Post-humanitarianism : Humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity

Lilie Chouliaraki

Published by:

SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *International Journal of Cultural Studies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://ics.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://ics.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://ics.sagepub.com/content/13/2/107.refs.html

>> Version of Record - Mar 17, 2010

What is This?

Post-humanitarianism
Humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity

● Lilie Chouliaraki

London School of Economics and Political Science, England

ABSTRACT ● This article offers a trajectory of humanitarian communication, which suggests a clear, though not linear, move from emotion-oriented to post-emotional styles of appealing. Drawing on empirical examples, the article demonstrates that the humanitarian sensibility that arises out of these emerging styles breaks with pity and privileges a short-term and low-intensity form of agency, which is no longer inspired by an intellectual agenda but momentarily engages us in practices of playful consumerism. Whereas this move to the post-emotional should be seen as a reaction to a much-criticized articulation between politics and humanitarianism, which relied on 'universal' morality and grand emotion, it is also a response to the intensely mediatized global market in which humanitarian agencies operate today. The article concludes by reflecting on the political and ethical ambivalence at the heart of this new style of humanitarian communication, which offers both the tentative promise of new practices of altruism and the threat of cultural narcissism. ●

KEYWORDS ● communication ● ethics ● multi-modal analysis ● politics of pity ● post-humanitarianism ● public realm

Humanitarian communication seems to be under a constant threat of de-legitimization. From the early 'shock effect' images denounced for dehumanizing the sufferer (Benthall, 1993; Lissner, 1979) to 'positive imagery' campaigns accused of glossing over the misery of suffering (Lidchi, 1999; Smillie, 1995) to the more recent critiques of the commodification of solidarity (Nash, 2008; Vestergaard, 2008), no manner of representing distant others as a cause of public action seems to do justice to the moral claim of suffering.

107

In this article, I approach humanitarian communication as the rhetorical practices of transnational actors that engage with universal ethical claims, such as common humanity or global civil society, to mobilize action on human suffering. Focusing on the trajectory from 'shock effect' to 'humanitarian branding' appeals, I show how each style of appealing represents suffering as a cause for emotion and action, and how, in so doing, it proposes distinct forms of public agency towards vulnerable others. My argument suggests a clear, though not linear, move from emotion-oriented to post-humanitarian styles of appealing that tend to privilege low-intensity emotions and short-term forms of agency. This shift, I argue, should be seen as a contemporary attempt to renew the legitimacy of humanitarian communication – one that abandons universal morality and draws on the resources of the media market in which humanitarian organizations operate today (Cottle and Nolan, 2007).

The crisis of pity

Boltanski (2000: 1–6) approaches the question of de-legitimization not simply as a problem of humanitarian communication but as a problem in the very relationship between humanitarianism and politics. He sees the problem as a consequence of the tactical use of humanitarian argument in the service of political interest that often discredits the appeal to suffering as a universal moral cause. For my purposes, his argument is helpful not so much as a critique of contemporary global politics but as an analytical insight into the very nature of the political.

Contemporary Western politics, founded as it is on an Enlightenment discourse of the public good, draws its legitimacy not simply from its adherence to principles of democratic governance but also from its adherence to a universal conception of welfare; from the articulation of justice with pity. Whereas this moral emphasis on pity has enabled, partially but significantly, the alleviation of suffering among large populations in modern times, it has simultaneously established a dominant discourse about public action that relies heavily on the language of grand emotions about suffering – a reliance that, in Arendt's famous critique, displaces politics into the 'social question'; it displaces the long-term concern with establishing structures of justice with the urgent concern for doing something for those who suffer (1990 [1963]: 59–114).

What Boltanksi calls the 'crisis of pity', therefore, can be understood broadly today as the crisis of a particular conception of politics, where the justification of public action in the name of universal ethics takes place by resort to an emotion-oriented discourse of suffering: a language of indignation or guilt that blames the perpetrators, examples ranging from peaceful civil protests to military state interventions, or the language of sentimental gratitude that evokes appreciation for the benefactors, as in disaster relief or development aid initiatives (Boltanski, 1999: 35–54).

The inadequacy of this conception of the political, I would argue, cannot be solely understood as an inadequacy of political practice, that is as the failure of global institutions to address injustice or alleviate suffering; on the contrary, despite criticisms, humanitarian NGOs continue to be an important part of global governance structures and to nourish the moral imagination of the West (Calhoun, 2008: 73–97). Instead, the inadequacy of this conception of the political can be understood, at least partly, as an inadequacy of the discourse of pity. Specifically, it can be understood as the inadequacy of this discourse to activate grand emotions, such as indignation and guilt or sympathy and gratitude, and so to sustain a legitimate claim for public action on suffering:

> Why is it so difficult nowadays to become indignant and to make accusations or, in another sense, to become emotional and feel sympathy – or at least to believe for any length of time, without falling into uncertainty, in the validity of one's own indignation or one's own sympathy? (Boltanksi, 2000: 12)

In this article, I approach humanitarian communication as a mode of public communication that both reflects and reproduces the inadequacy of this conception of the political, insofar as it aims at establishing a strategic emotional relationship between a Westerner and a distant sufferer with a view to propose certain dispositions to action towards a cause.

My argument develops as follows. In the next section, 'Critiques of humanitarian communication', I discuss the scepticism towards the 'shock effect' and 'positive image' campaigns as a critique of grand emotions resulting in a reflexive turn in humanitarian communication. Second, in the section 'An emerging style of humanitarian communication', I turn to an analytical discussion of three contemporary appeals (by Amnesty International and the UN World Food Programme, 2006–7) in terms of aesthetic quality and moral agency.[1] My discussion in the section 'Towards a post-humanitarian sensibility' illustrates an emerging style of appealing that, though not fully replacing emotion-oriented styles, breaks with pity in favour of a potentially effective activism of effortless immediacy; in so doing, it abandons the appeal to suffering as a universal moral cause and challenges the relationship between humanitarianism and politics as we know it so far.

