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JOURNALISM AND THE VISUAL POLITICS OF WAR AND CONFLICT

Lilie Chouliaraki

This chapter focuses on the visual politics of journalism by thematising the image as a crucial resource for the symbolic definition of world events. This is so not only in the sense of making visible but, in fact, rendering intelligible places and people otherwise not available to us through immediate experience (Zelizer 2004: 115–33). It is, in particular, the capacity of the image to go beyond simply enhancing our knowledge of distant others and to actually shape our orientation towards these others that raises the demand for journalistic reflexivity as an ethical obligation (Silverstone 2006).

The clearest manifestation of this ethical obligation is the unique responsibility of journalists to manage our encounter with distant but potentially traumatic events such as war and conflict (Allan 2004: 347–65). The symbolic power of news journalism, in this sense, can be conceptualised as the power of the image to render spectacles of war and conflict a cause of engagement for media publics and thereby to constitute these publics as ‘imagined communities’ – as ‘deep horizontal comradeships’ sharing dispositions to emotion and action (Anderson 1989: 6–7).

Focusing on two equally illustrative but radically different cases of war and conflict reporting, the ‘shock and awe’ bombardment of Baghdad (2003) and the killing of a Greek-Cypriot in the green zone of Cyprus (1996), I illustrate how the visual politics of each piece contributes to construing a particular type of imagined community for its viewing publics – respectively, a trans-national and a national community.

The two reports deliberately differ in many respects¹: in their historical contexts, a Western alliance in the ‘war against terror’ and a local conflict; in their importance: a global media event and a regional drama; in their journalistic culture: a trans-national (BBC World) and a national (Greek) network; in visual content: a cityscape in flames and the actually-occurring death of one person. Despite these differences, there is a significant similarity: both reports rely on a set of visual strategies, what we may call ‘strategies of sublimation’ (the phantasmagoria of cityscape in flames or the human body fatally wounded) in order to activate regimes of emotion that orient viewers

towards particular imaginations of community. In Iraq war reporting, this is the transnational community of Western spectators contemplating a war without victims, whereas in the Cyprus killing, this is the national community of Western civility protesting against Oriental barbarism – both imaginations inevitably presupposing and producing particular conceptions of the enemy as an Other (Silverstone 2006: 56–79).

The point of the chapter is, therefore, to demonstrate how journalism participates in the imagination of community and the production of Otherness not only through public argument and rational discourse, but also through aesthetic performance and affective discourse. Journalistic reflexivity, in this context, is a matter of becoming aware of the choices of image and language involved in war and conflict reporting and about developing an understanding of the implications that these choices may have on the dynamics of collective belonging. In juxtaposing two different news reports, this chapter draws on their similarities to problematise the assumptions that inform the aesthetic staging of war and conflict and discuss their contribution to the making of community.

Journalism and the politics of pity

Journalistic reflexivity in the context of war and conflict can be productively approached through the concept of a politics of pity (Boltanski 1999: 6–7). Journalists in such contexts are faced with the challenge of reporting on human suffering in ways that are compatible with Western principles of public presentation: such spectacles should protect viewers from trauma but, simultaneously, they should also invite them to a moral response. The politics of pity, therefore, refers to those journalistic choices of image and word that manage the emotional potential of viewers vis à vis the spectacles of suffering, in ways that motivate particular orientations to a response as-if these viewers were present in the scene of action, yet without overexposing them to the horror of the scene.

My claim is not that journalists consciously enact a politics of pity, in the sense that they always act on the basis of explicit knowledge of these requirements of Western publicity. It would be more accurate to say that the requirement to represent suffering through the moral response of pity has historically informed the textual genres of the public representation of suffering and today remains an unarticulated but constitutive principle in the authoring of journalistic reports. Pity, in this respect, should not be seen as the natural sentiment of human empathy but rather as a discursive accomplishment, something that we can be invited to feel, as a consequence of the ways in which journalistic reports render suffering a particular kind of ‘fact’ for viewers.

