

Distant Suffering and Postmodern Subjectivity: the Communal Politics of Pity.

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Abstract:

Television's role in the construction, representation and framing of tragic events forms an important component of our mediated modernity. Mass consumption and public spectacle authenticate an event whilst helping to reconstruct it. The freeze-framing of images, televisual vantage points and seamless narratives are often perceived as flattening event construction into a smooth commentary which is made less conflicting through the lens of the camera and a seemingly authoritative commentary. Televisual representation and the reconstruction of tragic events, nevertheless create communion and a mass politics of pity that unites humanity through images of destruction, death, turmoil and human degradation. The domestication of suffering through information and communication technologies (ICTs) in private and public spaces is a negotiated and contested phenomenon, and one which not only raises the issue of media power but also our subjectivity in postmodernity which is defined through people's interactions with the mediated environment in our everyday lives and the cultural codes which we produce, appropriate and sustain through this interactivity.

Keywords; Postmodern, Suffering, Trauma, Pity, Spectacle, Media Event

Introduction

Narratives of loss and suffering form an important part of the modern media landscape (see Gorney 2005; Oushakine 2006; Debrix 2006), and such narratives are the primary means by which people engage with disasters and tragedies. According to the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters in Belgium there has been a marked increase in the number of disasters worldwide with 1,230 disasters registered between 1970-1979, compared to more than 3,000 disasters reported between 2000-2003 (See Vasterman et al. 2005:107). As sociologists and historians have argued the communal consumption and experience of pain and suffering can be fundamentally social (see Cole 2004; Good et al. 1994; Winters 1995) enabling human communion through media narratives. Media narratives of suffering have the potential to both personalize and de-personalize suffering to their audiences and in the process they can re-frame proximity and distance, our sense of connection and disconnection as well as temporality.

Mediated suffering is then a cognitive construct which influences our moral and ethical responses through the media's visual cultures and discursive paradigms where images and narratives work hand in hand to compose and enable global spectatorship. The audience's ability to understand suffering as a phenomenon enacted on a global stage and the media's ability to invite moral gaze and engagement is a recurring phenomenon in postmodernity. Our socialization to 'mediated

suffering' denotes our subjectivity to our mediated environment and equally our human condition to be attracted to narratives of human loss and suffering. The media by socializing us as subjects who bear witness, authenticate and respond to mourning confers a state of subjectivity on the postmodern audience where suffering is pervasive and our reactions to it can be mediated both through our personal orientations as well as institutional and media attempts to forge collective mourning.

The act of bearing witness to global events through the broadcasting space has been well documented in media literature (see Dayan & Katz 1992; Scannell 1989). Broadcasting reframes time and space and has the ability to pause accelerated modernity and enable humanity to reconnect and commune through media events. Here the media appropriates a social role to transform tragic events into platforms for global communion. It can equally create spaces for therapeutic recovery both by inviting a moral gaze as well as facilitating national and (perhaps) global conversations on suffering, where these can be unrestrained by geographical barriers. Pantii & Wietten (2005:313) reiterate that the ability to connect with human tragedies is not limited by national borders and that national unity is forged through collective mourning. The news media becomes a platform for this brief national consensus.

By creating spaces for moral engagement mediated grief becomes a device to convene humanity and convey humanitarian discourses. However, our ability to domesticate grief and personalise it in relation to events far and near can vary in intensity. Whilst the mass media can mobilise national and global reactions to grief, its persistent need to feed the public with the politics of pity and invite moral engagement can equally lead to apathy and disengagement where suffering and traumatic narratives become part of the everyday terrain of news creation and consumption. Grief and suffering can become banal when entwined with the everyday and this non-stop consumption of images of suffering can result in 'compassion fatigue' (Hoijer 2004). Tester (2001:13) describes compassion fatigue as a phenomenon in which 'people become so used to the spectacle of dreadful events, misery or suffering that we stop noticing them and are left unmoved.' Tester (1994:107) contends that the media tends to have an anaesthetic effect and can in effect thwart the moral values of solidarity.

