for distant sufferers?
 - 7 Notably, Castells (1996, 1997), Bauman (1998), also Appadurai (1996), Featherstone (1990), Hannertz (1996), Morley and Robins (1995).
 - 8 See Hall (1996: 1–17; 1997: 223–90) on the concept of difference and the 'other', Calhoun (1995: 231–82) on difference and national identity, Silverstone (1999) and Butler (2004) in relation to media and the 'other'.
 - 9 See Said (1978) and, among others, Bhabha (1983, 1994), Hannertz (1996), Bauman (1996), Morley (2000).
 - 10 See Derrida and Stiegler (2002) among others.
 - 11 See Silverstone (2004b: 440–9) and Peters (1999) for this critical point.
 - 12 See Silverstone (1999) for the concepts of *annihilation*, Peters (1999) for the use of Adorno's term *pathic projection*, Butler (2004) for the concept of *radical exclusion*. All these terms refer to the reduction of the humanness of the 'other' in the media.
 - 13 See Aristotle (1976), *The Nicomachean Ethics* 1140a24–1140b12, 1144b33–1145a11.
 - 14 See Flyvbjerg (2001: 110–28) for a powerful appropriation of Aristotle's work in poststructuralist epistemology and Ross (1995: 31–49) for Aristotle's inductive methods and analytics.
 - 15 See Foucault (1980: 199), Flyvbjerg (2001: 131–8).
 - 16 See Ross (1923/1995: 52–4) for Aristotle's *demonstration* and *definition* in scientific enquiry.
 - 17 See Bourdieu (1990) and Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) on the distinction between nomothetic and idiographic science, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999: 29–36) for further criticisms of this duality and Laclau (1996) for the productive overcoming of the duality by means of the concepts of the *universal* and the *particular*.
 - 18 This is the strategy of *maximum variation* in the selection of the material (Flyvbjerg 2001: 79–81). Maximum variation makes it possible to identify two extreme ends in the news narratives on suffering – namely, a group of news pieces that say very little about an instance of suffering and the rare piece of news that replaces the programme flow with live footage from the scene of action. By this token, the *maximum variation strategy* also makes possible the delineation of a middle space occupied by pieces of news that establish some form of connectivity with the distant sufferer while avoiding the minimalism

and maximalism of the other two categories. In turn, these three positions – the two extremes and the middle one – make possible the construction of a news *typology* – that is, a grid of three classes of news that differ from one another in terms of how they employ the categories of multimodality, spacetime and agency in order to stage the spectacle of distant suffering on our television screens.

- 19 This is the strategy of *critical cases* in the selection of the material (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 79–81). The critical case – here defined in terms of news piece duration – makes it possible to study how differences in the length of the news piece have an impact on the staging of suffering and, hence, on the representation of the spectator–sufferer relationship in each news narrative. In this respect, each group of news pieces that clusters around similar-length variations constitutes a *critical case* in this study, with each case illustrating a particular regime of pity in the hierarchical typology of news.
- 20 As well as reflecting diversity across media cultures, the decision as to which networks were chosen was further informed by the claim that the study of discourse requires a solid linguistic and cultural background for the texts under study. As a Greek who has lived long in Britain and now lives in Denmark, I am able to bring to the analysis of each example that intimate knowledge of culture and language deemed crucial in intensive qualitative research (Barry, 2001: 22–3; Flyvbjerg, 2001: 81–7; Fairclough, 1992).
- 21 Gowing (2004), BBC Worlds main presenter and news analyst, makes a strong case for the study of how the changing technological conditions of remote disaster broadcasting bear on today's information landscape – including the conditions of journalistic work and military action in danger zones. Gowing argues for the need to identify the ethical, political and practical implications of the new 'real time tensions' that arise because the instantaneous transmission of information by anyone anywhere makes today's reports on distant events more frequent and intense than ever before.
- 22 See Anderson (1983), Giddens (1990, 1991), Hannertz (1996). For media studies, see Schlesinger (1991), Carey (1998) and Dayan (1998).
- 23 See Flyvbjerg (2001: 80–1).
- 24 See Geertz (1973: 6).
- 25 See Nussbaum (2001: 297–400) for a powerful argument on the relationship between emotion and public deliberation and (2001: 401–54) for compassion and the good of public life. See also Gilligan (1993) for the connection between emotion and the gender bias in social action and Tester (2001: 66–71) for the relevance of Gilligan's position on the relationship between emotion and humanitarian action.
- 26 See Hannertz (1996), Beck (2002), and Ekecrantz (in press), among others, for reservations about the category 'nation' as the key criterion in the study of the media on the grounds that global processes gradually erode the distinctiveness of the nation as a solid point of departure for comparisons. Such reservations, Ekecrantz claims, should be used as a tool for methodological reflection rather than as a cause for ignoring the 'nation' in comparisons of differences across media cultures. As I argue below, the use of 'nation' is more relevant when research focuses on difference and less so when it focuses on similarity across media cultures.
- 27 For example, public identity may be enacted differently in national cultures where care for the 'other' is institutionalized and incorporated into state

governance as 'foreign aid' and in national cultures where there are no institutionalized agencies or ministries to organize humanitarian action. For a discussion of the systematic correlations between national political cultures and foreign aid policy see Noel and Therien (1995).