The strategic role that routine practices of reporting play in the imagination of communities lies precisely in investing the imagery of suffering with certain ethical norms of what is legitimate and fair to feel and do towards such imagery, thereby also mobilizing processes of collective belonging and Othering. Whereas these normative discourses may take either the form of denunciation against the injustice of suffering, in the presence of a persecutor, or the form of care and philanthropic sentiment, in the

presence of a benefactor, war and conflict reporting often resorts to a third possibility that turns away from action and renders the scene of suffering an object of aesthetic appreciation.²

Operating within the cultural field of Western journalism, such ethical norms are routinely produced through, what Campbell calls, a number of key 'economies of regulation': an economy of 'taste and decency', which bans the imagery of suffering from the screen thereby responding to the public's aversion to atrocity, and an economy of 'display', whereby images of death are domesticated by the use of language and montage that frame the meaning of depictions of atrocity (Campbell 2004:70).³ Even though these economies of regulation can be seen as particular manifestations of the requirement of pity to avoid shocking viewers with spectacles of suffering, a consequence of their intersection is that the imagery of death is excluded from Western media. In so doing, Campbell claims, they come to restrict the *possibility for an ethical politics exercising responsibility in the face of crimes against humanity* (2004: 5).

What I wish to argue is that a third economy of regulation, what I call an economy of 'witnessing', is also always in operation in the journalistic presentation of war and suffering – an economy that controls the boundaries of taste and decency and the linguistic practices of display in ways that are politically, rather than morally or aesthetically, motivated.⁴ Witnessing functions as an economy of regulation by drawing on strong religious and cultural traditions of the West and, thereby, investing the imagery of war and conflict with a force of authentic testimony that leaves little space for questioning the 'truth' of the reported event. Operating in close articulation with the other two economies, witnessing may not altogether exclude atrocity from the media but rather make different claims to the authenticity of atrocity: it may come too close to it, showing actually-occurring death along the lines of a 'pathos' aesthetics characteristic of tragic heroism (Greek-Cypriot conflict) or it may keep us at a distance, presenting the scene of war along the lines of a cinematic aesthetics of phantasmagoria (Iraq footage). In both cases, without being explicitly political, witnessing produces forms of pity that primarily rely on the beautification or sublimation of suffering,⁵ thereby strategically participating in the political project of imagining community.

The analytics of mediation

In order to empirically explore the question of the politics of pity in the cases under study, I introduce the 'analytics of mediation' (Chouliaraki 2007c). This is a framework for the study of television as a mechanism of representation that construes war and conflict within specific regimes of pity, that is within semantic fields where emotions and dispositions to action vis à vis suffering others are made possible.

The analytics of mediation thus conceptualises the broadcast reports under study as discursive structures of witnessing that, following the economy of display, combine specific visual (camera work) and linguistic (voiceover) choices to invite a particular moral response on the part of viewers. The assumption behind the analytics of mediation is that such choices over how suffering is portrayed, where, when and

with whom the suffering is shown to occur always entail broader ethical dispositions, throwing into relief the norms of taste and decency that inform the authoring of suffering in journalistic reports. The value of the analytics of mediation, in this respect, lies in its capacity to re-describe the discursive constitution of the imagery of war and conflict and, in so doing, to explicate its moral implications for the mobilisation of emotion and action in the service of imagining community.

My discussion of the two types of footage is organised around two categories of the analytics of mediation: the *aesthetic quality* of the footage, that is the choices of language and image that construe witnessing as a dominant mode of seeing in war and conflict reports, and the impact of these reports on the forms of *moral agency* that the footage makes possible for the audiences of the broadcast.

Greek-Cypriot conflict

This case study refers to footage on the 22nd anniversary of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (August 1996), where demonstrations and protests took place on the green zone that separates the Southern from the Northern occupied part of Cyprus (August 14–15). In the course of these demonstrations, which turned into riots, two Greek-Cypriots were killed. The footage under study, referring to the second death, is unique not only in the sense of capturing actually-occurring, rather than accomplished or impending death (Zelizer 2005: 26–55), but also because it is one of the first examples of ‘networked journalism’, in the sense that the recording was amateur and accidental rather than professional (Beckett 2008). The footage follows the victim’s, Solomon Solomou, last movements as he broke away from a protesting crowd and ran into the buffer zone of the island, forbidden to civilians, and started to climb up the Turkish flag pole.

Aesthetic quality

Filmed in medium-range and broadcast in slow motion, this footage captures some of the background of the scene with the figure of a gunman standing in the balcony of a near-by building. As the victim is hit by bullets on the flag pole, his body jerks back, the cigarette in his mouth falls out and his grip of the flag pole is loosened; he slides down, turns to the side and falls on the ground.

