

POLITICAL THEATERS OF SUFFERING:

Humanitarian Politics and Representations of Distant Suffering

Symposium at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

15 March, 2012 at 09:00-18:00

SESSION 2 ABSTRACTS

Representing the Global Other

Chair: Mika Aaltola, Finnish Institute of International Affairs

1. Social representation and the visual construction of distant suffering

Matteo Stocchetti, Senior Lecturer (PhD) Arcada University of Applied Science

matteo.stocchetti(at)arcada.fi

Visual communication is a form of communication that nowadays many believe is distinctively influential in the social construction of reality. A useful approach to understand the nature and the direction of this influence is the theory of social representation. Originally designed by Serge Moscovici to study the assimilation of scientific knowledge in society, this approach has evolved since the 60s into an articulated research program dealing with the social formation of knowledge. Based on this approach, I suggest that relevant political outcomes of visual communication depend on processes – anchoring, objectification and familiarization – that ultimately require the analyst to look not at the image alone but at the cultural and ideological frameworks within which visual communication takes place. Applied to the uses of images in the representation of distant suffering this perspective suggests that the socio-visual representation of distant suffering in the mainstream media performs fundamental functions of social categorization and political legitimization. The main examples discussed in my text include: the visual coverage of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by BBC World and CNN International, the social impact of the images of abuses committed by the US military against Iraqi war prisoners at Abu Ghraib and more recently the representation of the "Arab Spring" in the West.

2. Mediatized Martyrdom

Lilly Korpiola, University of Helsinki

lilly.korpiola [at] Helsinki.fi

The images of death events or torture can facilitate solidarity and evoke social tensions. Death and its rituals and public presence plays a pivotal role in integrating a community (Pantti & Sumiala 2009). Martyrdom is an attempt to rescue some meaning and dignity from death and it represents the control over uncontrollable in a community (Cook 2007). In this process of social integration, the media play a central role.

This paper looks at images of suffering and death distributed by online activists during the uprisings in Egypt. Three cases of social media are analyzed: the "We are

POLITICAL THEATERS OF SUFFERING:

Humanitarian Politics and Representations of Distant Suffering

Symposium at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

15 March, 2012 at 09:00-18:00

all Khaled Said" Facebook page, the "Torture in Egypt" blog and the Flickr pool "Piggipedia" grown out of this site. The study is based on media analysis and interviews of activists and the sites' founders. Many of the images on these social media sites were also circulated in global media and through the wider media exposure created a global and a local community that witnessed the suffering and shared their solidarity through We are all Khaled Said Facebook sites (Arabic and English) currently with more than 1,8 million members.

Mediated martyrs are part of the wider system of symbols around "Arab spring" phenomenon. Symbolic means, such as images of suffering are an attempt to give meaning to a confusing and sometimes threatening reality. Grievances of Egyptian protesters were focused on legal and political issues. The social media sites studied in this paper shared the same concerns with police brutality and state of emergency laws as they were witnessing the suffering of Egyptian people. The shared threat and images of suffering seems to have functioned as a social adhesive; an effect that was amplified by the martyr culture and symbolic suffering. Mediated martyrs are providing a powerful motivation in political struggle besides connecting with wider audiences.

3. Frames of Suffering: Representing Haiti after the 2010 Earthquake

Annica Moore, University of Lapland

Amoore[at]ulapland.fi

The paper will discuss how Western humanitarian communication and relief politics framed Haiti and Haitians after the Earthquake in 2010. The earthquake brought immediate and intense news coverage of the unfolding humanitarian disaster. The coverage contributed to large amounts of resources being pledged to help the victims. People were made into humanitarian subjects. To this end the promotion of the generous international community and common sympathy trumped concern for local initiative or the questioning of the interests behind the action. This paper analyses snapshots of news coverage in order to shed light on how the emergent disaster event turned into a process of global recognition and representation. The paper will exemplify how the categorical representations of Haiti and its people's encampment could easily find support in the co-option of Western humanitarian discourses, insidiously legitimizing most actions. The influential disaster narratives, voiced by the most vocal intervenors, acted in framing and securitizing Haiti's sub-altern subjects as chaotic, poor, huddled masses in need of any assistance they could get.

4. The Sticky Figures of Suffering Children

Mona Mannevu, University of Turku, Gender Studies

mmanmann [at] utu.fi

My paper will explore the images of suffering through a case-study. The case-study is World Press Photo competition, a highly appreciated photography contest for news

POLITICAL THEATERS OF SUFFERING:

Humanitarian Politics and Representations of Distant Suffering

Symposium at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Helsinki

15 March, 2012 at 09:00-18:00

photographers founded 1955 in the Netherlands. In the archive of winners of the World Press Photo one can find one recurring theme: Third World children who suffer from malnourishment. Western viewers are nowadays said even to be numb to the flow of these kinds of images, but I think this is an exaggerated claim. The figure of a suffering child, no matter how familiar we are with it, still bears strong affective meanings especially in relation to the notions of innocence, vulnerability, and futurity.

Since the figure of a child is so powerful, the use of such an image should be considered critically. Drawing from the writings of Lauren Berlant, Luc Boltanski and Lee Edelman, I suggest that the winners mentioned use the stylized figure of the suffering child to create a humanistic fantasy of 'our world' which 'we, the good ones' have to protect. In this process the notions of 'here' and 'elsewhere' mix, and the pain of the child is universalized as a pain of *any* child – even a child that *could be mine* (Ahmed 2004, 192). This kind of proximity may reduce difficult questions of global inequality and structural violence into a series of individual events about personal suffering, trauma and loss.

5. Sisterhood and Unity? Images of Women in Yugoslavia's History

Vesna Adic, University of Belgrade

[adic_ja\[at\]yahoo.co.uk](mailto:adic_ja@yahoo.co.uk)

and

Brendan Humphreys, Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki

[brendan.humphreys\[at\]helsinki.fi](mailto:brendan.humphreys[at]helsinki.fi)

From the iconic image of Kim Puc from the Vietnam War to that of Sharbat Gula (the "Afghan Girl"), some of the most affecting images of conflict have been of women, often very young women. This paper traces images of Balkan women from the early 20th century to the wars of Yugoslavia's destruction. Some of the images are well-known, some less so, but they do argue complex and changing projections of female roles – matriarch and war widow, fighter and partisan, victim, spokesperson – all framed by changing political contexts. The paper presents and distinguishes both *representative* images, which are metaphorical and possess a lower truth claim, and *documentary* images, which have a much higher truth claim, but questions the exactness of this distinction. Furthermore, the paper addresses the increasingly troubling degree to which images drive and shape policy, especially as images are so easy re-contextualized and manipulated.