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Bearing Witness, Moral Responsibility and Distant Suffering

The idea that contemporary media have shaped or transformed the way that we see, contemplate, and respond to suffering is now widespread. In his influential *Seeing Things* John Ellis (2000: 1) identified a 'new modality of perception' brought about, in particular, by television, and producing both a 'powerless knowledge' and a sense of 'complicity with what we see'. With this, says Ellis, we can no longer say that we did not know what was going on. Where there is famine, war, atrocity or disaster, we cannot claim that it passed us by since it no longer takes place beyond the range of our vision. Part of this transformation, then, is the constitution of what Stanley Cohen (2016: 15-18) called the external bystander: those people who, as John Durham Peters (2001: 707) put it, 'watched history unfold in their armchairs'. Televised suffering, bringing to the viewer its combination of hapless knowledge and complicity, presents what Ellis calls a 'mute appeal' (2000: 11) – a televised call to responsibility – although his most famous contribution is in heralding the age of witnessing. This has been taken up by Fuyuki Kurasawa (2009: 93, 94), who identifies a generation in the grip of 'witnessing fever', as seen in the increasing number of media forms that present testimony and evidence, and our apparent enthusiasm for viewing them. For Kurasawa (2009: 95) bearing witness is made up of a number of elements, tasks shared both by those who produce media texts and by those to whom they are presented: speaking out about suffering

where otherwise there would be silence; providing interpretation where incomprehension might thrive; cultivating empathy in place of indifference; remembering events at risk of being forgotten, and preventing their recurrence. Barbie Zelizer (2002: 698) suggests that one of the key functions of bearing witness is that it helps return a community to a state of unity that existed prior to whatever trauma might have befallen it. Sue Tait (2011: 1221) argues that such traumatic events demand 'some form of public response', and understands bearing witness as a moral practice. This would be familiar to Kurasawa (2006: 95) for whom bearing witness is a mode of 'ethico-political labour'. As Tait (2011: 1222) reminds us, *to bear* is to assume a burden, and when we see the suffering of others – on our televisions, say – we are called to take on the burden of responsibility, to respond to what we see: to do something. So, bearing witness is more than just seeing: it is also a moral response, that is, to perform our responsibility.

We may no longer be able to claim that we did not know, but seeing on its own is no substitute for responding, being aware is not necessarily to be responsible, and so bearing witness must do more moral work than mere observation or recognition if we are to say that contemporary media have brought about any sort of useful change in the way that we exist in relation to suffering. For Tait (2011: 1233) this moral work is best motivated when the media present suffering in such a way that it is affective, so that it

vitalises our emotional bond to different and dissimilar others, and moves the audience bodily towards response. Similarly, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006b) has argued that media coverage of suffering must be brought into a narrative order that presents the human face of suffering – or else audiences will not be morally activated. In what follows, it is argued that the moral value of narrative order in media presentations of suffering has been overstated, which results in placing the weight of responsibility on media producers rather than on audiences. In the first section it is argued that this overstatement is, in part, a result of a narrow account of the political and moral function of the aesthetic of the sublime. Whilst it may be tempting to dismiss spectacular imagery – terror attacks, natural disasters, industrial accidents, and so on – as providing little more than voyeuristic entertainment unless news producers not only *show* us what happened but *tell* us why it is wrong, by returning to the work of Immanuel Kant (2008), and then to the re-reading of this performed by Jean-François Lyotard (2009), it is possible to find an account of bearing witness to sublime violence that emphasises its role in taking society *towards the better*. In the second section it is argued that the overstatement of the moral necessity of narrative order is also, in part, a result of assuming moral responsibility is something that follows from a media presentation, as if it can be activated if the coverage is *just so* and never engaged if a fully humanised, emotionally moving story is missing. Whilst these kinds of affective narrations are taken to be desirable, and their absence in coverage of certain categories of people seen

to be suspicious, through an engagement with the work of Emmanuel Levinas it is shown that moral communication is present even in the most minimal, *dots on maps* and *numbers dead*, type of coverage. Moral responsibility is there, if we care to look closely enough, and so it is concluded that the dismissal of certain kinds of media coverage as not morally activating only serves to justify our *spectatorish inertia* in the face of distant suffering.