Conversely, where events of suffering evoke a mass reaction they become transformative devices both in the project of memory and history and in forming communion with wider humanity. Audiences' ability to domesticate grief and suffering presented through the mass media is

dependent on various factors including personal experiences, networks, social and communal ties, sense of loss and belonging to an event, the quest for social justice and reparation for loss, and the degrees of vulnerability an event can evoke within the discourses of a postmodern risk society along with other abstract or concrete personal factors which may mediate the individual human condition. The politics of pity and the ability to create media events do not just illuminate the social role of the media they also periodically highlight the human need for communion. With the disintegration of community and family structures in postmodern societies, the media becomes a social device providing a functional role of connecting disparate and disaggregated societies. More fundamentally, the questions of grief, pain and loss and more specifically the media's power to depict these through its pervasive presence taps into the human psyche where the pull towards the melancholic and the abject reveals our ability to connect with, be attracted to and repelled by traumatic images. When a mediated trauma is able to mobilise strong emotions globally or nationally it may enable various forms of humanitarian reaction at individual, communal, national or global levels. Luc Boltanski, (1999) in his extensive examination of the politics of pity, has created a typology in classifying human engagement with distant suffering where the sentiment of pity can be located through how audiences engage with suffering. Audiences engage with the politics of pity either through the act of denunciation of an event, the degree of empathy directed at the victim, or the aestheticization of suffering.

Our ability to lay claim to trauma and grief represented in the media as communal constructs equally impresses our postmodern subjectivities defined through our interactions (with media as both technology and content) and equally with our engagements and disengagements with the imagined communities the media represents, reflecting both the media's symbolic power to represent and narrate reality and equally the audience's agency to partake in grief and to personalise or gain proximity or distance to events of suffering. This postmodern subjectivity rests on audiences recognising the 'media event' as a historical moment and the cultural codes that construct meaning beyond the immediate event.

The Media Event as Postmodern Ritual

In post-modernity the 'media event' captures the ability of the media to construct events, reframe temporality and to consolidate the construction of memory through its televisual spectacle. Televised tragedies which evoke both individual and communal displays of emotion have been well documented (Zelizer, Pantti & Wietten 2005; Kitch 2000; Walter 1995). In recent years, there has been an increased exposure to images of human suffering among civilian populations

through television news. These presentations have become more graphic, challenging the ethical and moral boundaries of taste and decency (see Hoijer 2004; 1996). Menaheim Blondheim & Tamar Liebes (2002: 271) note that ‘when major debacles occur, television interrupts its schedule for the live, open-ended ‘celebration’ of the momentous event, featuring the disaster marathon.’ This ‘disaster marathon’, according to them, is defined by natural disasters, high-profile accidents such as the failed launch of the *Challenger* space shuttle, or purposive public acts of major violence such as terrorist attacks.

Dayan and Katz’s conception of the ‘media event’ (1992: 196-7) captured television’s ability to mark an event or moment in history through the interruption of routine broadcasting. The suspension of usual routines to carve a moment in time where the nation convenes over the televisual space evokes both the power of mass media to create events but equally the conceptualisation of national spaces to mourn and commemorate. The suspension and reconfiguration of temporality through non-stop media broadcasts becomes a device to commit media events to public memory where pausing of routine broadcasts and the live consumption of events constructs the temporal space as a subjective device of the media in constructing history. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Rangers (1983) in *The Invention of Tradition* articulate the function of a ‘constructed past’ in establishing social cohesion, legitimizing authority and creating cultural frameworks. They argue that ‘invented traditions’ are crucial to the construction of the nation.

Beyond the broadcasting space, the social function of journalism in delivering bad or catastrophic news is also well researched (Kitch 2003; 2002; Lule 2001; Zelizer 1990). Kristina Riegert and Eva-Karin Olsson (2007: 144) take James Carey’s ritual view of communication where the purpose of communication is to maintain society over time, ‘representing shared beliefs, understandings and emotions whether in celebration or in mourning.’ This culturalist perspective, they argue, emphasises the importance of meaning-making and sees journalism as a platform for remembering, sharing and mourning and the forms of narrative they appropriate are then borrowed from the cultures in which they work. According to Coman (2005) the process of ritualization in journalism provides a means to gain control over the processes of meaning-making.