- 28 See Boltanski (1999: 170–92) for a similar argument.
- 29 This perspective informed my use of examples in the typology of news in Chapters 5–7. It is not according to the criterion of the 'nation', but that of the 'most illustrative example' that meant I eventually selected the cases I did out of a rich body of empirical material. If adventure news consists of two BBC World pieces and one Greek television one, this is because my purpose is to talk about key features in the semiotic make-up of this class of news and these examples illustrate these best, not to point to obvious national media differences. Similarly, if ecstatic news consists of Danish television's footage of the September 11th attacks, this is in order to study in detail the alternation of radically different regimes of pity in the live flow, which constantly engages the spectator of this footage with various emotions and dispositions to action – hence the term 'ecstatic' for this class of news. Finally, in emergency news, my intention is to show that the demand for action on distant suffering may take different forms, creating an internal hierarchy of pity within this class of news. The demand for action is a historical-generic feature of the public representation of suffering that cuts across emergency pieces of news from all three media contexts under study. Yet, the examples from Greek television fit my purpose best as they progressively propel the argument away from news that engages spectators in the position of voyeur of sufferers' misfortunes towards news that invites them to join an Amnesty International protest. I, elsewhere, discuss in detail the demand for action in BBC and DR news (Chouliaraki, 2005b; forthcoming).
- 30 See Barnett (2003: 60–80) on the distinction between 'cultural' and 'political' publics and Robins (1994: vii–xxvi) for a useful discussion of distinct models of public life along the lines that I argue here. For the distinction with respect to the media, see Alexander and Jakobs (1998) Schudson (1992) and Scannel (1989).
- 31 Grisprud (1992: 89) formulates this pervasive tendency when he claims that 'what the world [news] is really about, is *emotions*, fundamental and strong: love, hate, grief, joy, lust, disgust [...]. If the world looks incomprehensibly chaotic, it is only on the surface. Underneath, it's the same old story.'
- 32 See Morley (1998: 136–56) in his, tellingly entitled, 'Finding out about the world from television news. Some difficulties.'
- 33 See Sennett (1974/1992).
- 34 See Silverstone (1999: 135–6; 2004a and b: 776–7), Peters (1999: 230) and Cohen (2001: 168–73).

1

MEDIATION AND PUBLIC LIFE

Confronting Western spectators with distant suffering is often regarded as the very essence of the power of television. This is the power to make spectators witnesses of human pain by bringing home disturbing images and experiences from faraway places. The spectators see and hear about children dying in the refugee camps of the Sudan, the school siege of Beslan or the streets of Gaza, Baghdad and Kabul. 'You cannot say you didn't know': this is television's mode of address to spectators safely watching the news in their own living rooms.¹ No, we cannot say we didn't know, but can we *act* on what we now know? What are we supposed to do with our knowledge of suffering? This tension between a knowing yet incapable witness at a distance is the most profound moral demand that television makes on Western spectators today.

This demand also places television's role as an agent of ethical responsibility at the centre of current debates in media and social theory. The ethical role of television is indeed a controversial matter. On the one hand, there is optimism. The sheer exposure to the suffering of the world, which television has made possible to an unprecedented degree, brings about a new sensibility. It brings about an awareness and a responsibility towards the world 'out there' that has previously been impossible to create. On the other hand, there is pessimism.² The overexposure to human suffering has unaestheticizing, numbing effects. Rather than cultivating a sensibility, the spectacle of suffering becomes domesticated by the experience of watching it on television. As 'yet another spectacle' too, suffering is met with indifference or discomfort, with viewers switching off or zapping to another channel. Ultimately, the debate is polarized into ungrounded optimism – spectators' involvement in distant suffering *is* possible – and unnecessary pessimism – this involvement is, *de facto*, *impossible*.

