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## **'Improper Distance': Towards a critical account of solidarity as irony**

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### **Abstract**

Silverstone's 'proper distance' is one of the most original and productive conceptualizations of a fundamental problem in the ethics of mediation: the humanization of vulnerable others. This is because 'proper distance' is not only a normative but also, importantly, an analytical concept. Whereas, in its normative dimension, proper distance '*refers to the more or less precise degree of proximity*' (Silverstone 2006: 47) required for mediated relationships of care and responsibility to develop, in its analytical dimension, the metaphorical vocabulary of space becomes an important resource in evaluating how mediation produces 'humanity' through the positioning of vulnerable others along the axis of proximity-distance.

My application of this analytical vocabulary on the mediation of humanitarianism enables me to create a typology of paradigms of solidarity, namely 'pity', 'irony' and 'agonism', highlighting the different ways in which their particular articulations of proximity-distance produce distinct conceptions of humanity and, therefore, distinct proposals for solidarity towards vulnerable others. Focusing, specifically, on the critique of the emerging paradigm of solidarity as 'irony', I argue that, even though it appears as a promising response to 'pity' and its misleading spatiality of universal proximity, 'irony' celebrates consumerism as a reflexive distance-from-the self and is, therefore, unable to put forward a morally acceptable proposal of solidarity.

### **Keywords**

proper distance; solidarity; humanitarianism; new media; pity; irony; agonism

## Introduction

*'If improper distance can be, and is, created, inter alia, through the mediations that electronic technologies provide for us, then it follows that we can use the notion of proper distance as a tool to measure and to repair the failures in our communication with and about other people and other cultures and in our reporting of the world, in such a way as our capacity to act is enabled and preserved'* (Silverstone 2002: 284).

It is the production of Silverstone's 'improper distance' in contemporary mediations of solidarity that I here explore as a 'failure of communication'. Solidarity, the imperative to act on vulnerable others without the anticipation of reciprocation, is the humanitarian claim par excellence, yet its mediations are not strictly contained within the humanitarian field. Rather, I contend, solidarity is mundanely articulated through a broad communicative structure of popular genre that, by inviting us to act on vulnerable others, raises the question of how these others become the object of our judgment and imagination. Studying, therefore, the textualities of these humanitarian genres may tell us something important about the claim to solidarity that they articulate and the implications of such claim for our capacity to reflect on, feel for and act upon the world.

My argument, therefore, is that NGOs appeals, where injustice is a fictional monster that threatens our streets, disaster news, where human loss is mediated by an 'I-'m-praying' twitter from London and celebrity advocacy, where health policies in Africa are introduced through celebrity confessions about her adopted children point towards a new communicative structure of solidarity that tends towards the self rather than the vulnerable other as the cause for our action – a tendency that I have elsewhere introduced as 'post-

humanitarianism'<sup>i</sup>. Drawing upon playful textualities, this communicative structure challenges claims to our 'common humanity', characteristic of earlier humanitarian genres, and replaces their appeal to human suffering with artful stories that promise to make us better people. My discussion of these three emerging genres, NGO-branding appeals, celebrity advocacy and new media journalism, shows how their self-oriented textualities shift the claim to solidarity from a morality of pity to a morality of irony (in *Section 1, 'Improper distance': The textualities of post-humanitarianism*).

Inspired by Silverstone's unique analysis of the spatialities of solidarity (2002; 2004; 2006), I argue that, even though irony emerges as a problematization of pity and its appeal to 'common humanity', it ultimately fails to address the key problem of pity: its dehumanization of vulnerable others. This is because, rather than regarding human vulnerability as a politics of injustice, irony views vulnerability as a politics of the self. Specifically, irony renews the promise of solidarity today, by replacing the moral proximity between self and other, inherent in the logic of 'common humanity', with an opposing but structurally equivalent moral distance from the self - between us and the motivations of our action (but, consequently, also between the self and the other). Far from a purely philosophical affair, this transformation is co-nascent with the increasing 'instrumentalization' of solidarity in the global humanitarian market, which, by turning solidarity into self-centred consumerism, ultimately reproduces rather than challenges the existing relations of power between the West and vulnerable others. (in *Section 2, Ironic solidarity: the moralizing strategies of post-humanitarianism*).

Instead of 'universal' proximity or self-distance, I conclude, solidarity should be predicated upon Silverstone's 'proper distance': the recognition that it is this very asymmetry of power that must become the principle of solidarity

upon which we act on vulnerable others. This is, in Silverstone's spirit, an Arendtian solidarity of 'agonism', where the question of justice enters the public realm of reflexive judgment but also where the voice of distant others becomes an object of our empathetic identification and a cause for our action (in *Section 3. 'Proper distance': Towards a solidarity of agonism*).

### **Improper distance: The textualities of post-humanitarianism**

Improper distance refers to practices of communication that, predicated as they are upon the pragmatic acknowledgment that it is impossible to represent the 'otherness' of suffering, make use of imaginative textualities that problematize the act of representation itself and, thereby, privilege the voices of the West over the voices of suffering others. Rather than restricted to a single textuality, these post-humanitarian textualities rely instead on a number of discursive strategies that differ greatly across its genres, yet, ultimately, converge in producing effects of 'improper distance'. Let me discuss, in turn, the textualities of appeals, celebrity advocacy and disaster journalism.