Sublime Violence

In her analyses of the media coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001 and the subsequent invasion of Iraq by US and allied forces in 2003, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006a, 2006b, 2008c) utilises an idea of the sublime to argue that representations of suffering that do not move from images of spectacular magnitude to individuated stories are insufficient for mobilising moral sentiment. One of the ways that this sublimation occurs is through the use of the long shot. Chouliaraki (2006b: 70-71) compares the close up shots of the events of 11 September 2001 with long shots of the compromised skyline, arguing that the former brought viewers into moral proximity with the victims whilst the latter created a contemplative distance that lent itself more to voyeurism and self-reflection. For Chouliaraki the long shot dehumanises, giving precedence to the horror of magnitude over response to individual suffering, presenting Manhattan as if in

a painting, still and unmoving (2006b: 89, 92, 171). This, she says, creates an 'eternal present' (2006b: 171), appropriate for cool reflection but not for the urgency of moral response. Looking at the long shot, at smoke, fire and collapse on an urban scale, the audience, she argues (2006b: 180), were brought to think of the historical significance of what was happening, connecting the images to past events (Pearl Harbour, perhaps) or to other places (such as major European cities that may now be under threat), but not to the immediacy of moral responsibility for the sufferers, who are not depicted.

With the attacks on the World Trade Centre, the long shot was supplemented by survivor testimony, interviews with victims' loved-ones and sympathetic narration by news presenters, which create the sort of humanising presentation that Chouliaraki is after. That is to say, the images were subsequently brought into a narrative order that encouraged a sense of empathy for victims, as well as the denunciation of perpetrators. Other events do not receive the same attention. In her analysis of the media coverage of the bombing of the Iraqi capital in 2003, Chouliaraki (2006a: 263) argues that 'the semiotic choices of the footage construe the bombardment of Baghdad in a "sublime" regime of pity, whereby the phantasmagoria of the spectacle obliterates the humanitarian quality of suffering and whereby the aesthetic of "shock and awe" takes over other ethical and political considerations'. The viewer is taken through a process of 'sublimation', she says, that 'discourages the spectators from feeling for or denouncing

the suffering' (2006a: 267), encouraging instead contemplation of the shocking and awesome qualities of the aerial attack. This is achieved by showing neither the civilians bombed in their homes nor the aircrew doing the bombing, and by filming the bombardment from above and afar, together creating a spectacle of 'immense intensity' (2006a: 269), but without a human dimension. As Chouliaraki (2006a: 272) explains, the sufferer is represented in non-human terms, with focus on buildings and structures as targets; the victim in all this is described as 'the city', as Baghdad itself rather than its collective occupants and their individual lives. The result is a 'panorama of obscure action' (Chouliaraki, 2006a: 274), a magnitude of horror, a spectacle to be studied – but devoid of human agency. The audience's capacity for pity is blocked, she concludes (2006a: 276). For Chouliaraki (2008c: 338), the sublime retains the distance in distant suffering; by emphasising awe and magnitude and spectacle it diminishes the ability of those watching these sorts of events to locate the locus of moral concern: the suffering other. This maximises the drama but sanitizes the suffering: we watch but we do not connect.

Chouliaraki takes her understanding of sublimation from the work of Luc Boltanski (2005), for whom the sublime evokes neither denunciation of perpetrators nor moral sentiment towards victims, but a sort of contemplative despair. However, as Chouliaraki (2006a: 274) herself notes, there are other ways of thinking about the sublime. What

this account of sublimation lacks, and what we find in the work of Immanuel Kant (2008), is an emphasis on the pain of contemplating the sublime that produces states of humility and enthusiasm, and in turn a consideration of the political and moral dimensions given to this by Jean-François Lyotard (2009), where humility in the face of the sublime becomes an enthusiasm for something better. In his *Critique of Judgement* (2008), Kant contrasts beauty as the quality of objects, as found in nature, with the sublime as the representation of limitlessness to the imagination. This limitlessness contravenes 'the ends of our power of judgement' and does 'violence, as it were, to the imagination' (2008: 76). The sublime is about quantity rather than quality: a magnitude that is too much to be thought, that cannot be contained in thought, that exceeds the human capacity for thought. '*Sublime*', writes Kant (2008: 78), 'is the name given to what is *absolutely great*', which is to say, great beyond all comprehension, beyond all comparison, 'a greatness comparable to itself alone' (2008: 80). Chaos, disorder and dissolution, for example, and insofar as their magnitude and power is sufficient, excite the idea of the sublime. Negativity and fear, as well as quantity, are also fundamental to the experience of the sublime: 'This excess for the imagination', writes Kant (2008: 88), 'is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself'. The sublime makes us feel afraid, although those things that make us afraid are not sufficient to bring us to the sublime. But this fear can be positive. To attempt to hold magnitudes in the imagination that cannot possibly be thought inspires humility, which Kant (2008: 94) describes as 'a

sublime temper of the mind'. That something forces us to confront what is more than we can think, even against our own sensuous interest, since it is painful to bear, and that it reminds us of the limitations of what it is to be human, is what takes the sublime from being merely terrifying, and moves us towards an attempt – however forlorn – to grasp what escapes our understanding.