Critiques of humanitarian communication

The history of humanitarian communication can be productively recounted as a history of the critique of its aesthetics of suffering. Specifically, it can be seen as a critique of the social relationships that the imagery of suffering establishes in the course of proposing a certain emotional connectivity between spectator and sufferer. Two types of critique prevail in this account: a critique of the emotions of guilt and indignation that are associated with the 'shock' aesthetics of early campaigns, and a critique of the emotions of empathy and gratitude that are associated with the aesthetics of 'positive

image' campaigns (Dogra, 2007). Both critiques acknowledge that the aesthetics of suffering is catalytic in moving the spectator to action, but challenge the ethical discourse that underpins emotional motivations to action in each type of appeal.

My discussion of these critiques relies on the assumption that studying humanitarian communication in terms of its aesthetic properties, that is in terms of the ways in which it uses imagery to establish emotional connectivity between spectator and sufferer, can provide insights into the moral proposals for action that this form of communication makes possible in our culture. Drawing on a view of humanitarian communication as performative, enacting paradigmatic forms of feeling and acting towards suffering, this analytical approach assumes that such communication does not simply address the public as a pre-existing collectivity that awaits to engage in action but that it has the power to constitute this collectivity as a body of action in the process of visualizing and narrating its cause (Boltanski, 1999: 35–54).

Far from implying that publics become what campaigns intend them to become in a deterministic manner, the performative view emphasizes the role of humanitarian communication as 'moral education': as a series of subtle proposals as to how we should feel and act towards suffering, which are introduced into our everyday life by mundane acts of mediation (television, the Internet or urban advertising) and shape our longer-term dispositions to action by way of 'habituation' (Chouliaraki, 2008: 831–47). Let me now discuss the two types of appeals, 'shock effect' and 'positive image'.

'Shock effect' appeals

Early examples of humanitarian communication, including the paradigmatic campaigns of Oxfam 1956 and Red Cross 1961, rely on a documentary mode of representing suffering in its plain reality.[2] Oxfam's 1956 mother–child visual complex constitutes the classic imagery of the 'ideal victim' (Hojer, 2004). The lack of eye contact suggests that the mother is unaware of being caught in camera, yet the picture is focalized on her arm reaching out to an imaginary benefactor in a plea for help, whereas the apprehensive urgency in her emaciated face testifies to the despair of her condition.[3] The Red Cross 1961 campaign also relies on raw realism to depict human bodies in an extreme state of starvation. This image is a composition of people devoid of individualizing features – biological, such as their age and sex, or social, such as clothing. They are half-naked, exposing emaciated rib cases, arms and legs. Captured on camera, these body parts, passively sitting in a row as they are, become fetishized: they do not reflect real human bodies but curiosities of the flesh that mobilize a pornographic spectatorial imagination between disgust and desire.

Both campaigns are 'victim-oriented': they focus on the distant sufferer as the object of our contemplation. In so doing, they establish a social relationship anchored on the colonial gaze and premised on maximal distance between spectator and suffering other (Hall, 2001 [1992]: 275–310; Silverstone, 2006: 118–23). This social relationship of distance, produced

by the contrast between the bare life of these sufferers and the civility of healthy bodies in the West, is associated with the affective regime of 'guilt, shame and indignation' (adapted from Cohen, 2001: 214). Thrown into relief by the circulation of 'shock effect' images in contexts of affluence and safety, social distance operates as a moralizing force through a logic of complicity (Douzinas, 2000: 153–4). On the one hand, complicity evokes the legacy of the colonial past of the West and, with it, the European responsibility in systematically disfranchising distant others through imperial rule – a sense of historical complicity that figures in the consciousness of Westerners as a sentiment of collective guilt (Le Sueur and Bourdieu, 2001: 148–84). On the other hand, complicity renders the spectator a witness of the horrors of suffering and, in so doing, makes of our inaction a personal failure to take responsibility for their misfortune – a sense of everyday or banal complicity in distant suffering that taps into feelings of shame (See Ahmed, 2004: 105, for the guilt-shame distinction).

This logic of complicity is a primary source of emotion in 'shock effect' communication: failure to act is failure to acknowledge our historical and personal participation in perpetuating human suffering. Guilt and shame, however, pivotal emotions as they may be in this type of imagery, do not exhaust the communicative reservoir of 'shock effect' appeals. In its most powerful manifestation, complicity transforms these emotions, often regarded as introverted modes of feeling towards suffering, into the more extrovert and assertive emotion of indignation. Here, the social relations of complicity become political: they are externalized from the individual to society (Boltanksi, 1999: 61–3). Consequently, the figure of the persecutor is objectified in the form of unequal structures of power and action is linked to the imperative of social justice: 'outrage into action' is Amnesty International's campaign slogan during the early 1990s.

There is, however, an inherent tension in forms of communication that rely on complicity. In evoking guilt, shame or even indignation, 'shock effect' appeals seek to turn grand emotions into action, by, at least partly, identifying the figure of the persecutor in the very audiences they address as potential benefactors – aren't we, after all, part of this Western legacy, participating in the systemic inertia that reproduces the power relations between West and the rest? Guilt and indignation, in this sense, inform an ambivalent form of moral agency that both presupposes the Western spectator's complicity in world poverty, collectively and individually, and at the same time enacts this complicity in the power relations that it seeks to expose and redress (Hattori, 2003b: 164–5). The critique of distance, which the 'shock effect' imagery establishes between those who watch and those who suffer, captures precisely this ambivalence that makes the West the benefactor of a world that it itself manages symbolically to annihilate (Silverstone, 2007: 47–8).