Humanitarian appeals: NGO appeals today rely on strategies of textual playfulness that create a distance from Western lifestyles of (relative) privilege and urge us to reflect on global poverty not through moral argumentation but through the affective estrangement that these forms of distance enable. The recent 'Be Humankind' Oxfam appeal (2008), for instance, introduces the imperative to act on vulnerable others through a graphically animated story of a senior citizen who, indifferent as she initially appears to be towards the mediated spectacles of suffering available in the streets of her home town, ultimately realizes the consequences of her indifference for her own life and joins fellow-citizens in her town square to confront the 'monster of injustice'. As they all

‘speak out’ against the monster, a phantasmagoria of fireworks wrapping up the planet concludes the appeal. The only linguistic text of the campaign is the ‘Be Humankind’ slogan, accompanied by the Oxfam brand and contact details (text number and website address)<sup>ii</sup>.

Two textual choices facilitate the enactment of distance in this appeal: the aesthetics of graphic animation and the absence of suffering others. Graphic animation, part of a range of playful textualities that break with the traditional aesthetics of photorealistic suffering, fictionalizes the context of ‘our’ everyday living and, through a strategy of estrangement from our mundane habits, enables us to contemplate on the consequences of our denial (for the concept of estrangement see Orgad, this volume). The absence of suffering others (except in the doubly mediated form of ‘news on suffering’ within the appeal) addresses compassion fatigue, the de-sensitizing impact that earlier iconographies of suffering bear on Western publics (Cohen 2001), by avoiding the representation of the other and focusing instead on the presence of the Western actor. Whilst the fictionalization of the Western actor invites a reflexive identification with the self as a catalyst for cultivating dispositions of ‘humankindness’, the absence of suffering others maximizes the distance between the West and these others and renders their existence irrelevant to the justification of ‘becoming humankind’.

Even though the playful textualities of contemporary NGOs can be explained as a response to the failure of pity to adequately represent the humanity of suffering others (Bethnall 1993; Lidchi 1999), such textualities should also be associated with the corporate logic that informs NGOs’ response to compassion fatigue - what Vestergaard refers to as ‘humanitarian branding’ (2009). This is an elliptical form of marketing communication, which remains silent on the vulnerable other as a cause for our action and relies instead on the familiarity of consumer publics with the mega-brands of United Nations and

Amnesty International - and the advertising tropes through which these brands promote themselves in the media market.

Celebrity advocacy: Post-humanitarianism is further articulated through the performativity of celebrity, a distinct form of textuality associated with figures of UN advocacy, like Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie. Whereas celebrity humanitarianism has always relied upon an ambivalent performativity that combines 'impersonation', the celebrity's personal testimony of the suffering of others, with 'personification', the infusion of such testimony with the celebrity's own distinct star aura<sup>iii</sup>, contemporary UN advocacy tends to privilege a 'confessional' communicative structure of celebrity. Such performativity rests upon 'intimacy at a distance', a key feature of our popular culture that refers to our non-reciprocal intimate knowledge of celebrities, rendering the private life of the latter an inherent aspect of their public personae (Thompson 1995; King 2008).

Compared to Audrey Hepburn, a strictly professional performance of UN's Ambassadorial humanitarianism twenty years ago (1988-1993), for instance, Jolie (2001-present) deliberately fuses her UNHCR-related work with her private life as the mother of children adopted from developing countries and with her professional life as a human rights films' actress and as an entrepreneurial activist of development projects around the world (Littler 2008). Unlike the earlier communicative ethos of 'de-celebritization', where a dispassionate celebrity effaced her own voice so as to 'speak' the voice of the sufferers and appeal to our 'common humanity', today's ethos is one of 'hyper-celebritization': by co-articulating the humanitarian and the private in one hybrid public persona, contemporary celebrity prioritizes the communication of her own emotional voice about suffering others over the voice of those others<sup>iv</sup>.

An important consequence of this confessional performativity is that it is the intimate emotion of the celebrity, or her 'humanity', that we are now asked to identify with as moral actors, rather than the suffering others as others with their own 'humanity'<sup>v</sup>. In a manner parallel to campaigns, therefore, the celebrity's appeal to solidarity rests on an 'intimate distance' from the ideal figure of the star as a powerful site of self-identification for Western publics, but, simultaneously, also on the absence of suffering others, whose own voice is eliminated from this communicative exchange: *'when most people think of the UN now', as a UN employee puts it, 'they think of Angelina Jolie on a crusade, not the work that goes on in the field...celebrity is at the heart of every UNICEF campaign and the association is being sold incredibly cheap'*<sup>vi</sup>.

A magnet of public attention, post-humanitarian celebrity may maximize the visibility of the UN brand, but at the cost of denying vulnerable others the 'legitimacy of (their) difference' (Silverstone 2006: 46). Solidarity becomes, instead, a practice of voyeuristic altruism, which intensifies our engagement with the pleasures of show business whilst it reproduces the moral distance between 'us' and 'them'.

Disaster news: Post-humanitarianism is further embedded in the 'interrupted' textualities of post-television news; for instance, in the live blogs of the Haiti earthquake (BBC, 2010)<sup>vii</sup>. Rather than relying upon the live immediacy of television footage, focalized around the professional testimony of the reporter, live blogs draw instead on non-professional witnesses, as their 'real time' messages (twits, emails, mobile recordings) are collated online by major news networks in a timeline of cable-like updates on the event. These post-television textualities are primarily characterized by a *decentralization of voice*, which introduces the testimony of ordinary people as a major moral claim of the news,



both because such voice renews the authenticity of disaster reporting and because it challenges the institutional authority of the professional journalist (Beckett 2008).

Whilst the proliferation of ordinary voice in these online platforms promises to subvert the selective indifference to distant suffering characteristic of much television reporting<sup>viii</sup>, it simultaneously speaks a different 'truth' of suffering. Instead of television's truth claim to an 'objective' portrayal of the scene of disaster, the claim of live blogging is to a multi-perspectival 'truth', which represents distant suffering as an always fragmented, situated and open-ended narrative, constituted by snippets of people's own stories (Matheson 2004: 461).