For Lyotard, this makes of it something usefully and powerfully moral. Lyotard's account of the sublime takes the work of Kant as its starting point, and sticks faithfully to it for the most part. So, for Lyotard there are no sublime objects, only sublime feelings, and such feelings are awakened by 'magnitude, force, quantity in its purest state, a "presence" that exceeds what imaginative thought can grasp at once in a form – what it can form' (2004b: 53). This feeling of the sublime is not the feeling that something is great amongst others but of absolute greatness, such that no comparison between sublime events can be made. And so again we have a negative aesthetic, a confrontation with something that overwhelms the thinker and renders them powerless, and that does violence to the imagination by forcing it against the limits of what can be formed. 'Sublime violence is like lightning. It short-circuits thinking with itself' (Lyotard, 2004b: 54). For Lyotard, the sublime is a feeling that *there is*, but that I do not know what it is or what will happen next. That is to say, we are confronted by a magnitude, that there is something, something vast, but the violence this does arrests

our thinking, not only of what it is but what will happen with it. It is the feeling that something has to happen next – but I know not what it is. Lyotard (2004a: 92) calls this the 'and what now?' When thinking is arrested it seems possible that nothing might happen, that foreboding and dread and everything negative will win out, but there is also a contradictory pleasure, that we might welcome the unknown. Lyotard writes: 'What is sublime is the feeling that something will happen, despite everything, within this threatening void, that something will take "place" and will announce that not everything is over' (2004a: 84). He summarises the sublime feeling as follows: 'a very big, very powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any "it happens", strikes it with "astonishment" ... The soul is thus dumb, immobilized, as good as dead' (2004a: 99). That is, unless it is brought back to life by an enthusiasm for the sprawling unknown that opens beyond the sublime event. The sublime demands a reaction, although it gives no clues as to what to do; it creates an impulse to act, even though it provides no basis to judge what action is the correct one; it demands that we find ways to speak for the event, even though it has arrested thought and derailed narrative: in short, it drives us to bear witness (see Williams 1998). This places the sublime in the domain of morality, which for Lyotard cannot be separated from aesthetics (form) or history (event) (see Lyotard, 1988).

This moral function of the sublime is set out most thoroughly in *Enthusiasm* (2009). Here Lyotard suggests that we glimpse the sublime in events that do not seem to follow the predictable script of history, such as the French Revolution. History is understood here not only as the deeds of actors, but also the feelings of spectators who judge events in terms of what is just. In the face of the sublime this is achieved through a state of enthusiasm, a feeling not of the object but of the idea of humanity that the event evokes. So, amidst the chaos and disorder of revolution, say, the enthusiasm we might see from spectators is an expression of desire towards civil peace – even international peace. Lyotard (2009: 39) writes:

> The beautiful is not sufficient; it is merely a symbol of the good. But, because the sublime is the sentimental paradox, the paradox of experiencing publicly and *de jure* as a group that something which is "formless" alludes to a beyond of experience, it constitutes an "as if" presentation of the Idea of civil society and even cosmopolitan society, and thus of the Idea of morality, right where that Idea nevertheless cannot be presented, within experience.

That is, when some event occurs that is not tautological with previous events, that breaks from the expected procession of history, by virtue of being radical it opens up the space beyond it to a radical moral response, a communal endorsement of a moral

state-of-affairs that previously did not exist, or at least was hitherto only weakly mobilised. One of Lyotard's examples is the Holocaust, of which he writes: 'an abyss opened up when an object capable of validating the phrase of the Idea of human rights must be presented' (2009: 63). So, such an event not only demands a response – at once, moral, political and historical, in this instance the idea of universal human rights – but it also provides the ground on which we can think otherwise and go beyond what we have previously endorsed as a moral good. These abyssal events force us to judge without criteria, without any rulebook for containing the event within our current moral universe, such that the idea of what is just must be rethought. Whereas Zelizer's account of bearing witness involves returning society to its *status quo*, Lyotard's enthusiastic spectator is moved to take society 'toward the better' (2009: 37).