The popular resistance to 'shock effect' imagery, known as compassion fatigue, or the 'I've seen this before' syndrome (Moeller, 1999:2), may not directly draw on this theoretical critique of emotions, but it does reflect it in the form of two more pragmatic risks: the 'bystander' effect and the

'boomerang' effect. The former risk refers to people's indifference to acting on suffering as a reaction to negative emotion that ultimately leaves people feeling powerless; as Cohen puts it: 'a sense of the situation so utterly hopeless and incomprehensible that we cannot bear to think about it' (2001: 194). The latter risk refers to people's indignation not towards the imagined evil-doer but towards the guilt-tripping message of the 'shock effect' campaigns themselves – 'for bombarding you with material that only makes you feel miserable and guilty' (Cohen, 2001: 214). Rather than facilitating the call to public action on suffering, these risks may ultimately undermine it.

'Positive image' appeals

Developing in a responsive relationship to 'shock effect' campaigns, 'positive image' ones also rely on photorealism to represent the reality of suffering.[4] The difference is that these campaigns reject the imagery of the sufferer as a victim and focus on the sufferer's agency and dignity. This is evident in Oxfam and Save the Children campaign imagery[5] which sums up two key characteristics of the 'positive image' style: (1) it personalizes sufferers by focalizing the appeal on distinct individuals as actors (for example, as participants in development projects) and (2) it singularizes donors by addressing each one as a person who can make a concrete contribution to improve a sufferer's life (for example, through child sponsorship).[6] It is the presence of the benefactor, rather than the implied persecutor, which is instrumental in summoning up the emotional regime of 'empathy, tenderheartedness and gratitude' in 'positive image' appeals (adapted from Cohen, 2001: 216–18).

Rather than complicity, the moralizing function of this affective regime relies on the 'sympathetic equilibrium', a logic of representation that orients the appeal towards a responsive balance of emotions between the sufferer and the spectator as potential benefactor (Boltanski, 1999: 39). Specifically, the sympathetic equilibrium is established through the ways in which the imagery of suffering provides subtle evidence of the sufferer's gratitude for the (imagined) alleviation of her suffering by a benefactor and the benefactor's respective empathy towards the grateful sufferer.

On the one hand, the personalization of the sufferer (in the photos of smiling children, in the sentimental texts of child sponsorship or in the eyewitness accounts of aid workers) articulates such a sense of fine-tuning between the donor and the receiver of aid. This use of bilateral emotion not only empowers the sufferer, giving her a voice, but further animates the donor's 'modal imagination': our capacity to acknowledge in the suffering other a shared quality of humanity absent in 'shock effect' appeals. On the other hand, the singularization of the donor as an individual who can make a difference in a practical way similarly seeks to empower audiences by showing how our actions may lead to change.

The representational practices of 'positive image' appeals, in this sense, address the evils of 'shock effect' appeals: people's sense of powerlessness towards distant suffering (the bystander effect) and people's resistance to the negativity of campaigns themselves (the boomerang effect). Importantly, however, these representational practices are also closely articulated with the new spirit of interventionism in the humanitarian project, which goes beyond relief and aspires to transform the economic and political structures that can support a better life for vulnerable others. Imagery and the vision it informs are thus inseparable parts of this project; as the 1989 Commission for Images puts it: 'the problem of images and perceptions cannot be separated from the methodology of intervention'.[7]

Yet, even if these spectacles manage to provide us with a deeper understanding of global divisions, they conceal crucial aspects of their complexity. They fail, for example, to critically address the hegemony of neoliberal politics in world economy, the competitive governance milieu in which NGOs operate, the conditions of marketization and mediatization on which their legitimacy rests, the problematic links between NGOs and local regimes, as well as the lack of local infrastructures often leading to failures of development. In suppressing these complex dimensions of development, 'positive' appeals seem to lack a certain reflexivity as to the limits of the interventionist project to promote sustainable social change (Hattori, 2003a; Sen, 1999, 2006).

It is the social relationship emerging out of spectacles of hope and self-determination, embedded as they are in the power structures of development, that the critique of sameness describes as a classic instance of 'misrecognition', the euphemistic concealment of systemic power relations by the image of smiling children (Bourdieu, 1977: 183–97). Central to misrecognition is the focalization of 'positive image' appeals on the emotions of gratitude and fellow-feeling. Dialectically linked to empathy, through the logic of the sympathetic equilibrium, gratitude relies on the social logic of the gift between unequal parties, which helps to perpetuate the unequal relations of development. This is so, insofar as the gift without reciprocation, as in development aid, binds the grateful receiver into a nexus of obligations and duties towards the generous donor. At the same time, the generosity and tender-heartedness of the West unites donors in a community of virtue that discovers in its own fellow-feeling for distant others a narcissistic self-contentment (Hattori, 2003b). Criticism against 'positive image' appeals centres precisely on this ambivalent moral agency that their imagery makes possible. While it appears to empower distant sufferers through discourses of dignity and self-determination, such imagery simultaneously disempowers them by appropriating their otherness in Western discourses of identity and agency.

This critique of identity essentially addresses the ways that benevolent emotions operate as instruments of power to the extent that they render others the perpetual objects of 'our' generosity. Simultaneously, the critique reflects more pragmatic risks of misrecognition that feed into an increasing compassion

fatigue for 'positive images'. First, there is the risk that positive examples of 'aid in action' will be misrecognized as fully addressing the problems of the developing world and, therefore, lead to inaction on the grounds that 'everything is already taken care of'; this is, what we may call a misrecognition of the systemic relations of inequality (Small, 1997: 581–93). Second, there is the risk that the plethora of smiling child faces may be misrecognized as children like 'ours', leading to inaction on the grounds that 'these are not really children in need'; this is a misrecognition of the social relations of difference and identity that positive images gloss over (Cohen, 2001: 183–4). Rather than enabling action on suffering, the misrecognition risks inherent in 'positive image' campaigns deepen the crisis of pity by introducing suspicion in the representation of suffering – a 'How do I know this is real?' sensibility further amplified by the public's awareness of the capacity of the media to manipulate images of suffering (Cohen and Seu, 2002: 187–201).