Television’s ability to take part in ‘the live broadcasting of history’ (Dayan and Katz 1992) produces an experience where private and public moments coalesce into one. Menaheim Blondheim and Tamar Liebes (2002: 272) concur that when ‘major disasters occur, television

interrupts its schedule for the live, open-ended ‘celebration’ of the momentous event featuring the disaster marathon.’ The pausing of the routine and the switching into live mode creates a convergence of the public and private realms, fostering a collectivity. The thwarting of the boundaries between the public and private is a device which the media leverages on to construct public memory. As Roland Barthes proclaimed, the age of the photography denotes the ‘explosion of the private into public’ (cf. Helmers 2001: 448).

Blondheim and Liebes (2002:274) point out that there is ‘increasing difficulty in distinguishing between television coverage of an event and it becoming part of an event.’ The medium’s predominance in a public event, they argue, should be situated through electronic journalism’s adoption of the live coverage format which positions it in an intermediary role as a storyteller, negotiator and movable stage on which the drama is enacted.

For Dayan and Katz media events provide a social platform to affirm social bonds and to blatantly renew and activate dominant societal values (cf. Pantti & Wietem 2005: 302). These extraordinary events through the spirit of ‘communitas’ work to unite fragmented societies. Riegert and Olsson (2007: 147) in tandem argue that ‘media rituals can be said to function as a way for media organisations, television in this case, to establish authority by playing a key part in society’s healing process.’ They (2007: 145) assert that the media event enables not just the ‘reconstitution of older forms of rituals but new mediated ones gained through the shared experience of watching live in millions of homes across nations and peoples. Mervi Pantti and Jan Wieten (2005: 301) concur that contemporary coverage of any culturally proximate tragedy will now include depictions of public mourning and trauma and in the process they convene ‘unprompted feeling communities’ which are not limited by national borders. The media then provides rituals of participation which in effect become a platform to witness and feel with the rest of imagined humanity.

To Witness is to ‘Partake’

The bias of the visual in the media event plays a dominant role in constructing our postmodern subjectivity. Images have always been problematic devices in conveying or depicting reality both as photographs and as moving images. Images particularly photographs have been the subject of close scrutiny by Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Michael Foucault and Jacques Lacan, amongst others. Barthes positions pictures as a ‘witness to layers of meaning’ (cf. Hudson 2003: 45) where no one meaning hermeneutically seals an image. The image’s crisis of authenticity and

its difficulties in representing reality or misconstruing the 'real' confers it with a dubious status. Its ability to distort reality and exhort the emotive, places it into a double bind where its relationship to reality and truth is confounded by our obsession to incessantly capture images and exhibit them, inviting a pervasive public gaze. The bias of the visual in our postmodern culture bears the hallmark of this dilemma and equally highlights the complex subjectivity of the postmodern audience where engaging through images and communal consumption validate the politics of pity in different ways. We're conditioned to transgress boundaries and view private images on public platforms. Our relentless gaze into private spheres vigorously co-opts private realms as moments of public spectacle. Our postmodern subjectivity is insensitive to the transgression of public gaze into private arenas and private lives of the injured, the victimised and marginalised. This insensitivity and the thwarting of boundaries between the public and private along with the mass consumption of trauma as media spectacle define the politics of pity in postmodernity.

The communal spectacle and the communal politics of pity through mass consumption provide valuable insights into the human psyche where the construction of reality becomes validated through mass viewing. The 'media event' works to authenticate an event through this mass witnessing. The media, by inviting global viewing, enables mass witnessing which acts as a communal ritual as well as a transformative device in consigning mediated events to public memory. To partake through viewing is equally to bear witness to media events through the screen. This makes audiences a complicit component in producing the media event. The recognition that the event is watched simultaneously by the rest of 'imagined' humanity becomes an implicit cultural code in constructing and relating to an event and in tandem ascribing it social or political significance. This postmodern subjectivity of audiences is dialectical; the media can implicitly exert its cultural codes and equally there is agency to negotiate the power of the media by domesticating an event or de-personalising it, both through our interactions with technology as well as our engagements with the content that accrues through these platforms.