This account of the historical significance of the spectator of sublime events provides a useful alternative to accounts of media events that suggest that unnarrated images of the spectacular are insufficient for grounding a moral response. It tallies with Kurasawa's argument that 'representational aporias' (2009: 100) – what in Lyotard are called abyssal events – might be unintelligible but this does not mean that nothing can be done in response to them. We have to speak the unspeakable when the framework of normal understanding is shattered by events of incomparable magnitude. Bearing witness, for Kurasawa (2009: 101), would consist of confronting this 'limit-experience' in order to

gesture towards its universal significance. He offers examples of how this universal significance might then be mobilised that are similar in kind to Lyotard's: the recognition of crimes against humanity in response to genocide and the emergence of treaties such as the United Nations-sponsored Millennium Development Compact as a result of globally visible poverty (see Kurasawa, 2009: 103-104). Bearing witness for Kurasawa is a largely political project, and, whilst the moral dimension appears evident if the response to the sublime is to meet radicality with radicality and push society towards the better, the concerns raised by Chouliaraki remain unaddressed. So, let us deal with them in turn.

First, she has said that the sublime focus on magnitude does not lead to a moral response because it fails to represent the individual. We already partly have an answer to this through Lyotard, which is that a perfectly moral response can be made at a collective level of spectators when they share an enthusiasm for a new moral arrangement to be applied universally. This might be expressed through something like social media, not through denunciation of perpetrators or through sentimental gestures towards victims, but by coalescing around an Idea that would take society towards the better. For example, we saw this in the UK in 2017 with the online response to the Grenfell disaster, when users united around the idea that austerity, social

marginalisation and housing poverty were unacceptable in the face of catastrophic neglect (Bratchford 2017).

Second, reflecting on the attacks on the World Trade Center, Chouliaraki has argued that spectators are brought to think of historical magnitude – past events, potential future attacks, the way that the world will never be the same again – rather than the specificity of the present suffering. This is a live concern, but Lyotard shows that it is precisely the historical magnitude of such events, the way that they derail the normal procession of occurrences, that opens up a radical horizon from which things can be changed for the better. In any event, there seems to be no strong argument for untangling the ethical, the political and the historical in the first place, something Chouliaraki would have to better motivate if we are to accept that historical magnitude is really a barrier to moral action.

Third, Chouliaraki has suggested that the long shot frames a sublime image that encourages a contemplative distance that is self-indulgent. This is a weak claim, shared by Boltanski, in that it owes more to a historical use of the term *sublime* in sentimental fiction than in what philosophical use the concept can be put to when considering the presentation of events such as those on 11 September 2001 or the subsequent invasion of Iraq. It need not be the case that such contemplation is one of self-concern, and

Lyotard's alternative account, of thinking of new ways to utter the unthinkable, has the benefit of at least picking out the experience of trying to make sense of something unimaginable – which might include, but is unlikely to be limited to, consideration of how this involves oneself. There is nothing wrong in and of itself with a moment of contemplation: it just depends on what you are contemplating.

Fourth, Chouliaraki highlights the way that the coverage of the carpet bombing of Baghdad represented the victims in non-human terms, with excessive focus on buildings, compounds, the city itself and so on, and shows that the coverage failed to identify victims and perpetrators, focusing instead on shock and awe. Whilst this is clearly dehumanising, to argue in terms of the sublime that it has a material impact on moral responsibility is to confuse object with feeling. It is the feeling of the sublime, rather than whatever is depicted, that is morally mobilising. Chouliaraki has asserted that the media fail to animate a moral response when they do not direct us towards a human form of suffering to ameliorate or of wrong-doing to denounce. Yet this human presence is not necessary since in confrontation with the sublime, in thinking of limitlessness, we are brought to probe the very limits of the human condition: fragile bodies do not need to be on screen since the feeling of the sublime brings to mind the fragility of human existence in the face of greater forces. The human-level of the event is never far from our minds precisely because of the shock and awe presented.

Finally, to return to the question of the long shot, Chouliaraki has argued that the images of Baghdad, shown from above and from afar, were presented with inadequate narration that offered no direction for moral response. But the event as an abyss or representational aporia escapes any narration in the first place, at least in the moment of its eruption in history. When we consider the live broadcast of such events as they occur, it is by no means obvious that it is desirable for journalists or talking heads to immediately impose narrative order on what is fundamentally disordered – and not just because this is how terrorist attacks undertaken by Islamic extremists are explained as aviation accidents or terrorist attacks undertaken by white supremacists are ascribed to Islamic extremists. The problem is more fundamental than that of false narrative. As Paddy Scannell (2004) has argued, disasters strike without meaning, gaining sense only after the fact. Ellis (2009: 78) suggests that even live news events 'are quickly brought into narrative order', and Chouliaraki seems to hold this as a necessary condition for moral response. But there is that moment before the live event is brought into narrative order, however brief, and it is here in confrontation with the incomprehensible, the event as brute fact, that we encounter a moral demand that exists before the media allows us to pick and choose our responsibilities by narrating them this way or that, constructing moral hierarchies here and there. For Lyotard, narrating the event is a way of neutralising the event: a coping strategy (see Bennington, 1988). What we see before

this interested narration that seeks to contain the event, before this 'particularization of the singular' (Stiegler, 2014: viii), is immediately moral.