This decentralization of voice, however, primarily concerns the inclusion of Western voices in the news, since the majority of ordinary postings consist of citizens in Europe and the USA communicating their emotions about the suffering of distant others<sup>ix</sup>. Even though the rising number of NGO messages from Haiti worked as a form of 'crisis communication', pointing to the cosmopolitanizing potential of live-blogs, ordinary voices of despair in the face of tragedy speak, in fact, to a Western sphere of compassionate addressees that takes the suffering of Haitians to be its object of communication yet places its own emotions about their suffering at the centre of its rituals of communication. This is, as Castells puts it, a case of '*mediated mass self-communication...self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, an self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many*' (2007: 248).

Post-television narratives are, in this sense, similar to campaigns and celebrity advocacy in that they introduce the 'truths' of the self as an alternative to the 'objectivity' of live footage. Yet, in so doing, they reproduce a new distance between those who speak and those who are spoken for. What the overwhelming

majority of Western news voices suggests is that the systemic distance between the zones of safety and suffering re-emerges online, as material inequalities in the distribution of communication technologies is now coupled by symbolic inequalities in the distribution of voice across global information flows<sup>x</sup>. The post-humanitarian character of new media journalism, which represents vulnerable others through 'our' stories about their suffering, should, from this perspective, be seen as closely linked to the political economy of Western journalism – one that seeks to renew the legitimacy of news networks by globalizing its authoring voices, yet ultimately relies on the technological capacities, literacies, testimonies and, not least, unpaid labour, of the West (Scott 2005; Allan 2007).

The fictional textualities of campaigns, the hybrid performativity of celebrity and the 'interrupted' narratives of live blogging are but three of the multiple strategies of post-humanitarianism. They all seek to represent human vulnerability in innovative ways that break with the 'objective' certainties of pity and, in so doing, they depart from a morality of 'universal' proximity towards a morality of self-distance as a more pragmatic basis for imagining our relationship to distant others (for a parallel discussion see Sturken, this volume). However, insofar as they situate self-estrangement, confession and testimony at the heart of their appeals to solidarity, I have cautioned, these textualities ultimately reproduce effects of 'improper distance': they subordinate the voice of distant others to our own voice and so marginalize their cause in favour of our narcissistic self-communications. Let me now situate the shift towards post-humanitarian textualities in the context of advanced liberalism and discuss the implications of this shift for the moral claim to solidarity.

### **Irony solidarity: The morality of post-humanitarianism**

Playful textualities are a response to the sober imagery of emaciated children, the dispassionate style of celebrity advocacy or the objectivity of broadcast news. Even though these influential genres of pity have traditionally moralized the West in the name of our 'common humanity', they have, at the same time, been criticized for de-humanizing the vulnerable other and naturalizing, rather than problematizing, the power relations of humanitarianism between the West and the 'rest' (Cmiel 1999; Cohen 2001; Silverstone 2006). The solidarity of pity, as Tomlinson puts it, belongs to '*... a vision of technocratic, Enlightenment universalism, largely untroubled by concerns of cultural difference ...and populated by orderly, rational, co-operative moral agents who had transcended all cultural particularity*' (this volume, p. xx).

It is this skepticism towards 'universalism' that informs the textualities of post-humanitarianism. What they intend to do is challenge the 'truth' of suffering that pity represents and draw attention, instead, to the act of representing the many 'truths' of suffering as itself a part of their appeal to act upon it. In this way, post-humanitarian textualities transform the 'universal' morality of pity into a morality of contingency – one that, according to Rorty, '*combines commitment with a sense of contingency about (our) own commitment*' (1989: 61). Turning, thus, skepticism from problem into promise for a renewed practice of solidarity, the morality of contingency further situates post-humanitarianism within a specific cultural sensibility, the 'culture of irony' (Rorty 1989).

Grounded as it may be on contingency, the culture of irony nonetheless differs from the radical relativism of post-modern culture in that it recognizes in human suffering that minimal, yet crucial, moral claim to other people that remains irreducible to any language game and defines the nature of sociality in

our culture. Solidarity as irony, in this sense, flourishes within a world of situated meanings and values not in the form of a 'universal' truth, but in the form of stories of suffering that, by way of '*sentimental education*', mundanely cultivate the virtue of '*being kind to others as **the only social bond that is needed***' (Rorty 1989: 93- emphasis added).

However, this profound shift in the epistemological basis of solidarity away from the moral gravity of distant suffering-qua-suffering and towards a reliance to our own 'truths' as a justification for action on suffering should not only be seen as a shift in cultural sensibility. It is also an ambivalent political project, firmly grounded on the politics of advanced liberalism and its aggressive instrumentalization of spheres of action that have hitherto remained outside the remit of global capitalism<sup>xi</sup>. The corporate appropriation of solidarity refers, in this context, to the increasingly managerial practices that regulate the communicative structure of humanitarianism with a view to increasing its economic efficiency in a globally competitive media market (Cmiel 1999; Cottle and Nolan 2007; Cottle 2009). This corporate process signals, according to Calhoun, '*the end of the humanitarian field (...) as it came to be conceived over a longish history and as it flourished especially in the four decades after 1968*' (2010: 18)<sup>xii</sup>.

Whereas the instrumentalization of the communicative structure of solidarity is evident in the marketization of its textual strategies, discussed in the previous section, the instrumentalization of the moral proposals to solidarity can be identified in the individuated ways by which Western publics are today asked to engage with vulnerable others: the online activism of campaigns, evident in the invitation to join Oxfam's website (part of the minimal linguistic text of the appeal), the hyper-celebritization of UN advocacy that turns commitment into fandom and the invitation for people's e-testimonies that turn news co-production into an emotive call. Far from claiming that these textualities of post-

humanitarianism exhaust the responses of their publics in fully predictable ways, a question open to empirical research, they do indicate that ironic solidarity responds to the challenges of compassion fatigue, by replacing an ethos of conviction to a cause with a closer-to-life altruism of the everyday – what Eagleton playfully refers to as ‘the banality of goodness’ (2009: 273).