Slow motion situates the footage within a particular aesthetic register, that of the pathos formula. Even though, historically, the pathos formula refers to a specific artistic tradition, whereby visual representation depicts the dying body as something *willingly alienated by the victim for the sake of pleasure and aggrandizement of the oppressor* (Eisenman 2007: 16), today the pathos formula reappears in the repertoire of war photojournalism as evidence of contemporary forms of martyrdom.⁶ By focusing on the singular figure of the dying man inviting his own death and by construing death as service to a higher cause, love for the country, the pathos formula essentially *sublimates* suffering: it seeks to remove suffering from the order of lived experience, thereby protecting the spectator from the horror of death, and presents it as ‘beautiful suffering’, allowing us to indulge in its aesthetic value from a position of safety (Reinhardt 2007).

Slow motion turns death into spectacle by magnifying every movement and amplifying every second of the act of dying: the slight jerk of the body, the cigarette falling out, the gentle sliding down the pole.

In parallel to the footage, the newsreader's text moves away from the pathos formula and introduces the political theme of denunciation: *Into a rally of denunciation of the monstrosities of Attila was transformed the funeral of Solomon Solomou. . .* Whereas the first clause of the text is about the funeral-as-denunciation, the other two sentences are about reactions to the killing from the European Union and the US State Department: *At the same time, in Brussels, the Irish President of the European Union was condemning the two assassinations by the occupation forces, calling them barbaric murders. Whereas in Washington, the press representative of State Department, Nicholas Burnes, used for the first time harsh language to condemn the assassinations. . . The protection of the flag cannot justify the incidents of the 15th of August, said Mr Burnes, adding emphatically that human life and its sanctity are, in any case, more important than the protection of a piece of cloth.*

What we have here is a group of vocabulary choices that work together to consolidate denunciation as the dominant discourse of the international community towards the event of the killing. This discourse first, signifies identity of opinion among Greek-Cypriots, the US administration and the EU presidency who all condemn the killing, and, second, stresses an intensity of emotion which all three parties are sharing through the act of condemnation ('occupation forces', 'barbaric murders', 'harsh language'). A set of evaluative norms is thus presupposed in the discourse, whereby Greece and the rest of the world are seen to form a moral front in defence of human rights whereas Turkey is seen to be diplomatically condemned and morally isolated (particularly in the contrast between the *sanctity of human life* and the protection of the flag as a *piece of cloth*).

At the same time, by attributing denunciation to a range of institutional actors, the report evokes a discourse of impartial authority: it is the trans-national community, rather than just the Greeks, which speaks out against the killing. This aura of objectivity that the international verdict lends to the report is further consolidated visually: the Turkish gunmen in the background are being circled, at the moment of the shooting, as if to disclose the identity of the 'assassins'.

Moral agency

The pathos formula, the denunciatory language and the displacement of moral evaluation onto external sources show the ways in which the economy of witnessing endows Solomon's killing with a strong claim to authenticity. It does so by appealing to two different but simultaneously enacted journalistic modes of seeing: *being an eye-witness* of the killing and *bearing witness* to the killing (Oliver 2004: 79–88; Zelizer 2004: 115–35). Being an eye-witness to the killing entails watching the event as it happens and engages with the objective depiction of historical truth; bearing witness entails watching the event as a universal truth that transcends the fact of killing and engages with a traumatic moment that borders the unrepresentable. The imagination of the nation arises out of a complex politics of pity that the witnessing of Solomon's

death makes possible: the bearing witness of the sublimation of a national martyr and the eye-witnessing of a human rights crime denounced by an international community of civility.

Bearing witness as a mode of seeing is reflected in the slow motion, the frontal view and the focus on detail, in short in the pathos formula that recognises death and suffering to be, at once, the beautification of death as martyrdom and the authentic manifestation of the national psyche. The regulative economy of witnessing here relies on the capacity of the pathos formula to use a traumatic spectacle so as to produce collective imaginations of the nation as a source of heroic action. It is this productive capacity of the pathos formula to celebrate the national body politic that overrules the norms of taste and decency and renders the footage of actually occurring death not only legitimate but, in fact, strategic in the context of conflict reporting.

Eye-witnessing is reflected in the documentary aesthetic of the recording combined with the reporting on international reactions to the killing. Unlike bearing witness, the eye-witness involves a mode of seeing that approaches the scene of dying as actually-existing reality that requires an urgent response. The regulative economy of witnessing here relies on this testimonial element of the report, which hints at the juridical dimension of journalism: providing objective evidence in the service of a just cause.⁷ The voiceover further participates in this juridical procedure by setting up a contrast between the values of the West (construed as an alliance between Greece, EU and US) and the values of Turkey, thereby producing a national imagination of Western civility sharply juxtaposed to its Other: the 'monstrosities of Attila'.

If the moral claim of a nation traumatized by the death of a martyr is the prototypical claim of journalism as bearing witness, the eye-witness proposes an explicitly political form of national imagination driven by the desire to restore justice in the name of international law.