Despite differences, the two types of appeal, 'shock effect' and 'positive images', have similar orientations: they share a reliance on photorealism and a belief in the power of grand emotions. Seeking to confront us with distant suffering in two of its most authentic forms, shocking destitution and hopeful self-determination, humanitarian communication nonetheless seems suspended between distance and identity. The former animates the affective regime of guilt and indignation to lead us into action, but such negative emotions tie action to our own complicity in global injustice and run the risk of fatigue and apathy. The latter animates the emotional constellation of gratitude and tender-heartedness to persuade us to act, but such positive emotions tie action to a view of development as a gift, which glosses over asymmetries of power and runs the risk of denying the need for action on the grounds that it may be unnecessary, or even unreal.

An emergent style of humanitarian communication

The field of humanitarian communication seems to be a field of inherent tension. The threat of de-legitimization, mentioned at the beginning of the article, occurs in this contradictory field, where the reality of suffering appears through different norms of realism and activates different emotions without, however, managing to transcend its contradictions – without managing to construe suffering as the cause of legitimate emotion and action 'for any length of time', in Boltanski's words.

It is in the light of this inherent instability that we need to examine the emergence of a style of humanitarian appeal that departs from previous ones in terms of aesthetic quality, problematizing photorealism, and in terms of moral agency, breaking with the traditional registers of pity as motivations for action (guilt and indignation, empathy and gratitude). This style of appealing differs from the previous ones in that it does not seek to resolve the contradictions of humanitarian communication but to put them forward in an explicit way.

The implications of this shift go beyond the domain of communication and return us to the relationship between humanitarianism and politics, insofar as this style of appealing reformulates the conception of public action on suffering that this relationship presupposes. The emerging style, I argue, makes possible a new public sensibility that (1) disengages public action from pity, that is from the activation of grand emotion towards suffering and (2) engages the reflexivity of the spectator, inviting us to rely on our own judgement as to whether public action is possible or desirable.

I focus on the World Food Programme's (WFP) 'No food diet' appeal (2006) and the Amnesty International 'Bullet. The Execution' and 'It is not happening here but now' (2006–7) appeals.[8] I discuss each in terms of their aesthetic quality and moral agency.

Aesthetic quality

The central aesthetic feature across all appeals is multi-modal juxtaposition: the contrast between different elements of each campaign's meaning-making system. Each appeal is constituted by particular forms of juxtaposition between (1) verbal and visual modes, in the WFP 'No food diet', (2) visual form and content in Amnesty International's 'Bullet. The execution' and (3) textual and physical space, in Amnesty's 'It's not happening here but now'.

The 'No food diet', WFP, appeal relies on the contrast between language and image. Imagery focuses on an African hut, showing the mother who makes food and puts her children to bed, and evokes an aura of everyday domesticity – further enhanced by the reassuringly intimate and familiar tone of the voiceover that recites a recipe. Yet, the talk provides a different framing for the visual: the recipe refers to the old trick of fooling children to sleep in the expectation of a dinner that is never to come – the 'no food diet'. The voiceover continues by contrasting the effectiveness of our familiar 'Atkins diet' with the 'no food diet' and concludes that: 'guess what … it is so effective that 25,000 people on the no food diet die every day'.

At this point, the visual shifts to African people looking frontally at the camera; domesticity has now given way to the more traditional imagery of silent figures to be contemplated. The film's last frame is WFP's website address with a subtle invitation to act: www.wfp.org/donate. This contrast between language and image works effectively to situate a Western diet discourse in the context of African famine and, in so doing, it manages to throw into relief another contrast between a lifestyle of scarcity and a lifestyle of abundance. The rhetorical effect is a Bakhtinian 'tragic irony', a sense of the absurdity of our cultural habits echoed in the appeal's two voices: theirs and ours. Unlike 'shock effect' appeals, this ironic double-voicedness does not work to remind us of the radical otherness of the African poor, but of the otherness of our own cultural habits against the background of their struggle for daily survival.

The 'Bullet. The Execution' Amnesty appeal relies on a different juxtaposition between image form and content. In terms of form, the appeal

consists of a three-dimensional animation technique, which simulates a prisoner's execution. Three formal properties are important: *colours,* dark and subdued, *rhythm*, slow motion, and *design*, an exaggerated realism that focuses on the detail of human figures, such as body posture, muscle movement, gaze, but also on the detail of objects, such as the jerking of the gun, the gun fire, the vector of the bullet shooting through. The effect of these formal properties is hyperreality, a perfected sense of the real that can only be fictional (Baudrillard, 1988: 43–4). In terms of content, the story is about the saving of a prisoner's life through the paper shield of petition sheets signed by Amnesty supporters. As we follow the bullet moving slowly towards the prisoner's body, petition papers start flying through and hover in space between the bullet and the body. They are being ripped by the bullet but ultimately succeed in protecting the body – then there is an extreme close up to the prisoner's eye and the sigh of his relief. The statement 'Your petitions are more powerful than you think', followed by Amnesty's website address (www.AmnestyInternational.fr), is the only linguistic text of the appeal. There is a sense of extreme intensity in this silent sequence, which endows the piece with an ecstatic sense of temporality where 'time stands still' and a 'minute seems to last a lifetime' (Barker, 2002: 75), a temporality that we often associate with the visual genres of adventure fiction.

Finally, the 'It is not happening here …' Amnesty appeal relies on yet another form of juxtaposition, 'chronotopic reversal' (Bakhtin, 1986: 10–59). This refers to the reversal of the categories of space and time, where the imagery of distant suffering comes to haunt some of the most banal spaces of our everyday life: the neighbourhood street or the bus stop. The campaign consists of 200 images of suffering from Iraq, Myanmar, Liberia and other places set in transparent advertising frames across a number of cities in Switzerland – but quickly spread around the world through the phenomenal media response to the campaign. Devoid of background, these transparent images appear strangely disembodied, as if they suddenly emerged from a remote reality to interrupt our safe lifeworld. The only bit of language, 'It is not happening here but now', functions to frame this optical illusion as a play between physical and textual space, blurring the boundaries between the two and bringing about the unsettling sense of urgency that chronotopic reversal can so powerfully activate. At the same time, Amnesty's website, standing unobtrusively at the bottom of the poster, gently invites us to visit the organization's website as the access point for engagement with this cause (www.AmnestyInternational.sw).