Two properties define the ‘banal’ morality of ironic solidarity: *self-distance*, which treats our action on suffering as public but keeps judgment over why we should act on the suffering private; and *self-empowerment*, which, consequently, formulates our (private) reasons for action as the realization our own humanity whilst keeping the humanity of the sufferer outside the remit of our empathetic imagination. Dialectically related to one another, these two properties of ironic solidarity subordinate judgment and imagination to an instrumental logic of market consumerism with important consequences as to the quality of public engagement that this solidarity proposes to the West.

### ***Solidarity as self-distance: the marginalization of judgment***

The morality of everyday habits, celebrity emotions and ordinary testimonies originates in the subjectivist epistemology of neo-pragmatism (McCarthy 1990). As there is no knowledge outside the self, neo-pragmatism claims, there can be no moral appeal to solidarity beyond the stories we produce so as to imagine ourselves as altruistic actors within our own communities of belonging. In acknowledging the complicity of the self in the production of morality, neo-pragmatism converges with the radical politics of deconstruction – the latter also relying on the subjectivist nature of knowledge in its critique of power. Unlike the politics of deconstruction, however, which turns subjectivism into self-distance as a strategy that exposes the ‘universal’ truths of liberal morality and identifies the unequal relations of power that such morality masks, neo-

pragmatism uses self-distance as a strategy for legitimizing the subjectivist morality of liberalism and its power relations as the best option we have (Geras 1995).

It is Rorty's figure of the 'liberal ironist' that best exemplifies this complacent use of self-distance in the morality of advanced liberalism (1989:15). Much like the post-humanitarian activist who expresses solidarity with distant others from the comfort of her living room, the liberal ironist treats, what Rorty calls, the '*vocabulary of justice*' as a private matter, which enables the ironist to both remain skeptical of any claims as to the justification of solidarity and, simultaneously, to engage in solidary action on vulnerable others as part of her own project of moral self-fulfillment. Whilst, therefore, the imperative to reduce suffering marks the liberal's commitment to the public realm of solidarity, the question of justification that informs this moral imperative is treated as inherently un-resolvable in the public realm and, hence, as belonging to the private realm of the ironist (Rorty 1989: 73-95). Self-distance becomes, thus, a crucial strategy of the ironic sensibility, insofar as it navigates the tenuous space between public hope and private skepticism, to paraphrase Rorty, by rendering public our expressions of solidarity to vulnerable others whilst privatizing the question of why we should be solidary to them.

Insofar as self-distance turns the morality of solidarity into a private affair that concerns no one but ourselves, then irony privileges the cultural dimension of solidarity, self-expressive stories that speak to our commitment to vulnerable others, over the political dimension of solidarity, argumentative stories that help us understand human vulnerability as a political question. This is because, if it is through our own stories of suffering that we become accustomed to a '*vocabulary of justice*' rather than through the argumentative justification of justice (the latter being a cause of skepticism rather than commitment), then

solidarity cannot but be a matter of 'training the soul' rather than a matter of understanding the predicament of the distant other.

It is precisely this view of solidarity as sentimental education that dominates the post-humanitarian textualities I examined earlier. What the introspection of campaigns, the intimate life of celebrity and the therapeutic discourse of disaster reporting demonstrate is that, by ceasing to rely on the justification for action on these others, ironic solidarity becomes today a matter of crafting artful stories that situate the self at the heart of their communicative structure.

This does not mean that the vocabulary of justice is absent from post-humanitarianism. Far from it. It could be argued, in fact, that it is the very proliferation of this vocabulary that enables these genres to emerge, in the first place. The elliptical character of humanitarian branding, for instance, presupposes our familiarity with a vocabulary of justice and taps upon our already existing awareness of global poverty as a cause for action; the entrepreneurial activism of Jolie rests on criticisms of Hepburn's de-politicized Good Samaritanism, which prioritized the alleviation of suffering at the expense of questions of development, whilst new media journalism links the co-creation of news with the de-Westernization of journalistic business.

Even though these systematic references to a vocabulary of justice could be seen as performing what Benhabib calls a series of 'democratic iterations', that is a chain of moral claims that catalyze debate and action in the mediated public realm (2007: 31), they do not, in fact, constitute a resource for the exercise of judgment. What renders judgment marginal to the communication of solidarity is the fact that these iterations are textually implicit. Their references to justice are fully embedded in the story-telling conventions of the post-humanitarian genres

and, therefore, are always formulated as subordinate to the dominant reference to a 'vocabulary of the self' as the legitimate source of knowledge on the world.

As a consequence, rather than providing us with the resources to judge the predicament of vulnerable others, these genres present us with shortcuts to judgment, hinting to justice, but always engaging with corporate persuasion: Amnesty International promotes its global brand to maximize consumer loyalty; Jolie, herself a mega-brand of the film industry, increases the authority of the Hollywood star system; and BBC reporting on Haiti's earthquake markets citizen journalism as the 'new democracy' of global broadcasters. This marginalization of judgment, in turn, allows no space for accounts of humanitarianism that may touch on solidarity as a project of social change. By being prevented, as McCarthy puts it, *'from even thinking...the thought that the basic structures of society might be inherently unjust in some way, that they might work to the systematic disadvantage of certain social groups'* (1990: 367), solidarity as self-distance favours a complacent view of culture populated by self-expressive ironists and devoid of memories of injustice and visions of social change.