Moral Enthusiasm

In an essay on the Heysel Stadium Disaster of 1985, when football hooliganism led to the deaths of 39 supporters during the televised European Cup Final between Liverpool and Juventus, Jean Baudrillard (2009: 85-91) argues that we see a role-reversal, of football crowds usurping the players in creating their own spectacle for the cameras. He asks: 'Now is this not precisely what is expected of the modern spectator? Is he not supposed to abandon his spectatorish inertia and intervene in the spectacle itself?' (Baudrillard, 2009: 87). Baudrillard is here pointing to an emerging culture of participation, where exhortations to get involved replace passive consumption of the media, something we see perfected today through participatory media of various forms (reality television or social media, say). He is not impressed, but as Bernard Stiegler (2015: 27-30) argues, we might understand this yearning for participation as the signification of its loss. For Stiegler (2015: 51), this is the result of the *symbolic misery* of a media environment that restricts singularity by refusing 'the unanticipatable' and 'the incalculable', offering aesthetic conditioning rather than encouraging aesthetic inquiry. Baudrillard (2009: 87) asks: 'Where exactly does participation pass over into

too much participation?' The answer should be that there can never be enough participation. It is morally fundamental that we shake off our spectatorish inertia and respond meaningfully to those in need, however they are presented on our screens and regardless of the aesthetic conditioning the media subject us to.

If Lyotard's account of enthusiasm in the face of the sublime does not seem urgent enough, coming much too late to help those in immediate need, then it is not such a difficult task to imagine a timelier moral enthusiasm. The images we receive, of the attacks on the World Trade Center, or of the carpet bombing of Baghdad, or of the neglectful catastrophe at Grenfell, are sublime as far as they force us to confront an unimaginable scale of human suffering. That we do not see the human face of suffering is not sufficient to make the claim that such images are not morally moving. They attempt to communicate a scale and intensity of suffering that we could not hope to understand, that cannot be replaced with a humanised story and a mental multiplication. The communication fails because its content is unimaginable, but in confronting the viewer with this sublime violence, the failure is productive: it brings about humility that not only is there suffering greater than my own, but suffering greater than I can hold in thought. Here we might say, as Emmanuel Levinas (2007: 27) would, that a confrontation with this sublime suffering consummates the idea of the infinite and shows the impossibility of reducing both the other and the suffering of the other to

objects of our intellect, that is, the impossibility of a totality of suffering. This experience, this encounter with something that resists the sovereignty of my intellect, is a profoundly moral one in that it calls into question what Levinas (2007: 43) calls the 'spontaneity' of the individual. He sets this out as follows:

> It is the very revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent (2007: 84).

Sublime violence, then, does not (just) confront the viewer with a quantity of sufferers that exceeds imagination, but a quantity of suffering that belongs to the other, both of which escape my grasp. This provides the conditions for what we might call a moral humility, not just that we cannot think through the intensity of suffering, such that we might be humbled by our own cognitive limitation, but where our own freedom seems arbitrary when we are confronted by reportage of levels of suffering that attack the freedom of the other to exist without harm – or even to exist at all. As Silverstone (2003: 479) argues, this humility brought about by a failure to fully comprehend is 'a necessary precondition for our capacity to care for the other'. And if this to be the case, if humility is to have any moral function, then it must prompt action. There must be an

enthusiasm to transform this humility into response, an enthusiasm to intervene in the suffering of the other, or else what is the point of my freedom when that of the other is curtailed by events of such intense suffering? Such enthusiasm would consist of substituting the other's concerns for your own (see Cohen, 2000: 28), putting yourself in harm's way, and 'giving' as 'a tearing from oneself despite oneself' (Levinas, 2008: 74). Lyotard's or Kurasawa's bearing witness as the mobilisation of an Idea can come later. But the immediate suffering of the other demands an immediate response, a moral enthusiasm born in the humility of contemplating sublime violence. If this is the case, then the sublime presentation of suffering in the media, the sorts of presentation discussed by Chouliaraki, maintains what Silverstone (2003, 2008) calls 'proper distance': the other may not be heard, their story may not be fleshed out, but the unintelligibility of their unique experience of suffering is communicated in the confrontation with the sublime, a confrontation that should bring humility and enthusiasm in profoundly moral measure.