In so far as these appeals still rely on the force of the imagery of suffering to construct the humanitarian cause, they do not drop photorealism. They do, however, shift away from photorealism as authentic witnessing towards photorealism as yet another aesthetic choice by which suffering can be represented.[9] This occurs through the use of juxtaposition that works to estrange us from a range of popular visual genres, such as digital games or

the advertising genre of *trompe l'oeil*, and introduces the imagery of suffering as the new content of these genres. In inviting us to engage with their textual games, these appeals come to remind us that we are confronted not with the 'truth' of suffering but with acts of representation (Vestergaard, 2009).

Moral agency

Rather than simply breaking with the aesthetic conventions of 'shock effect' and 'positive image' appeals, these appeals importantly also break with the moral mechanism of those appeals, whereby one thing, the immediacy of suffering, is assumed to be translated into another, action on suffering. What are the properties of moral agency in this style of communication, where suffering becomes self-consciously aestheticized? I focus on two: the technologization of action and the de-emotionalization of the cause.

Technologization of action. A key feature of these campaigns is the simplicity of their proposals for action: click your mouse. This figures modestly as a *slash/donate* in the WFP website address (www.wfp.uk.co/donate) or simply as a reference to Amnesty's website addresses (e.g. www.AmnestyInternational.fr). Such technologization of action significantly simplifies the spectator/user's mode of engagement with the humanitarian cause: all we need to do is click under the 'sign petitions' or 'make donations' links. There are two dimensions to this simplification.

The first dimension of simplification has to do with the use of the internet as the vehicle for public action on distant suffering. Speed and on-the-spot intervention, both features of online activism celebrated as catalysts for a new democratic politics (Bennett, 2003), are here instrumental in addressing the key problem of the humanitarian sensibility mentioned earlier: the non-sustainability of grand emotions towards a cause *for any length of time*. The simplification of action, in this sense, is not only an inevitable but also a desirable dimension of technologized humanitarian communication. More ambivalently, however, this no-time engagement with technology suggests that expectations of effortless immediacy, the most prominent element of contemporary consumer culture, are increasingly populating the moral imagination of humanitarianism.[10]

The second dimension of simplification has to do with the absence of justification in the appeals: there is simply no mention of the reasons why action may be important. As opposed to the other two styles of appealing that draw on universal discourses of ethics, this style abandons universal morality. What it communicates instead is the organizational brand itself: the WFP and AI website addresses constitute the only linguistic text of the appeals. Responding to the communication risks of emotion-oriented campaigns that 'tell' the public what they should feel (risks of cynicism, fatigue and suspicion), this style of campaigning relies instead on signalling the strong 'brand equity' of these organizations, that is their solid image and international reputation (Slim, 2003: 8–12).[11] Insofar as it strategically replaces moralistic exhortation

with brand recognition, thereby moving from an explicit marketing of suffering as a cause towards an implicit investment in the identity of the humanitarian agency itself, this emergent style can be seen as inspired by practices of corporate branding (Vestergaard, 2008). Regarded as the most effective form of corporate persuasion, branding works through ellipsis: it is not the verbalization of argument but the 'aura' of the brand that sustains the relationship between product and consumer (Arvidsson, 2006: 73–94).

In this spirit, the branding of suffering abandons visual realism, grand emotion and the question of why in order to tap into the readily available assets of historical organizations, such as WFP or Amnesty, and to allow consumption-savvy publics themselves to engage with brand associations of solidarity and care as the autonomous creators of brand meaning. An important consequence of this highly technologized and elliptical style of humanitarian communication is the transformation of the affective registers of suffering that these appeals produce.

The de-emotionalization of the cause. All three appeals inevitably articulate certain affective dispositions towards suffering, since without emotion no appeal to action could be legitimate. These dispositions rely on the traditional affective regimes of humanitarian communication: guilt and indignation or empathy and gratitude. These regimes, however, do not appear as immediate emotions that may inspire action but rather as objects of contemplation to be reflected upon.

The 'No food diet' campaign relies on *irony*, a textual trope characterized by a high degree of self-consciousness that sets Western concerns about weight control against the drama of survival in Africa – echoing perhaps Bob Geldof's words: 'It is absurd that in a world of plenty people die of want.' Rather than relying on the contemplation of the other, this appeal relies on the contemplation of the self, through imagery that creates a distance from our own taken-for-granted habits in a world of abundance. This ironic self-reflexivity conveys a sense of suppressed guilt that gently hints at the affective regime of 'shock effect' appeals in the final visual frame of African people gazing at the camera. These images, however, do not seek to shock us by exposing the extremities of 'bare life' but only perhaps to remind us of the absurdity of injustice at the heart of our condition of existence.

The 'Bullet. The Execution' campaign relies on the *sublimation* of the moment of execution, where the battle of good versus evil works to evoke a suppressed reference to heroic sacrifice: the spectator's noble power to do good, to save the life of a prisoner of conscience. Again, this is not the heroism of indignant denunciation that has, in the past, so powerfully inspired movements of international solidarity against tyrannical regimes. It is rather a dispassionate emotional regime, where the act of saving a life is coded into the aesthetics of digital gaming and the proposal to action is disconnected from a rhetoric of justice: 'your petitions are more powerful than you think'.

Finally, the 'It is happening now…' campaign uses *optical illusion* to interrupt our 'chronotopic unconscious', the naturalized assumptions about where we are and how we orient ourselves to the world by placing the horrific event at the centre of our ordinary visual experience (Holquist, 2002: 141–2). What the unexpected presence of torture and near-death next to us evokes is a fleeting reference to compassion, an empathetic sentiment of urgency associated with the classic Christian figure of the Good Samaritan – the stranger who stops to provide aid to the wounded, without verbalizing justification or expressing emotion (Boltanski, 1999: 5–9 for the pity-compassion distinction).