### ***Solidarity as self-empowerment: the marginalization of empathy***

Online petitions, celebrity fandom and citizen reporting are some of the key proposals to solidarity available in post-humanitarian textualities. In their refusal to engage our capacity for judgment, these proposals speak to the liberal ironist – a figure suspicious of the moral 'truth' of suffering, yet harbouring a visceral sense of care towards vulnerable others. At the absence of argumentative discourse, however, how do these textualities appeal to solidarity as a morally meaningful practice for the West actor? They do so, by construing solidarity as a matter of self-empowerment.

This is evident in campaign slogans, which focus on the promise to



enhance our social consciousness and improve our moral conduct ('*be humankind*'); in post-television news, where the therapeutic sharing of voice is celebrated as the power of ordinary people to author the news; and in the entrepreneurial individualism of celebrity, which is hailed as the most effective model of solidarity activism today (Bishop and Green 2008:194-213)<sup>xiii</sup>. If, then, self-distance is responsible for separating private judgment from the public expression of solidarity, self-empowerment is further responsible for construing this private judgment as the exercise of free choice towards a fulfilled moral life.

However, insofar as solidarity is presented as a matter of choice about how to live our lives, rather than (also) as a practice of how we may imagine vulnerable others as others with humanity, then the communication of solidarity ceases to be about habituating Western publics into dispositions of care and responsibility to the world beyond our own. Under conditions of global market competition, the communication of solidarity becomes, ultimately, an effort to seduce these publics into making a 'profitable' choice, by picking the better brand - be this Oxfam or the UN. The tearful celebrity, Oxfam's 'Be Humankind' and the twitter hype on Haiti function, in this context, as sentimental discourses of the humanitarian market, whose value lies not in showing us how to relate to the world beyond 'us' but '*in the attempt of one will to align the attitudes, feelings, preferences and choices of another with its own*' (1981/2006: 24).

To the extent that we are addressed as primarily sentimental publics, whose personal preference for a cause depends on the branding strategy of a campaign or the star appeal of a celebrity, ironic solidarity treats us more as a means to the accomplishment of certain ends - sign, donate or buy online - and less as ends in ourselves - as citizens who may engage with the cause of distant suffering because we have a reason to do so. In the ironic solidarity of self-

empowerment, as McIntyre would put it, '*others are always means, never ends*' (1981/2006: 24).

Yet, solidarity as self-empowerment does not only instrumentalize Western publics. It also construes vulnerable others as 'annihilated' figures who have no voice of their own (Silverstone 2002: 306). Campaigns avoid or aestheticize the presence of vulnerable others, live blogging refracts the voices of victims through the voices of people like 'us' and celebrity appropriates distant suffering in her own confessional personification of this suffering. Even though they may employ a rhetoric of dignity, these representational choices fail to construe these others as historical figures who struggle to come to terms with their own predicament and, hence, as figures that deserve our empathy and care.

As a consequence, post-humanitarian textualities may aim at combating fatigue towards traditional iconographies of suffering, yet, ultimately, they distribute the quality of humanity unequally among its communicative figures. Whilst their promises to self-empowerment over-humanize the Western actor, be this a celebrity or an ordinary blogger, their silencing of vulnerable others de-humanize those who already lies outside Western centres of power and visibility. Ironic solidarity is, in this sense, an ethnocentric solidarity that reserves moral fulfillment for Western publics but employs strategies of annihilation in the trans-national sphere of development politics. Instead of enabling us to hear their voice and get an insight into their lives, it treats distant others as voiceless props that evoke responses of self-expression, but cannot in themselves become anything more than shadow figures in someone else's story.

In summary, the culture of irony reflects the instrumentalization of solidarity, under conditions of advanced liberalism. As market practices are increasingly infusing non-economic spheres of activity with a corporate rationality, solidarity

becomes a practice of self-expression, which treats the imperative to act on vulnerable others as a matter of free choice at the service of our moral self-fulfillment. In so doing, however, it reduces us to sentimental publics with little capacity for judgment and empathy, whilst it reduces vulnerable others to voiceless figures without humanity.

### **Proper distance: Solidarity as agonism**

Pity and irony, the two historical paradigms of humanitarianism, fail to sustain a legitimate appeal to action on vulnerable others. Pity is associated with a solidarity of 'universal' proximity, which assumes a false sense of 'common humanity' and suppresses difference between 'us' and 'them', whilst irony is associated with a solidarity of self-distance that takes the self to be the source of morality and assumes an equally misleading radical difference between 'us' and 'them'. Neither paradigm, I have argued, puts forward a political and morally productive proposal for solidarity.

Yet, we may ask, would it not be possible to imagine a different communicative structure of humanitarianism that navigates beyond pity and irony and escapes both the arrogant proximity of the former and the narcissistic self-distance of the latter? Is it not possible to produce an alternative vision of solidarity? My response is yes, provided that we reconsider the imperative to act on vulnerable others on the basis of neither proximity nor self-distance.

Silverstone speaks about a different space, that of proper distance, as '*a space of imagination*', that goes '*beyond the individual and the solitary self*' so that it '*opens the doors to understanding and in turn to the capacity to make judgments in and through the public world*' (2006: 46). Far from maintaining the strategic distinction between imagination and judgment, characteristic of the ironic preference for self-expression as playfully imaginative and its marginalization of judgment as

irrelevant to solidarity, Silverstone's proper distance favours, instead, the co-articulation between judgment and imagination as the only way in which solidarity can go '*beyond the solitary self*' and become a practice of the '*public world*'. Proper distance, for him, requires therefore a dual engagement with human vulnerability, which both enables us to reflect upon this vulnerability as a political question of justice and invites us to relate to the vulnerable other as an '*other with her or his own humanity*' (2004: 4). It is precisely this recovery of the public world as a space of both judgment and imagination that promises to renew the morality of solidarity, today.