The collective watching and bearing witness through technology has significance in authenticating an event. Mass viewing coupled with the pausing of broadcasting schedules through live events reframe temporality whilst constructing a mediated memory. When the act of bearing witness through live broadcast creates a historic moment through the public consumption of trauma, this act of mass consumption elicits people's personal memory in constructing a public

one. In this sense, the act of bearing witness through mass media creates a cultural code where audiences are socialised into the politics of pity with the reframing of the temporal dimension, the disruption of broadcasting routines, the validation of an event through mass gaze and embedding of personal memory with a public and mediated one. In tandem with this Helmers (2001) asserts that popular memory is mediated by electronic technology where the emergence of the public occurs when an event or a sequence of events coalesce. The process of interrupting broadcast schedules to bring live events acts as a validating device for impressing the significance of the event. The disruption of routine and re-direction to the event are important in the act of authentication.

John Durham Peters (2001:707) describes witnessing as an intricately tangled practice which ‘raises the questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying.’ For Peters the phenomenon of bearing witness re-opens and raises ‘fundamental questions of communication’ itself. Peters rightly points out that while witnessing is a cultural, moral, ethical and legal construct, it is clearly under-theorised in media studies.

Both John Peters (2001: 708) and Michael Humphrey (2000: 10) write about witnessing and testimony as a legal construct with a long history of establishing facts in trials. Humphrey situates the notion of testimony as truth in news gathering, psychological therapy and entertainment. Peters additionally locates the notion of witnessing in theology where the concept of a witness as a martyr developed in early Christianity. In recent decades there has been a proliferation of literature where witnesses record their experiences as survivors of traumatic events such as World War II . Peters argues that ‘witnessing’ is an extraordinary moral and cultural force as it fundamentally anchors the act of witnessing to life and death from the theological perspective.

Humphrey postulates that giving testimony of one’s experiences can be manifested in different forms – speech, literature, poetry, drama, art, music, photography, etc. - but nevertheless the more dominant cultural form tends to be narrative or storytelling. Humphrey, in citing Milan Kundera, reiterates that narrative comes out of experience and also shapes experience and what is generated as narrative is as much a product of forgetting as remembering. In drawing on Engels’ notion of memory, Humphrey points out that memory, especially spoken memories, can be constructed as a conversation (2000:11). In situating the concept within media, John Ellis (2000: 32) reiterates witnessing can be in some ways responsible for the events which you bear testimony to. He argues that television presents a particular way of witnessing as a domestic act. Similarly, for

Tobias Ebbrecht (2007: 223) the 'event' has become a key term in our contemporary culture where historical moments can become current events as they are commemorated through the media space and hence these mediatised rituals play a role of emphasizing remembrance.

This act of bearing witness through the television screen evokes Raymond Williams' mobile privatization where distant acts and events can be consumed within the domain of one's home. These private moments of consuming a global tragedy signify both the need to connect with far and distant humanity whilst marking these spaces out as events witnessed through the screen. Helmers (2001:450) contends that the mass media 'provides citizens with common stories, shared cultural memory and mandatory rituals creating temporal (yet temporary) public sphere(s) that conjoins humanity through the act of public consumption.' For Helmers (2001: 450) 'media texts provide a certain flow of cultural material from producers to audiences who in turn use them in their life world settings to construct a meaningful world and to maintain a common cultural framework.'

The important role of the media in our everyday life, especially its ability to represent the wider world and reality, means that it appropriates a symbolic power and a liminal space where it is positioned between our private realm of consumption and the public realm of moral engagements. Its ability to invite spectacle and gaze and equally to enable mass consumption of suffering and trauma imposes a subjectivity where the act of mass consumption and the invitation to bear witness creates a moral economy of validating an event through personal witnessing. This invitation to bear testimony construct the audience as crucial to the politics of pity and the construction of public and media memory. Often this subjectivity of the audience to a media event or the 'disaster marathon' is underplayed in media studies. The invitation to bear witness binds audiences into a moral economy of validating and constructing the media event where mass viewing is a vital component of creating it in the first place.