I now take as my point of departure for this debate on media and social theory a discussion of the two competing narratives on the ethical role of television in social life – the optimistic and pessimistic ones. The main concept in this debate is mediation. The question is how we can study mediation as a public-political process, a process that sets up norms of public conduct and shapes the spectator as a citizen of the world. My own argument is that the potential of mediation to cultivate a cosmopolitan sensibility is neither *de facto* possible nor *a priori* impossible – it has its

own historical and social conditions of possibility. In order to investigate these conditions, I propose to investigate empirically how television creates sentiments of pity in its news reports on human suffering.

I approach the notion of pity not as the natural sentiment of human empathy but, rather, as a sociological category that is constituted in discourse. Pity is a product of the manner in which television signifies the relationship between spectators and distant sufferers. Pity, therefore, draws attention to the meaning-making operations by means of which sufferers are strategically, though not necessarily consciously, constituted so as to engage spectators in multiple forms of emotion and dispositions to action. 'In order to generalize', Boltanski writes, 'pity becomes eloquent, recognizing and discovering itself as emotion and feeling' (1999: 6). As the discursive mechanism that establishes a generalized concern for the 'other', pity is central to contemporary conceptions of Western public life and indispensable to the constitution of modern democratic societies.³

I propose two particular dimensions of the spectator-sufferer relationship that enable us to analyse the 'eloquence' of pity, its production in meaning. These are the dimensions of *proximity-distance* and *watching-acting*. How close or how far away are spectators placed vis-à-vis sufferers? How are spectators 'imagined' as reacting vis-à-vis sufferers' misfortunes – look at it, feel for it, act on it?

Using these questions to investigate the ethical impact of mediation helps us break with dominant perspectives on how television should or should not moralize the spectator and allows us to examine how television actually produces its own ethical norms and standards for public conduct. The research practice I am exercising is *phronesis* – an Aristotelian practice that approaches ethics as the situated enactment of values, rather than abstract principles of conduct.

Mediation

The concept of mediation is often defined in relation to its ethical implications – that is, in relation to the capacity of the media to involve us emotionally and culturally with distant 'others'. Tomlinson (1999: 154) provides two distinct definitions of mediation, the combination of which highlights the ethical underpinnings of the concept. In the first definition, mediation is about 'overcoming distance in communication'. As such, it is responsible for the deep cultural transformations of our times. Mediation is responsible for deterritorialization, the overcoming of geographical distance, as well as the compression of space and time and the real-time witnessing of faraway events. Mediation, in this definition, is not only about overcoming geographical distance, but also 'the closing of moral distance' between people who live far away from one another.

At the same time, wishing to avoid a naive determinism that celebrates mediation as the happy bringing together of the world, Tomlinson also cares to emphasize the role that the medium plays in closing the distance between disparate locales. His second definition of mediation, then, is about the act of 'passing through the medium'. This definition draws attention to the fact that everything we watch on screen is subject to the interventions of technology and the semiotic modes that the technology of the medium puts to use. Satellite transmission, strategies of camera work, television's narratives and genres are some of the techno-semiotic affordances of television that affect the manner in which the closing of the distance between spectator and spectacle occurs.⁴

These two definitions of mediation – concerning distance and the medium – are brought together because they serve the ultimate purpose, or the *telos*, of mediation. To connect:

one way of thinking about the development of modern media and communication technologies is as the constant attempt to deliver the promise of the first definition [closing distance, LC] by reducing the problems of the second [refining the medium, LC].

(Tomlinson, 1999: 155)

Tomlinson provides us with a teleology of mediation – a story of progress constantly striving for connectivity. How can the promise of connectivity between places and people be fulfilled? For Tomlinson, mediation connects us by delivering immediacy – one that is qualitatively distinct from face-to-face interaction. Specifically, mediation is about putting *technical* immediacy – the high fidelity of transmission – at the service of *socio-cultural* immediacy – the sense of copresence with faraway others. The ethical capacity of mediation rests on immediacy as a certain sense of togetherness or 'modality of connectivity' in Tomlinson's words (1999: 157).

Let us take an example. The European spectator is, in theory, unable to share the same emotional and cultural experience as a Nigerian woman who has been given a death sentence under the sharia law (the case of Amina Lawal in summer 2002). Yet, television's shocking images of collective violence, showing street scenes of an African woman being mobbed by an enraged crowd of men, facilitate *modal* imagination. Modal imagination is the ability of spectators to imagine something that they have not experienced themselves as being possible for others to experience. It is not simply impossible or unreal.⁵ This may sound simple, yet the capacity of television to mediate events from far away as possible and thus factual rather than render them imaginary and fictional is, as we shall see, highly debatable. For now, let me insist that the visual immediacy of such television scenes makes it possible for spectators to perform an 'as if' operation. Instead of orientating spectators towards the news on