In summary, the uses of irony, hyperreality and optical illusion contribute to the constitution of moral agency in this emerging form of campaigning, insofar as they manage to refract grand emotions into what we may call low-intensity affective regimes – regimes that insinuate the classic constellations of emotion towards suffering but do not quite inspire or enact them. Guilt, heroism and compassion re-appear not as elements of a politics of pity, partaking of a grand narrative of affective attachment and collective commitment, but as de-contextualized fragments of such a narrative that render the psychological world of the spectator a potential terrain of self-inspection.

Towards a post-humanitarian sensibility

It is this humanitarian sensibility, characterized by textual games, low-intensity emotional regimes and a technological imagination of instant gratification and no justification, that we may call post-humanitarian communication.[12] While still depending on realistic imagery (of the poor, the wounded or the about-to-die), the key feature of post-humanitarianism lies precisely in loosening up this 'necessary' link between seeing suffering and feeling for the sufferer, and in de-coupling emotion for the sufferer from acting on the cause of suffering. Central to the post-humanitarian sensibility is the particularization of the cause, whereby the representation of suffering becomes disembedded from discourses of morality and relies on each spectator's personal judgement of the cause for action.

It is this contrast between the traditional, universalizing styles of campaigning and the contemporary, particularizing ones that renders the post-humanitarian style vulnerable to critiques of commodification. In requiring no time commitment to the cause of suffering, humanitarian branding obeys a market logic that is unable to defend a political vision of justice and social change, or to inspire a sustained form of moral agency vis a vis suffering others.[13] Whereas the commodification critique is fully justified in its suspicion regarding the strategic disembedding of suffering from a morality of justice, it overlooks the fact that previous styles of campaigning were also informed by a similar tension between politics and the market – between awareness-raising and fundraising (Lissner, 1979). Indeed, the dominant

conception of the political, introduced earlier, that connects the legitimization of public action with the production of grand emotion is not itself devoid of economic interest. Rather, both 'shock effect' and 'positive image' campaigns are situated squarely within a market logic of persuasion, insofar as they also communicate emotion for their own ends. The production of negative or positive emotion in these appeals, is at once the articulation of political passion in the service of legitimizing public action on suffering and, simultaneously, a strategy of the market put to the service of legitimizing the humanitarian brand itself.

The difference, then, between emotion-oriented and post-humanitarian campaigns lies essentially in the principle each style uses to secure legitimacy: moral universalism in the former and reflexive particularism in the latter. The particularization of the cause in post-humanitarian campaigns should be seen, in this light, as a market response to the universalization of the cause in the emotion-oriented ones. In portraying sufferers as powerless victims or as dignified agents, these campaigns intend to produce either a universal discourse of justice, through negative emotions that ultimately dehumanize the sufferer, or a universal discourse of empathy, through positive emotions that eventually appropriate the sufferer in a world like 'ours'. Neither of these two forms of moral universalism ultimately manages to sustain a legitimate claim to action on suffering.

From this perspective, rather than claiming that the post-humanitarian style commodifies communication, it would be more productive to claim that this style shifts the terms on which the commodification of humanitarianism occurs today. Whereas the politics of pity in earlier appeals assumes that emotions and their universal discourses operate in a moral economy of abundance, an economy where everyone can, in principle, feel for and act on distant suffering in an unrestricted manner, post-humanitarian appeals assume instead that emotions operate, in fact, in an economy of scarcity 'where the emotional wealth of one agent necessarily comes at the expense of another' (Gross, 2006: 79).

It is the recognition of this tension between the proliferation of moralizing discourses, prescriptive and perhaps inauthentic as they are, and the public's bounded ability to feel and act on distant others, which lies at the heart of humanitarian branding and its new style of communication. By foregrounding the act of representation rather than emotional response towards suffering, this style acknowledges that compassion fatigue lies not so much in the excess of human suffering that transcends our individual capacity to feel for or act on it, but rather in the excess of discourses of morality around which we are called to organize our feelings and action towards suffering.

Conclusion: a new altruism or cultural narcissism?

To come full circle to the question of de-legitimization, I propose to understand the post-humanitarian style as a specific response to the crisis of pity

that reclaims the legitimacy of humanitarian appeals by removing grand emotion from the call to action on suffering. It does so by recourse to the market practice of branding, which technologizes and particularizes the premises for action, rendering such action irrelevant to the ethical discourses that have traditionally informed public agency on suffering.

As a consequence, the post-humanitarian style offers an alternative vision of agency – one whose political implications are deeply ambivalent. In activating low-intensity emotions, this style proposes a conception of action that 'cleanses' public communication of sentimentalist argument and introduces individual judgement as our primary resource for engaging with suffering as a cause. This focus on individual judgement further foregrounds the power of personal rather than collective action in making a difference in the lives of vulnerable others. What this form of agency asserts, in particular, is the capacity of popular culture to expand the domain of politics towards mundane tactics of subversion, such as momentary estrangement and playful self-reflection, through the media tropes of irony, hyperreality and illusion (Harold, 2004: 189–211); but also the capacity of new media to engage individual users in fleeting and effortless, but potentially effective, forms of solidarity activism (Bennett, 2003: 17–38). The post-humanitarian sensibility thus comes to challenge traditional conceptions of agency, where such activism tends to presuppose a certain subordination of the self to a higher moral cause and promotes instead a different disposition, where a playful engagement with the self without visionary attachments may also prove to make a difference to the lives of vulnerable others (Gross, 2006: 110).

At the same time, however, in capitalizing on the reflexive resources of the individual without offering a moral justification for action, the post-humanitarian style confronts the public it addresses with a mirror of their own world. In so doing, it runs the risk of failing to operate as an agent of 'moral education' – that is, failing to go beyond everyday playfulness so as to inspire and re-constitute the moral agency of Western publics along the lines of civic virtues such as solidarity with and care for vulnerable others. The danger, then, in removing the moral question of 'why' from humanitarian communication, may lie in the perpetuation of a political culture of communitarian narcissism – a sensibility that renders the emotions of the self the measure of our understanding of the sufferings of the world at large.