Deeply aware of the asymmetrical distribution of humanity between the West and the 'rest', however, Silverstone's claim is not that we all equally participate in the public world but, rather, that the task of actively construing the world as 'common and shared' to all is a moral stake in its own right and itself an act of solidarity. This active and continuous reassertion of the world as-if it were 'common and shared' to all, what Arendt refers to as the 'agonism' of the public world, should, I propose, become the starting point for a new vision of solidarity, 'agonistic' solidarity (Arendt 1958/1999; Silverstone 2006).

Against the contingent morality of irony that reduces the world-beyond-us to our own 'truths' about ourselves, agonistic solidarity re-asserts this world as distinct from us and re-appreciates the role that judgment and imagination can play in turning this world into an object of our reflection, empathy and action. Given the dominance of the morality of contingency today, however, how could the agonistic vision emerge as a convincing alternative to ironic solidarity?

***Imaginative judgment: The morality of agonistic solidarity***

Agonistic solidarity must begin from where we are. It has to take its point of departure in people's reluctance to engage with the 'universal' truths of pity. Whilst irony recognizes this reluctance, its market-response to pity marginalizes the requirements for judgment and empathy that are integral to the moral imperative to act on vulnerable others. It is, therefore, the introduction of these two requirements in the communicative structure of humanitarianism that agonistic solidarity needs to begin with.

The first requirement, judgment, relies in challenging the separation between private justification and public self-expression inherent in the paradigm of irony. Far from private, as I have shown, the promise to self-empowerment that justifies post-humanitarian action is itself constitutive of this action and cannot be arbitrarily separated from it. The moral imperative to 'be humankind', for instance, construes action as the private choice of a Western consumer, yet remains itself fully public, insofar as it bears effects not only upon the enactment of solidarity by Western actors, by reducing our activism into a consumerist practice of brand recognition or celebrity fandom, but also upon vulnerable others, by silencing their voice and annihilating their humanity.

The advanced liberal attempt to separate private from public dimensions of solidarity should, therefore, be seen as itself serving a specific project of power that, by construing solidarity as self-empowerment, ultimately legitimizes the instrumental rationality of the market that informs such action, in the first place (Connolly 1991). Instead of approaching the question of solidarity from a (neo-) pragmatic perspective, as a claim to action that denies its own interest, agonism approaches solidarity as a claim that is always driven by interests and, therefore, as always open to struggle over which of these claims are to be heard and seen, praised or criticized, accepted or rejected: '*...being seen and heard by others*', as

Arendt puts it, '*derive their significance from the fact that everyone sees and hears from a different position*' (emphasis added). The voicing of standpoints, as claims to public interest, rather than self-expressions, as claims to private morality, is, therefore, crucial to a solidarity of agonism.

Far from arguing that the communication of solidarity should become a heavy-handed lesson in the complexities of development politics, the requirement of judgment suggests, rather, that, *contra irony*, agonistic solidarity becomes explicit about the social values that inform its calls to action and problematizes human vulnerability as a question of global injustice, collective responsibility and social change. It also suggests that, *contra pity*, agonistic solidarity does not treat the meaning of these values as 'universal' truths, for there may be many standpoints to injustice, various manifestations of collective responsibility and multiple visions of social change. It is by carving out the communicative space wherein the radical plurality of these standpoints becomes the object of politics – that is to say, the object of public deliberation and collective judgment that agonistic solidarity may be able to galvanize the sensibilities of Western publics towards other-oriented, rather than self-oriented, expressions of solidarity.

The second requirement of agonistic solidarity, imagination, relies in challenging the Western bias inherent in the playful genres of ironic solidarity. Rather than nurturing our empathy to distant others, I have shown how these post-humanitarian textualities invite identification with those who speak our own voice but ignore the voices of others. Whilst the imagination of the self as a more fulfilled human being may well serve the consumerist logic of advanced liberalism, it can hardly educate Western publics to engage with the plight of those who live in zones of danger and deprivation. Instead of the imagination of the self, it is the imagination of the other that becomes crucial to agonistic

solidarity, as a way of habituating us into dispositions of empathy not only by use of '*the rigorous logical unfolding of an argument but rather*', as Villa puts it, '*(through) imaginative mobility and the capacity to represent the perspective of others*' (1999: 96).

This 'imaginative mobility' should, therefore, start from the voice that matters most in the communication of solidarity, the voice of vulnerable others. The inclusion of this voice is instrumental in the humanization of the sufferer, since, as I have argued elsewhere, the quality of humanity cannot be taken for granted as a 'universal' property of our species but is constructed through choices of representations that selectively privilege certain figures rather than others as worthy of our imagination and action (Chouliaraki 2006). This suggests that, *contra* irony, the vulnerable other should be portrayed as an historical agent – someone who actively strives to manage her life, yet under conditions severely constraint by structures of injustice, global and local. It also means that, *contra* pity, this other escapes the 'universalist' imageries of powerless destitution or hopeful self-determination, characteristic of the traditional stereotypes of humanitarian communication. Agonistic solidarity, in this sense, may rely on more complex but also, perhaps, more discomforting representations of distant others, made possible today through the new mediated textualities available in the communicative structure of humanitarianism.