Iraq war footage

The shock and awe bombardments of Bagdad (BBCWorld, March–April 2003), one of the most visually arresting spectacles of warfare, were broadcast live on BBC World and they were, subsequently, inserted as regular 'updates' in the channel's 24–7 live footage flow – the examples described here focusing on the updates' common patterns throughout their three-week broadcast span.⁸

Aesthetic quality

The imagery of Iraq warfare is the exact opposite of the Greek-Cypriot footage: without a sign of human presence, the point of view is from afar and above with a steady camera capturing the Baghdad cityscape in its visual plenitude. Bombing action animates this imagery through camera tracks and zooms that capture the hectic movement of weapon fire. The outcome is a structure of visualization reminiscent of the 'tableau vivant', an art form that relies on the physical re-enactment of culturally familiar pictorial representations of other cityscapes, fuzzing the line between live performance and still image (Rosengarten 2007). As a tableau vivant, the war

becomes visualised as an explosion of shapes and colours against the dark background of the cityscape: the bomb explosions themselves, which appear as random orange-coloured flashes that temporarily amplify the sense of onscreen space, and of Iraqi anti-aircraft fire, which appears on screen as a tiny, round, fluorescent whiteness that glows in the dark on its way towards the sky. This pictorial composition, a shape and colour panorama, is often accompanied by the sound effect of rattles and blasts that amplify the visual effect of unrelenting bombing action.

In terms of language choices, both the bomber and the Iraqi sufferer are represented in non-human terms. This happens through word choices such as *'the plane'* and *'the strikes'*, for the persecutor, and *'the compound'*, *'the city'* or *'Baghdad'* for the sufferer. These collective wordings parallel the visual effect of the long shot: they diffuse the figures of pity away from a politics of justice or care and invite us to indulge in the spectacle of warfare as a game to be studied: *'... we saw this building take a direct hit. Look carefully and you'll see...'*, *'this is what shock and awe looked like ...'* or *'Then we heard...we looked up...above us a buster...it swooped down...And it blasted'*.

On the whole, the bombardments of Baghdad are a spectacle of rare audio-visual power but without perpetrators or victims. Its visual effect is that of a digital game, endowing the spectacle of war with a fictional rather than a realist quality – a similar quality to the Gulf War visuals that made Baudrillard (1995) famously conclude that the war never happened.

Moral agency

As in the piece on Solomon's death, these journalistic choices invite us both to experience 'reality as it is', in the position of the eye witness, and to take a moral stance vis à vis this reality, in the position of bearing witness to the horrific fact of warfare. This happens through the combination of the tableau vivant with the two narrative types of the voiceover: description and exposition, or evaluation (adapted from Chatman 1991). The 'this-is-what-happened' function of description uses language in the first person to put words into visual action and invites us to experience the spectacle 'as-if' we were there. This is obvious in expressions such as *'... we saw this building take a direct hit...'*; *'this is what shock and awe looked like ...'*; *'then we heard...we looked up...'* etc. This combination both authenticates the report as objective reality and invites viewers to study the war as spectacle.

This same language of eye-witnessing simultaneously allows for sporadic elements of evaluation to be dispersed across the reports: *a terrible deafening sound as though the earth was being ripped open...anti-missile flare spewing out of its wing...let loose a ferocious barrage*. Such quasi-literary use of adjectives and metaphors, such as *spewing*, *let loose* and *as though the earth*, frames the sight of bombing action with a sense of the horrific and the extraordinary, moving beyond description to introduce a bearing witness position vis à vis the spectacle of war – the proliferation of sound effects further magnifying the 'shock and awe' experience that visuals and voiceover seek to evoke.

Through an imagery of panoramic phantasmagoria and a language that is devoid of human agency but full of commentary on the detail of action, the 'updates' propose

an approach to war primarily as a cinematic spectacle to be appreciated rather than a humanitarian catastrophe to be denounced. This perspective resembles the idea of beautiful or sublime suffering that I associated with certain features of the footage of Solomon's death, including the slow motion and the focus on subtle detail in movement. Similarly here, the footage of the bombings invites viewers to engage with the scene of suffering through reflexive contemplation – slow motion being replaced by the camera's zooms and close ups as well as by the journalist's analytical voiceover.