Embodied in the metaphor of the modern '*homo sentimentalis*', this sensibility favours a public culture of private emotionality and indulgent self-inspection (Illouz, 2007: 36–9), which makes it almost impossible to engage, emotionally and practically, with those who suffer outside the community of the West. What this narcissistic sensibility fails to recognize is that the public circulation of emotion and action, far from being distributed in random patterns of scarcity and abundance, is actually inscribed in systematic patterns of global inequality and their hierarchies of place and human life – hierarchies that divide the world into zones of Western comfort and safety and non-Western need and vulnerability (Chouliaraki, 2006: 206–18).

In conclusion, whereas the post-humanitarian style manages to reflexively address the limitations of a politics of pity, detaching the communication of suffering from grand emotion, in one and the same move, it has also suppressed the articulation of ethical discourse on public action. This has important implications for humanitarian organizations' practices, calling for a closer examination of their strategic communication choices. The main implication is that, rather than challenging the historical patterns of injustice inherent in the moral economy of scarcity, which these organizations have so accurately diagnosed, the post-humanitarian style may be reinforcing them. Out of an interest in renewing the legitimacy of humanitarian calls to action, such appeals may be feeding back into a dominant Western culture where the de-emotionalization of the suffering of distant others goes hand in hand with the over-emotionalization of our safe everyday life.

Notes

1 My empirical focus is on European appeals across causes (poverty and human rights) and across media (television, the Internet and urban advertising space). In the European context, appeals by Oxfam (e.g. 'Be humankind', UK, 2008); Save the Children (e.g. 'Saving children's lives', Sweden, 2008) and Red Cross ('Aqua', Denmark, 2006–7) demonstrate a similar move away from an emotion-oriented style of communication (see Vestergaard, 2008 for the Danish Red Cross campaign).

2 Images available at: http://www.imaging-famine.org/historical/08.html and www.imagin-famine.org/historical/09.html

3 Red Cross image photographed by Werner Bischoff in Bihar, India (1951) for *Life* magazine, where it appeared with the caption 'Sir, we are dying'.

4 Two recent examples of positive imagery can be found in Oxfam's 'Unwrapped' and Save the Children's 'Rewrite the Futures' campaigns (see: https://oxfam.jp/unwrapped/en/ and http://www.champagnat.org/images/BisSaveChildrenReport.jpg).

5 'Shock effect' and 'positive image' appeals should not be seen as following a linear development from the former to the latter. Despite criticisms against 'shock effect' imagery, evidence suggests that this is still a most effective style of appealing for urgent action – hence its continuing presence in the public communication of suffering. Both 'shock effect' and 'positive image' appeals are today dominant styles of humanitarian communication, co-existing and often complementing one another.

6 Whereas Oxfam prefers community to child sponsorship, the latter spearheads the campaign communications of other international NGOs such as ActionAid, Plan, Children SOS, and World Vision.

7 In the 'Code of Conduct on Images and Messages Relating to the Third World' (adopted by the General Assembly of European NGOs in April 1989), where NGOs were moreover advised to be 'attentive to messages that oversimplify or over-concentrate sensational aspects of life in the

third world'. The Code has been under revision since 2004, in the light of surveys showing that, even though 60 percent of NGOs claim to have become more sensitive in their representational practices, there is little statistical difference in the actual imagery of suffering used in the past ten years.

8   The WFP appeal (BBC World television; now available on WFP website, YouTube and other networking sites: http://www.wfp.org/videos/no-food-diet); the AI 'Bullet. The Execution' appeal (French television, 2006, YouTube and other social websites: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwl 2aFNsW30). The 'It is not happening here… ' poster campaign (Swiss urban advertising, May 2006: http://osocio.org/message/its_not_happening_here_ but_it_is_happening_now/) multiplied online visits to AI by 20 and brought the number of hits per day to hundreds of millions globally.

9   For theoretical perspectives on witnessing see Oliver (2004: 79–88); Ellis (2000: 2); Frosh and Pinchevski (2008); Peters (2001: 709).

10 See Fenton (2008: 37–57) for the risks of technological activism; Stevenson (2006) for a cautionary argument on 'technological citizenship'; Livingstone et al. (2004: 10) for young people's use patterns of civic/political websites; Bauman (2001: 118–29) and Tomlinson (2007: 124–33) for risks in the 'culture of speed'.

11 AI's 'Bullet. The execution', produced by the advertising agency AOCPROD, Paris (and won the Golden Lion at Cannes Festival for ad production, 2006); 'It is not happening here…' was produced by the Walker Werbeagentur advertising agency, Geneva (and won theSilver Lion at the Cannes Festival in ad production, 2007); the 'No food diet' appeal was part of a series of WFP outsourced productions, which include celebrity interviews and on-location visits to Africa, as well as the use of Hollywood film trailers such as *Blood Diamond* (Warner Bros, 2006).

12 This definition is inspired by Mestrovic's thesis on the post-emotional society, which argues that contemporary socio-political dispositions are produced through technologically mediated and discontinuous engagement with emotional states (see Mestrovic, 1997: xi–xii).

13 See Mestrovic (1997), Cohen (2001: 195) and Sznaider (1998: 7–25) for the co-emergence of commodification and humanitarian sentiment in modernity.

References

Ahmed, S. (2004) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Arendt, H. (1990 [1963]) *On Revolution*. London: Penguin.

Arvidsson, A. (2006) *Brands: Meaning and Value in Media Culture*. London: Routledge.

Bakhtin, M. (1986) '*Bildungsroman*', in C. Emerson and M. Holquist (eds) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Barker, C. (2002) *Alain Badiou: A Critical Introduction*. London: Pluto Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1988) *Selected Writings*, edited by M. Poster. Cambridge: Polity.