Mass consumption of suffering, bearing witness, our moral gaze and the politics of pity all reaffirm a postmodern subjectivity where our engagements with our mediated environment is both about subjugation, where the media exploits the human psyche and its pull towards pity, abjection and suffering, and equally about our ability to domesticate or dismiss the media's invitation to partake in suffering. The subjectivity of the human condition is defined through our appropriation of the mediated environment into our everyday lives and our degrees of dislocation in our immediate physical societies. Here the media and particularly new media provide new

platforms to experience communion and connection where these provide opportunities to construct private meaning to public events.

Beyond witnessing, new media technologies enable new ways to engage with media events, from the creation of online content to the posting of pictures and videos of events along with the possibility of viewing events decontextualised from media narratives in video portal sites such as Youtube. The liveness that denotes Dayan and Katz's (1992) notion of a media event is re-negotiated through new media technologies which enable audiences to view footage on demand and to extend and augment television news consumption through other multimedia platforms.

As Jan Roscoe (2004: 363) points out, as 'interactive media opportunities have arisen, content is now being produced, delivered and consumed in new ways and content can be delivered across various platforms, utilising television, the internet, mobile phones and digital and interactive screen services.' Roscoe argues that instead of our viewing being controlled through the flow of schedules, which Raymond Williams envisaged, it is now clustered around events, and through technologies such as personal video recorders, DVDs, and subscription television services. Additionally, new media platforms such as websites and blogs function as memorials and as performance where they provide spaces to partake in the event (Helmets 2001).

Like placing flower bouquets and notes at accident sites and places of commemoration of tragic events, new media spaces enable audiences to participate discursively with events and to watch and read events beyond the 'liveness' of the media event on television. Video platforms enable audiences to view video images and footages disembedded from the media narrative. This decontextualization of events from live broadcasts and seamless narratives re-negotiates the media event as both a collective and fragmented experience in postmodernity and in the age of convergence. Secondly, new media spaces enable the creation of content by audiences. These engagements broaden event creation and in the process become therapeutic sites for recovery and individual and communal meaning making.

The collective commemoration of grief and trauma enables the emergence of collective memory. Beyond the creation of collective memories, rituals are also performative (Schefflin 1985; Tambiah 1977). In stressing the significance of rituals for the act of remembering and collective memory, Joseph Roach (1996: xi) articulates that the social processes of memory and forgetting may be manifested in various performance acts 'from stage plays to sacred rites, from carnivals to the invisible rituals of everyday life.'

Pain and Memory

Postmodern subjectivity is built through socialisation into media rituals and the human condition to relate to pain and suffering where these play an important part in constructing memory. In bearing testimony to tragic and mediated events, pain and the ability to relate to suffering become an integral component in mediatised rituals. Pain and suffering become tools to conjoin private and public memory. Jennifer Cole (2004:88) argues that the ability of ritual to assuage pain lies in its ability to draw pain into the process of producing people's memories. Memory then becomes a mechanism that links individual bodies with wider narratives and commits people to a particular narrative of rooting it within their subjective sense of themselves. Blondheim and Liebes (2005) assert that the relationship between audience and television becomes significant during historic moments as the media appropriates the role as a memory institution. Jay Winter's (1995) *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* explores the various dimensions in which the process of grieving manifests forms and rituals to express and assuage collective loss and suffering. Collective commemoration is both a ritual and a device for healing and remembrance.

Jennifer Cole (2004: 87), whilst exploring the 'question of how ritual can heal community pain or trauma', argues that ritual's ability to relieve pain is conjoined to the process of reconstructing memory.' Cole points out that the experience of pain and suffering can be fundamentally social. This social nature of pain is yielded through the interfacing of the social world with individual subjectivities. Cole is of the view that social pain is 'historically constituted and expressed' leading to an 'archive of historical memories' structured around social pain. In citing social theorists such as Emile Durkheim and Friedrich Nietzsche, she points out that memory requires pain and indeed other sensory and visceral perceptions such that pain pre-dates visual images and languages (Cole 2004:99).

