

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 3 ABSTRACTS

New Perspectives to the Aesthetics of Distant Suffering

Chair: Lilie Chouliaraki, London School of Economics

1. Mediatized visual discourse, suffering and security: the case of #Neda

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This paper aims to understand the mediated visual icon #Neda, and asks what this mode of 'speaking security' visually and through 'new media' mean for critical security studies. It conducts a media-semiotic analysis of the widely circulated videos of the death of a young woman in Iran in 2009, teasing out how semiotic markers interact with contemporary media structures to produce this extraordinarily strong referent object for politics of international security. In taking serious the agency of non-verbal communication it challenges the speech act understanding of political communication underlying securitization theory, and outlines as a contrast a critical semiotic analysis of the mediatized video sequences allegedly depicting the death of Neda Agha-Soltan. It argues that a media-semiotic framework for understanding of political communication (and constitution of referent objects) might be more fit for today's mediatized international relations than the speech act theory, and shows how it could help securitization framework overcome problems of silence and elite bias. In making this series of arguments it strikes a note now familiar in Security Studies, challenging the dominance of the verbal in poststructuralist thought, as well as the notions of actors and audiences that go with it. But it furthermore aims to note a familiar absence in critiques of the securitization framework, namely mediatization, and what mediatization as a condition for successful political speech does to a theory based upon speech acts.

2. Cosmopolitan empathy and user-generated disaster appeal videos on YouTube

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One of the most important aspects of the communicative changes in today's humanitarian-media field concerns the participation of ordinary people in disaster communications. Self-organizing "digital volunteers" increasingly participate in disaster response efforts in a number of ways. This paper deals with one of the so far overlooked aspects of citizen communications taking place in the aftermath of disasters, the emergence of user-generated humanitarian appeals for donations on

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the Internet. Taking as a theoretical starting point the concept of “cosmopolitan empathy” (Beck 2006), understood as an extended capacity to imagine and empathize with the suffering of others beyond one’s immediate existence, we will address the impact of the Internet on humanitarian communication. It has been claimed that humanitarian communication is increasingly rejecting universal morality in favour of consumerism-based solidarity (Chouliaraki 2010, Vestergaard 2008). Specifically, we will examine the styles and practices of emotional mobilization of user-generated disaster appeal videos uploaded on popular video-sharing website YouTube in response to Haiti earthquake in January 2010, Japan tsunami in March 2011, and East Africa’s escalating draught and famine in 2011. The YouTube fundraising appeals are targeted at the uninvolved public, thus the communicative situation between the viewers and user-generated disaster appeal videos is comparable to that of the traditional forms of disaster reporting that involves those who represent the suffering and those who watch from a distance. We ask: How YouTube disaster appeal videos invite their viewers to be humanitarian actors?

3. Imagining the Evil Other. Visual Construction of the Evil Opponent in Contemporary Humanitarian Politics

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Strikingly violent media images of fallen tyrants ---Saddam been dragged out of his hole, Gaddafi beaten to death and defeated Bin Laden’s sad hiding place --- are familiar to all contemporary spectators of mediated war. Photographs of today’s most wanted tyrants and political evil-doers portrait dirty, bloody, beaten down, humiliated men down on their luck, punished for their bad deeds. These pictures are usually juxtaposed with a visual counter image: the west presented in the figure of a strong, righteous, technically advanced and moral, humanitarian soldier or the oppressed and rightfully angry, domestic western-minded civilian opposition. Political imageries picturing the evil opponent violently defeated by humane western forces visually point to the decadent, perverted and sick nature of the archenemy. They vividly tell that the enemy is evil; and must thus be destroyed without pity by democratic forces and humanitarian interventions. These images endlessly circulating in the media will arguably be cemented as one political photo genre descriptive of the era of “war on terror”. The paper ponders upon what do these violent imageries picturing the defeated “enemies of the west and freedom” tell about the world in which we live today and of the current political system? The ways in which we picture our enemy, tell a great deal about our selves; our identity, ideals and the political paradigms of our time. This paper also studies, through a historical overview and visual analyze, whether these images are an updated version of the historically much used western propagandist imaginary picturing the eternal struggle between the Good and the Evil?

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4. Humanitarianism, Imagery And The Emotional Encounter With Suffering: A Critical Investigation of the Narrative Logics of Compassion in Western NGO Advertising Campaigns

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The public face of the aid industry is quite often, and literally, a face; that of the hungry child or helpless mother in the advertisement campaign designed to collect private donations for humanitarian action. These emotionally appealing visual representations in the media help in the production of global connectivity through which distance can be bridged, caring made manifest, and the lives of distant strangers affected. This article focuses on, and investigates, the specific role of emotion in visual advertising campaigns of humanitarian non-governmental organizations. This is done, first, by theorizing the encounter with visual representations with an emphasis on the emotional identity of the spectator. To support this, the article theorizes a social, and specifically a narrative, view of emotion; this discussion is related to the emotion of compassion. Stemming from this theoretical elaboration, the article investigates a sample of NGO advertising images. By reading these images and their constitutive narratives we also gain insight into the narratively constituted emotionality of their spectators. Furthermore, this investigation makes it possible to engage critically often quite paternalistic cultural practices of the West that rely on degrading narrations of identity and social life at the level of both image and emotion (of compassion).