### *The textualities of agonistic solidarity*

Coming full circle to the question of textuality, let me briefly re-evaluate the role that the humanitarian genres explored earlier may play in agonistic solidarity. The commercial advertising format of the Oxfam campaigns suggests that the elliptical communication of branding may be good for generating visceral and, often, strong sentiments towards its artful stories of suffering, but it may not be

able to condense the plurality of voices into its narratives and may not, therefore, be conducive to the 'imaginative mobility' necessary for the exercise of imaginative judgment among Western publics<sup>xiv</sup>. Raising parallel concerns about the 'quality of public engagement', Darnton's review of current practices of NGO communication warns that '*if, for short-term reasons, NGOs choose to trade on more self-interested motivations ... then they must do so. But all the time they should be mindful of the collateral damage these tactics will cause to the supporter base in the longer term*' (2010: 12).

Similarly, as a frontline communication strategy of the UN, the confessional style of the hyper-celebrity appears seductive in terms of online downloads of the UN website, but is perhaps less effective as a medium for engaging citizens with a vocabulary of justice as well as educating them to engage empathetically with distant others, instead of their favourite celebrity. Rather than one-sidedly rejecting the massive, economic and symbolic, capital of celebrity, however, it would be more effective to direct such capital into generating enterpreneurial aid projects and engaging in high-level diplomatic lobbying<sup>xv</sup>; this is a point also argued by Thrall et al, who, from a different perspective, similarly contend that, whilst '*the standard view of celebrity advocacy significantly overstates the news-making abilities of celebrities...*' their research shows that the power of celebrity may indeed lie outside the spotlight, as '*celebrities instead play a growing role as part of an emerging strategy for political advocacy*' (2008: 362).

Finally, even though live blogging has the potential to act as an important medium of crisis communication in disaster reporting, it is, as Beckett puts it, '*best suited to breaking stories and events*' (2010:4) and can, therefore, only be seen as contributing to the agonistic discourses of solidarity when it is contextualized within the broader media ecology of mainstream journalism. This is the context



of, what Beckett (2008) calls, '*networked journalism*', which complements live blogging with authoritative journalistic stories that provide an informed framework to our understanding, with links to the historical context of disaster that offer insights into the causes and conditions of vulnerability, and with eyewitness accounts of vulnerable others who speak from within the scene of suffering; in short, a news ecology that afford the potential for greater analytical context but also for greater visibility of those others.

The normative spatiality of proper distance, as this news example suggests, further presupposes a specific temporality of communication, the temporality of contemporaneity – one that brings the voices of distant others in the same space-time as ours and allows them to be heard side-by-side with ours stories (Silverstone 2006: 43-9). This temporality may thrive on new media, but, because it relies neither on the elliptical messages of branding nor with the emergency calls of live blogging, it capitalizes instead on the simultaneous co-existence of online voices, wherein the voices of distant others unfold, develop and intersect with our own.

An example of such textuality is The Guardian's online journalistic project, the '*Katine Project*', which involves the long-term reporting of a development initiative in NE Uganda, led by AMREF and Farm-Africa (2007-10)<sup>xvi</sup>. A complex online textuality, the '*Katine project*' offers links to multiple stakeholders, including local residents' stories, NGOs and local governments' contributions as well as the history of the village, the day-by-day progress of the project and its sustainability prospects for future development. Combining the temporality of the long-duree with these multiple micro-temporalities embedded within it, the textuality of '*Katine*' managed to enhance the journalism of development, both by inviting Western self-expression, in that it crowd-sourced

expert voices for specialist advice to the project and, crucially, by offering visibility to the problems of the residents of the village.

Two features of the '*Katine project*' are illustrative of agonistic solidarity. The first is the inclusion of a broad array of voices of vulnerable others in its online reporting. By following testimonies of people's lives in their own words, this multi-media textuality places the vulnerability of these people in the historical world of social conflicts and everyday struggles and, further, nuances our understanding of Uganda itself as a complex and challenging context of development. Rather than situating their vulnerability in the fictional universe of post-humanitarianism, this routine inclusion of local voices in the newspaper's story enables precisely that imaginative move towards the standpoint of the other, which makes it possible for us to consider their vulnerability as an object deserving our imaginative judgment.

The second agonistic feature of the project is that, unlike post-humanitarian stories, the stories of *Katine* share none of the narcissistic comfort that lies at the heart of the seductive persuasion of branding, the voyeuristic sentimentalism of celebrity or the therapeutic reverberation of online emotion. By contrast, the *Katine* stories are discomfoting stories: they show us how new media may disempower as well as empower local people, how people's expectations and NGOs' strategies may clash and bring projects to a grind, how local government as much as international bureaucracy may stifle hope but also how things can, against all odds, be hopeful: '*Katine*', as Jones says, '*shows that actually doing development is difficult...You are shown that development is less than perfect. But you are also shown that there is positive change*' (Jones 2010: 18).

Far from requiring a fundamental transformation of the economic relations of global capitalism, then, agonistic solidarity resides instead in subtle but crucial re-articulations of current representational practices of distant

suffering, which break with corporate genres of persuasion and introduce public judgment and empathetic imagination as the two crucial resources for our engagement with human vulnerability.

## Conclusion

Silverstone's analytics of the spatial relationships of mediation as *moral* relationships, par excellence, offers us an invaluable resource for the critical investigation of the communicative structure of humanitarianism. My application of his analytical matrix on the mediation of solidarity has enabled me to produce a typology of paradigms of solidarity, namely 'pity', 'irony' and 'agonism'. Focusing on a critique of irony, I have shown that, even though it has emerged as a promising response to pity and its misleading spatiality of universal proximity, irony is itself a manifestation of the consumerist morality of advanced liberalism and, therefore, unable to put forward a morally acceptable proposal of solidarity. This is because its spatiality of distance-from-the-self organizes the moral relationships of solidarity around a radical difference between us and vulnerable others and keeps their suffering outside the remit of our judgment and imagination. In the spirit of Silverstone's normative proposal for 'proper distance', I have formulated the contours of an alternative vision of solidarity as 'agonism'. Agonistic solidarity is neither about the sharing of the same humanity for all nor the sharing of our own feelings for distant others but about the communication of human vulnerability as a political question of injustice that can become the object of our collective reflection, empathetic emotion and transformative action.