In a similar vein Birgitta Hoijer links the view of tragedies and crises on media platforms to the creation of global compassion. Hoijer (2004: 19) describes the sentiment of compassion as a sentiment commonly exploited in media and politics. She points out that this is evident with the integration of trauma and suffering as mainstream narratives with the 'CNN effect' where rolling news focuses on conflicts and disasters and their impact on the innocent without reprieve. Hoijer, (2004) in citing Sznajder, locates public compassion with the ideas of Enlightenment and humanitarian movements that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries where it was manifested in a

zeal to abolish slavery, child labour and other forms of social injustices that prevailed in society. The media draws on the moral gaze in enabling a collective engagement. The moral gaze thus captures another form of subjectivity created by mediated suffering where the ability to experience pain is also equally mediated by the need to respond morally and to impose judgement through our cultural paradigms and value systems.

Martin Bell (1998: 169) describes the focus on human suffering in conflict, war and strife as the ‘journalism of attachment’. This journalism of attachment, according to Bell, emphasises people as opposed to weapons and strategies, depicting a change in the reporting of conflicts, wars and humanitarian crises. Bell argues that the journalism of attachment, with the focus on human interface with conflict, works to remove distance and neutrality. The journalism of attachment is then rooted in depicting pain and suffering and drawing on the audiences’ compassion as opposed to apathy.

Hojjer (2004: 514) contends that ‘global compassion is situated at the intersection between politics, humanitarian organizations, the media and the audience/citizens.’ Through extensive media coverage, images of distant suffering have become part of ordinary citizens’ perceptions of conflicts and crises. Television, with its reach and visual impact, may therefore play a key role in the fostering of a collective global compassion. For Hojjer (2004: 520) the compassion that the audience expresses is often directly related to the documentary pictures it views on television. Thus individual pain and collective memory along with the ritual depiction of human suffering by the media enacts cultural codes which audiences are able to identify. Our ability to personalise and de-personalise mediated suffering then is determined by our individual psyche. Suffering has mass appeal but it is equally mediated by the sense of the personal and by individual orientations. Our ability to partake or disengage from mediated suffering reveals the politics of pity where the agency of the audience interplays with various media conventions which constantly pull us into a pervasive and moral space of pain and suffering,

Conclusion

It is the argument in this paper that distant suffering and the mediated politics of pity create a postmodern subjectivity where the media event is about socialising audiences into media rituals through certain technical devices. These include the suspension of temporality and a re-configuration of spatiality, the ability to narrate and represent reality and its persuasive potential

to invite audiences to bear witness to the images of suffering with the rest of humanity. Steve Anderson (2001: 21) describes television as ‘an ideal facilitator of cultural memory with its ritualistic, event-style coverage and capacity for endless repetition.’ This postmodern subjectivity narrates both the power of the media as well as the complexities in engaging with events of distant suffering. The emphasis on a visual culture and its relevance in creating global compassion along with its relationship to pain and memory are crucial elements of our postmodern subjectivity. This is constructed through our socialisation into media rituals which leverage on our human condition and psyche to relate to pain and suffering. A pervasive image economy of suffering in accelerated modernity can equally de-sensitise people’s relationship to pain where people can renegotiate and domesticate suffering through their interactions with technology and content. Media events and the rituals enacted through the media are significant memory devices where the suspension of time and routines are employed to commit media events to public memory. Here the collective watching seeks to validate an event as nationally or globally significant where the act of mass viewing transforms audiences into witnesses. Postmodern subjectivity is about this complicity in the media’s ability to represent reality. This subjectivity enables mediated suffering to be both a pervasive narrative in our media-saturated world and equally one that could be domesticated by individuals and societies. This postmodern subjectivity is intrinsically dialectical in its orientation where the ‘media event’ and the attendant suffering could alter our psyche and consciousness locating them as ‘transformative devices’ in constructing history and public memory, whilst enabling us to connect and disconnect to the strange and familiar in proximate and distant places.

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