A question remains: what happens when there is not only a lack of attention to the stories of individual sufferers during media coverage, but also no sublime image? Without the magnitude, there is no humility to motivate the enthusiasm. So, we need to supplement our account of moral enthusiasm if it is to do enough work to ground moral responsibility in the face of such minimalist media presentation. This sort of coverage is

again characterised by the absence of emotionally-evocative, humanised accounts of suffering in news presentations of distant events. It displays what Chouliaraki (2008c: 329) calls the symbolic power of transnational media: 'the capacity of the media to selectively combine resources of language and image in order to present distant suffering as a cause of emotion, reflection and action for Western audiences'. This power, then, is exercised through the decisions made when creating news texts, decisions about how suffering is portrayed and narrated. Global victims are placed within a hierarchy of suffering, wherein those that are more culturally proximate to the intended audience generate more evocative coverage and those that are distant are afforded only a superficial attention. The narrative format of news is organised according to a 'hierarchy of relevance' (Scannell 2004: 579), dividing people up into worthy and unworthy victims (Höijer 2004: 516), and rendering unprivileged victims as 'a general category of unfortunates' (Kyriakidou 2015: 227). For Chouliaraki (2006b) we see this power at play when news producers decide to cover an event from the studio rather than on location, replacing victim testimony with a verbal text from the news anchor and reducing the geography of suffering to mere dots on maps; when words and abstractions stand in for images of suffering; when victims are reduced to numbers – of killed, wounded, displaced, and so on; when brief descriptive narratives are chosen ahead of in-depth explanation of the cause and effect of the event of suffering, rendering events as random and isolated; and when victims are not given a voice to say something

about their own suffering. This is an act of 'misframing' that reproduces the fault lines of global inequality and marginalises non-Western victims (Chouliaraki 2013: 110; Joye 2009: 58). As Stijn Joye (2009: 52) argues, this sort of coverage depersonalises those in pain or peril, portraying them as passive agents in a way that maximises the emotional distance between the audience and those caught up in harmful events, making it difficult or impossible for an audience to identify with them. Chouliaraki (2006b: 97) argues that this minimalism restricts the 'ethical appeal' of the suffering that is reported on, such that the news report fails to make a moral demand on the audience to respond to the suffering they see. This position reveals Chouliaraki's stated assumption, that 'the moral horizon of the spectator resides in media discourse' (2006b: 46), such that the textual quality of the mediation constitutes the possibility for moral response (2008a: 832). This places the burden of moral responsibility on media producers, casts the media text as the locus for moral activity, and suggests that morality is only possible dependent on certain kinds of news presentation (see Corpus Ong, 2009: 450). Where the media do not present a strong appeal to action, Chouliaraki (2006b: 191) argues, the viewer is not constituted as a moral agent – and this leads, she claims, to a 'moral vacuum' (2006b: 216). The presentation of suffering, she suggests, needs to be supplemented first of all with an understanding of the event as an 'emotional occasion' that demands action (Chouliaraki, 2006b: 106), and secondly with some attempt to indicate a practical response the viewer can take. This first part is supported by audience analyses, where

respondents have pointed to the lack of emotional development of stories of distant suffering as being a justification for their own lack of moral engagement (see Kyriakidou, 2015: 227). For Chouliaraki (2008b), the media must expose the audience to dispositions towards suffering, making them feel something if they are to make them do something. Like Tait (2011), then, she calls for a more personal presentation, one that is altogether more human and more emotional such that viewers are moved and move to act in response to the suffering they encounter through the media. Otherwise, as Maria Kyriakidou (2015: 227) argues, 'the distant other fails to enter the moral space of the viewer'. The second part involves some concrete possibility for action being presented. This might be by indicating how viewers can donate to or volunteer for charity organisations or NGOs that are working in the area. Without humanised stories, emotional engagement, and a direct steer on how to help, Chouliaraki (2008a: 842) concludes, the viewer is 'freed from the moral obligation to act'.

It is not the purpose here to argue against the idea that hierarchies of suffering are unethical. It is taken as self-evident that they are, and that the choices made in presenting some victims as fully autonomous persons whilst depersonalising coverage to the extent that other victims are dehumanised, is morally wrong at best, and likely carries racist and culturally imperialist overtones that are rightly condemned. The argument here is that whilst minimalist presentation is *unethical*, it is not self-evident

that it should be seen to alter the *moral responsibilities* of its audience. This is an argument made in two parts: first, that even when suffering is denied a human face its presentation still constitutes a moral encounter that makes demands of the viewer to assume responsibility for that suffering; and second, that we cannot read responsibilities from media texts, assuming that news categories pick out moral categories, nor expect that these media texts will be action-guiding. Overall, the argument to be made is one for a greater recognition of the moral responsibility of the audience – as well as the difficulties of enacting it.