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<sup>i</sup> For theoretical elaborations of the term 'post-humanitarianism' see Chouliaraki (2010a,b; 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam\\_in\\_action/impact/video/behumankind\\_tvad.html](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam_in_action/impact/video/behumankind_tvad.html)

For an analysis of the post-humanitarian style in various NGO campaigns see also Chouliaraki (2010a).

<sup>iii</sup> For the mechanism of impersonation/personification in the public performativity of celebrity, see King (1985/2006: 230-5; 244-6). For an analysis of the performativity of humanitarian celebrity, in particular, along these lines see Chouliaraki (2011).

<sup>iv</sup> In celebrity rhetoric, this difference is reflected (among others) in the use of pronouns, with Hepburn's consistent use of 'they' in order to refer to attributes of the 'people of Ethiopia' in contrast to Jolie's use of 'I' to refer to her own self-development as a result of witnessing the suffering of others:

*Audrey Hepburn, UNICEF Press Conference on Ethiopia 1988: I am very impressed by **the people of Ethiopia**. By **their** beauty, by **their** dignity, by **their** patience and by **their** enormous desire, (their) enormous will to help themselves. **They** are not just sitting here waiting, **their** patience is a patience that is coming partly from **their** religion and partly from **their** characters for dealing with **their** lot the best they can...* (available at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7V6OQcu5ZY&NR=1>)

*Angelina Jolie, UNHCR World Refugee Day 2009: The refugees **I** have met and spent time with have profoundly **changed my life**. The eight-year-old who saved her brother **taught me** what it is to be brave. The pregnant woman in Pakistan **taught me** what it is to be a mother. And the paralyzed boy who was shot in the back with his big smile **showed me** the strength of an unbreakable spirit. So today, World Refugee Day, **I thank them for letting me** into their lives (available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPAuNI4cSpU&NR=1&feature=fvwp>).*



<sup>v</sup> For the confessional in the realm of celebrity altruism see Illouz (2003) on the therapeutic sentimentalism of Oprah Winfrey; Hardt and Tindall (2008) on Geldof's anger; Littler (2008) on Jolie's tearful appearances.

<sup>vi</sup> McDougall G., *The Observer*, *Now charity staff hit at cult of celebrity*, November 26, 2006. For critical accounts of the celebrityization of UN advocacy see Alleyne (2005); Cooper (2007).

<sup>vii</sup> The Haiti earthquake website (January 13<sup>th</sup> 2010):  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8456322.stm>

<sup>viii</sup> For discussions of the news hierarchies of suffering see Galtung and Ruge (1966); Moeller (1999); Cohen (2001); Hojer (2004); for the promise of new media journalism to challenge the power politics of television see Cottle (2009: 161-63); Cooper (2006).

<sup>ix</sup> For an analysis of the post-humanitarian style in BBC's 'Haiti. As It Happened' see Chouliaraki (2010b).

<sup>x</sup> For the implications of the digital divide in the communication of distant others see Beckett and Mansell (2008); for the communication challenges in Haiti, after the earthquake, see Margesson & Taft-Morales (2010).

<sup>xi</sup> For an account of the distinction between liberalism and advanced liberalism or neo-liberalism see Rose (1999) and Lemke (2001). As Lemke puts it, the key transformation from a liberal to an advanced liberal logic lies precisely in the generalization of the economic logic beyond the sphere of economic activity with a view to accomplishing two things: '*First, the generalization functions as an analytical principle in that it investigates non-economic areas and forms of action in terms of economic categories... and... Second, the economic matrix ...it enables a critical evaluation of governmental practices by means of market concepts*' (2001: 198). Whereas Rorty's approach to liberal solidarity does not refer to the advanced version of liberalism, my argument is that the increasing intrusion of the economic logic into the humanitarian field has catalysed processes of 'ironization', which have both expanded and intensified the liberal spirit of solidarity, since the initial formulation of Rorty's thesis in 1989. Post-humanitarianism is, as we will see, is the manifestation of liberal irony in the age of advanced liberalism.

<sup>xii</sup> For a discussion of instrumentalization as a complex process that combines the appropriation of humanitarianism by a market logic with the subordination of humanitarian ends to a military logic of a realpolitik diplomacy, see Calhoun (2010); Barnett & Weiss (2010).

<sup>xiii</sup> For a discussion on celebrity entrepreneurialism or ‘celanrthopy’, as part of philanthro-capitalism, a CSR-type solidarity that is based on harnessing the creativity of major corporations to find solutions to the problems of global poverty see Bishop and Green (2008:).

<sup>xiv</sup> For a persuasive argument on ‘emotional capitalism’ as the short-circuiting of critical reason by the sentimentalism of corporate persuasion see Illouz (2007); Eagleton (2009).

<sup>xv</sup> But for scepticism regarding the role of celebrity in the diplomatic process see Alleyne (2005); Cooper (2007); Dieter and Kumar (2008).

<sup>xvi</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/katine/villagevoices> The Katine website was awarded for its outstanding new media output at the One World Media awards (2008)

## **Bio**

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 mediation of suffering and death as a politics of pity, on historical transformations in humanitarian communication from a politics of pity to a politics of irony and on the rise of technological self-mediation as therapeutic discourse. Her book publications include ‘Discourse in Late Modernity’ (co-authored, 1999); ‘The Spectatorship of Suffering’ (2006); ‘Self-Mediation’ (ed; 2010) and ‘The Ironic Spectator’ (to appear 2012).

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