Bauman, Z. (2001) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Bennett, W.L. (2003) 'New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism', in N. Couldry and J. Curran (eds) *Contesting Media Power*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Benthall, J. (1993) *Disasters, Relief and the Media*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Boltanski, L. (1999) *Distant Suffering. Morality, Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Boltanski, L. (2000) 'The Legitimacy of Humanitarian Actions and their Media Representations: The Case of France', *Ethical Perspectives* 7(1): 3–16.

Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Calhoun, C. (2008) 'The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress, and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action', in T. Weiss and M. Barnett (eds) *Humanitarianism in Question: Power, Politics, Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Chouliaraki, L. (2006) *The Spectatorship of Suffering*. London: Sage.

Chouliaraki, L. (2008) 'Mediation as Moral Education', *Media, Culture & Society* 30(5): 831–47.

Cohen, S. (2001) *States of Denial*. Cambridge: Polity.

Cohen, S. and B. Seu (2002) 'Knowing Enough Not to Feel Too Much: Emotional Thinking about Human Rights Appeals', in M.P. Bradley and P. Petro (eds) *Truth Claims: Representation and Human Rights*, pp. 187–201. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Cottle, S. and D. Nolan (2007) 'Global Humanitarianism and the Changing Aid–MediaField', *Journalism Studies* 8(6): 862–78.

Dogra, N. (2007) 'Reading NGOs Visually' – Implications of Visual Images for NGO Management', *Journal of International Development* 19: 161–71.

Douzinas, C. (2000) *The End of Human Rights*. London: Hart Publishing.

Ellis, J. (2000) *Seeing Things: Television in an Age of Uncertainty*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Fenton, N. (2008) 'Mediating Solidarity', *Global Media and Communication* 4(1): 37–57.

Frosh, P. and A. Pinchevski (2008) *Witnessing in the Era of Mass-mediated Communication*. London: Palgrave.

Gross, D. (2006) *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Hall, S. (2001 [1992]) 'The West and the Rest', in S. Hall and B. Gieben (eds) *Formations of Modernity*, pp. 257–330. Milton Keynes: Open University Press and Blackwell.

Harold, C. (2004) 'Pranking Rhetoric: "Culture Jamming" as Media Activism', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21(3): 189–211.

Hattori, M. (2003a) 'The Moral Politics of Foreign Aid', *Review of International Studies* 29(2): 231–49.

Hattori, M. (2003b) 'Giving as a Mechanism of Consent: International Aid Organizations and the Ethical Hegemony of Capitalism', *International Relations* 17: 153–74.

Hojer B. (2004) 'The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering', *Media, Culture & Society* 26(4): 513–31.

Holquist, M. (2002) *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge.

Illouz, E. (2007) *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.

Le Sueur, J. and P. Bourdieu (2001) *Uncivil War. Intellectuals and Identity Politics during the Decolonization of Algeria*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Lidchi, H. (1999*)* 'Finding the Right Image: British Development NGOs and the Regulation of Imagery', in T. Skelton and T. Allen (eds) *Culture and Global Change*. London: Routledge.

Lissner, J. (1979) *The Politics of Altruism: A Study of the Political Behaviour of Voluntary Development Agencies*. Geneva: Lutheran World Foundation.

Livingstone, S., M. Bober and E. Helsper (2004) *Active Participation or Just More Information? Young People's Take-up of Opportunities to Act and Interact on the Internet*. London: LSE Research Online, URL (consulted December 2009): http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/396/

Mestrovic, S. (1997) *Postemotional Society*. London: Sage.

Moeller, S. (1999) *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*. London: Routledge.

Nash, K. (2008) 'Global Citizenship as Show Business', *Media, Culture & Society* 30(2): 167–81.

Oliver, K. (2004) 'Witnessing and Testimony', *Parallax* 10(1): 79–88.

Peters, J.D. (2001) 'Witnessing', *Media, Culture & Society* 23(6): 707–27.

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2006) *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. London: Penguin.

Silverstone, R. (2006) *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*. Cambridge: Polity.

Slim, H. (2003) 'Marketing Humanitarian Space: Argument and Method in Humanitarian Persuasion', paper presented in the Humanitarian Negotiators Network, 12–14 May, Talloires.

Small, D. (1997) 'Development Education Revisited: The New Zealand Experience', in V. Masemann (ed.) *Tradition, Modernity, and Post-modernity in Comparative Education*, pp. 581–94. New York: Springer.

Smillie, I. (1995) *The Alms Bazaar: Altruism under Fire*. London: Non-profit Organisations and International Development Intermediate Technology.

Stevenson, N. (2006) 'Technological Citizenship: Perspectives in the Recent Work of M. Castells and P. Virilio', *Sociological Research Online* 10(3), URL (consulted December 2009): http://www.socresonline.org.uk/10/3/stevenson.html

Sznaider, N. (1998) *The Compassionate Temperament: Care and Cruelty in Modern Society*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Tomlinson, J. (2007) *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*. London: Sage.

Vestergaard, A. (2008*)* 'Branding the Humanitarian: The Case of Amnesty International', *Journal of Language and Politics* 7(3): 200–16.

Vestergaard, A. (2009) 'Identity, Integrity and Humanitarian Appeal', in L. Chouliaraki and M. Morsing (eds) *Media, Organisations and Identity*. London: Palgrave.

● **LILIE CHOULIARAKI** is Professor of Media and Communications at the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics. She has published extensively on the moral implications of the media in contemporary public life. Her books include *Discourse in Late Modernity* (co-authored, Edinburgh University Press, 1999), *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (Sage, 2006), *The Soft Power of War* (ed., Benjamins, 2007) and *Media, Organizations and Identity* (co-ed., Palgrave, 2009). *Address:* Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, St Clements Building, Room S102, Houghton Street, London WC2 2AE, UK. [email: L.Chouliaraki@lse.ac.uk] ●