The first argument involves a consideration of the moral quality of indirect communication. Chouliaraki (2006b: 105) has written: 'The absence of a person, somebody with a name and a face, deprives the encounter between spectators and sufferers of any sense of humanness'. In setting out his moral philosophy, Levinas (2007: 50) writes: 'The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me,* we here name face'. The face in this sense is a marker or trace of something beyond my cognisance, something that cannot be represented for the other. The face is a sort of boarded up window into the soul of the other person. But what it lacks in opening the other to my understanding, it makes up for in opening a moral encounter that sustains enthusiasm by exposing us to vulnerability. As Levinas (2007: 75) observes: 'The nakedness of [the] face extends into the nakedness of the body that is

cold and that is ashamed of its nakedness'. The face is a 'destitute authority' (Pinchevski, 2005: 217) that calls us to moral response without force, in a manner 'fundamentally pacific' (Levinas, 2007: 171); whilst the encounter with the other calls into question my powers, it does so from the vulnerable position of exposure rather than from a position of superior power. As Amit Pinchevski (2005: 217) explains:

> The "power" of the face, so to speak, is in its powerlessness; the call the face puts forth affects precisely because of the Other's weakness. The frailty of the face is paradoxically the source of its command: its address is what exposes my primordial responsibility towards the Other.

The sort of minimal coverage that might be dismissed in terms of its lack of human face more precisely presents the frailty of the face, such that the weak presentation of the distant other in news media is a manifestation of vulnerability that only serves to highlight the need for a moral response to the suffering. Moral responsibility is about protecting and helping the vulnerable, and the refusal of the media to show the human face of certain categories of victims should reinforce in us the idea that these are the most vulnerable of all. Levinas (2008: 100) sets out an idea of moral encounter that seeks sensibility beyond 'the circulation of information it becomes', something 'irreducible to consciousness and thematization', an encounter with the other 'who

24

cannot be resolved into "images" or be exposed in a theme'. Minimal coverage conveys a naked face and constitutes an 'indirect communication' (Cohen, 2000: 31) of a moral demand. We do not need framing by the news to lose sight of the face of the other; we do so all the time, since the face is a weak force, a call to help but not a guarantee that help will come. But everything communicated indirectly points to a face. We find a trace in the statistics, in the maps, in the brief narrations of distant tragedies. 'The source of all signification lies not in signs relating to signs […] but more deeply, more seriously, more painfully, in the moral significance of the face that obligates' (Cohen, 2000: 32). We can be responsible or not, respond as actors or remain inert as spectators – in short, be moral or immoral – but we cannot blame our tools. We can no more hide behind our television screens – or the presentation of suffering on them – than we can hide from the destitute on our streets behind blacked out car windows or locked gates at the perimeter of our homes (Cohen, 2000: 35). To be told of suffering and to protest that the coverage did not do enough to motivate a response is akin to stepping over a contorted mass in a sleeping bag on the pavement, and claiming that there was no way of determining that there was a homeless person inside. Neither is a reasonable response to the demands of moral life; these are weak gestures that amount to 'accepting the rules of a game, but cheating' (Levinas, 2007: 173). We need to demand more of ourselves – which takes us to the second, and final, argument.

To insist on a sort of Goldilocks News, where the presentation of suffering has to be *just so* if it is motivate and mobilise a distant audience, is to assume that, because the presentation of news can be straightforwardly categorised in terms of moral function – personalisation, affective engagement, dehumanisation, hierarchies of suffering, and so on – that moral responsibility can be read off these categorisations. The emphasis is too fully on the media text. The moral encounter should be understood as an encounter between the viewer and the person who is suffering, not between the viewer and the news presentation. We should not expect media conditions that allow the other to enter our moral space, but instead to actively enter the moral space of the other for ourselves. We should demand more enthusiasm. A medium is merely something that lies in the middle, something Sybille Krämer (2015: 36) observes is too readily forgotten in media analysis. The mistake when reflecting on distant suffering is to treat the medium as *the* object, rather than a middle ground between spectator and sufferer that retreats to the background when the moral encounter is consummated. There are three useful consequences if we take such an approach.

First, once such an intimate moral relationship can be said to be in place, we can motivate a much more urgent and irrevocable sense of responsibility. Scannell (2000: 19) argues that the for-anyone-as-someone structure of media appears as if it is only for me, the viewer, but that the viewer understands that it addresses millions of others at the

same time, creating a shared experience: 'We do not treat what we read and see and hear every day as if it was a purely personal matter'. We should. An I-other relationship does far more moral work than does Scannell's 'we-ness'. As Levinas (2007: 245) argues: 'To utter "I" ... means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me'. To move the moral encounter from the text to the other, and so create a relationship that transcends spectatorship, is to emphasise the imperative of the audience to act. The viewer cannot shirk or wait for others to act in their place.

Second, this approach allows us to transcend the limitation of what media producers and contributors might understand as appropriate moral response. Pinchevski (2005: 216) suggests that responsibility means 'exceeding rather than following social norms'. Whilst the media can provide a moral education, responsibility should involve asking more of oneself than any institution might, including the media, whose suggestions too often echo the unimaginative responses found in Boltanski (2005): putting your hand in your pocket or spreading the word. If we are to take society towards the better, which is to think of moral responsibility as something radical, then we have to go beyond the conservative moral education performed by the media. This would represent the kind of rejection of moral authority called for in their different ways by Levinas and by Friedrich Nietzsche (2013). The two progress towards radically different conclusions,

with Nietzsche calling for a rejection of pity and Levinas for an infinite responsibility; Nietzsche arguing that we should see ourselves as superior to others (nobles above a herd) and Levinas for us to lift the other up into a superior position to ourselves. But both call for a break from traditional morality and ethical law, and a re-evaluation or revision of values, and it is worth noting, as David Boothroyd (2009) does, that Nietzsche's supposed rejection of compassion is overstated, and that his message is most strongly one of caution against over-identification with the suffering of others. As such, the overcoming of suffering is central to both thinkers: for Nietzsche, because it is 'a manipulative demand for pity' (Boothroyd 2009: 162); for Levinas, because the 'I' cannot suffer the other's suffering for them. Whilst Alphonso Lingis (2009) points out that Nietzsche's admonition not to intervene in the suffering of the other, since they might gain strength from it, runs contrary with Levinas' demand to alleviate said suffering, we should see these two responses as two sides of the same coin. That is, since Levinas recognises that the other is fundamentally unknowable and that we cannot suffer their suffering, any moral response to them is inherently risky; we might take away from them something beneficial, as Nietzsche says, or we might aggravate or intrude on their suffering in ways that cannot be anticipated. But if the choice is between responding or not responding, then we should be firmly on the side of the gambler. Moral responsibility is worth the risk.

This takes us to the final point: to focus on an intimate moral encounter rather than the informative role of the media would better reflect the unpredictability and risk inherent to all moral response. To assert that the media ought to be action-guiding or else it cannot be said to dispose the viewer to act, as Chouliaraki does (see 2006a: 277), is to assume that moral disposition is dependent on guidance, or on practicability. Moral life is a contingent, messy affair, and no amount of tidying up by the media can make it any easier to navigate. Often, what would be the correct advice in respect to responding to one other would be misjudged for another other; there might be competing or conflicting demands on our moral responsibility that make it impossible to respond in a way that is wholly good or that does not do some harm to someone, even if only by omission: moral response cannot be universalised or else it is not a response to the other at all. Sometimes there simply is not an obvious response to suffering, but it does not follow that the inability of the media to present one translates to the absence of responsibility. Where response is frustrated, where it cannot be enacted, we have not a voyeur, as Chouliaraki (2008a: 838) suggests, but a figure of moral reality, an individual responsible for all the suffering they encounter but who will always fall short in that responsibility. This is not to say that we are freed from our obligation to act, but that moral life is one of constant failure. We never live up to our moral responsibilities and yet they can never be relinquished.

In summary, we should ask more of the viewer as a moral agent at the same time that we ask the media to be more ethical in producing content. In wanting or trying to respond we can and will be frustrated, but we do not get off the moral hook simply by virtue of variations in news coverage. The sorts of media presentations of violence and suffering discussed above should not be seen to derail moral responsibilities. Bearing witness to sublime violence demands humility and enthusiasm, both of which have been shown to be useful moral concepts; minimal presentations, it has been argued, open up indirect encounters that are no less moral than those generated by affective coverage; and the idea that the media should be action-guiding, or else responsibility cannot be communicated, has been questioned, since responsibility should exceed social expectations, and in any event is not contingent on the possibility of enacting a response, remaining in place even where such a response is impossible. None of this is intended to discount media analysis that focuses on the aesthetic presentation of news, which frequently and persuasively demonstrates the skewed ethics of news production. The purpose, instead, has been to shift moral responsibility some way back towards the audience. Responsibility is constant and infinite; it is consummated in the encounter with the other beyond the medium, not in the consumption of the media text. Without such a readjustment, we would be left with a passive moral subject who is excused their spectatorish inertia.

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