Unlike Solomon's report, however, which quickly passes from the aestheticisation of death to the denunciation of the 'assassination', thereby providing the resources for the collective imagination of a national community, this one insists on presenting the war as an aesthetic spectacle to be studied rather than as a political fact that requires a response. Consequently, whereas the Greek news relies on a politics of justice that enables an action-oriented disposition vis à vis Solomon's death, witnessing warfare as a work of art is founded upon the condition of inaction (Boltanski 1999: 127).

This is because the choice of the tableau vivant eliminates the humanness of civilian victims from the imagery of the reports and draws attention away from the destructive consequences of the bombings – euphemistically called 'collateral damage'. Whereas this elimination of human suffering from these journalistic reports fully resonates with the Western economy of taste and decency, it simultaneously works to construe the Iraqi sufferer as the West's Other, a figure undeserving of Western pity.

Released from the responsibility to take sides, the trans-national community of BBC viewers is oriented towards reflecting upon its own experience of 'watching itself seeing' (Boltanski 1999: 119) – an experience well-orchestrated by the analytical voiceover. It is this introverted process of analytical self-contemplation over the evils of warfare that invites these viewers to join an indefinite and undefinable type of community united solely by its 'common humanity' – a humanity that discovers itself in its shared judgement of the war as 'shock and awe' about which, however, nothing can be done.

The imagination of such trans-national, yet resolutely Western, community arises then out of an economy of witnessing, which co-ordinates the viewers' 'feeling together' though the detached and analytical observation of bombing action (eye-witnessing) and through the invitation to contemplate the visual aesthetics of, rather than takes sides on, the destruction of Baghdad (bearing witness).⁹ This is, simultaneously, a community that comes into being at the expense of recognising the humanity of the Iraqi sufferer: invisible in this war footage, suffering is construed as irrelevant to our political and moral concerns.

Journalistic reflexivity: the ethics and aesthetics of witnessing

Whereas all war and conflict journalism inevitably balances rival concerns, namely objectivity and partiality or patriotism and humanity, the question of this chapter is how journalistic discourse reflexively manages these balancing acts in specific cases of reporting. I sought to address this question by proposing a conceptualisation of war and conflict reporting as a politics of pity. The politics of pity, let us recall, refers to

those journalistic choices of image and word that seek to present the spectacles of war and conflict as authentic and as demanding a response, without over-exposing viewers to the horrors of suffering.

Placing emphasis on witnessing as an economy of regulation that proposes particular modes of seeing suffering as authentic, I discussed two radically different journalistic reports, a 'global' war and a local conflict. My aim was to show how, despite their differences, both reports strategically use the imagery of war and conflict in the service of imagining community. I specifically focused on strategies of sublimation as the predominant repertoire of aesthetic resources, which manages the act of witnessing by performing two functions at once: to protect viewers from the trauma of war and to construe bonds of belonging along the lines of a West/Other distinction.

The function of sublimation to protect viewers from traumatic witnessing responds to the Western prohibition of the public display of death as a morally unacceptable and culturally sanctioned spectacle. Regulated through the economy of taste and decency, the journalistic imagery of war and conflict can only become legitimate under the condition that it is elevated to beautiful suffering – here construed by use of the pathos formula and the tableau vivant. Both strategies, each in their own way, seek to aestheticise suffering through a range of choices of display: the magnification of detail through slow motion and analytical language, or the objectification of the scene of suffering through editing devices (circling the persecutors) and first person language (what I/we see) or reported speech (what others say about the event).

Such choices render death and suffering morally acceptable for public viewing, yet they risk blurring the line between fact and fiction, between historical world and mediated virtuality. In seeking to manage, what Ellis (2001) calls, the psychological process of 'working through' traumatic events, journalistic stories enact economies of display which represent war and conflict both as a reality-out-there and as a de-realised filmic sequence. Several criticisms of war reporting as Hollywood entertainment find justification in photojournalistic routines similar to the 'shock and awe' bombardments of Baghdad, where the moral dilemmas and political tensions of war are suppressed in favour of a contemplative aesthetics of inaction.¹⁰

Journalistic reflexivity, in this context, entails an awareness of the fact that war and conflict reporting is not simply about how journalists remain objective whilst acting patriotically, but about how concepts such as objectivity, patriotism or humanity are themselves produced in the course of reporting and are inherently linked to the aesthetic effects of imaging war. As our two cases demonstrate, the use of strategies of sublimation may, in fact, combine the tendency to fictionalise death, in the pathos formula or the tableau vivant, with simultaneous references to objective truth, through the use of the documentary or an appeal to first and third party testimonies.¹¹ Central to these unresolved (and perhaps un-resolvable) tensions is the duality of journalistic reporting as both eye-witnessing and bearing witness, pointing simultaneously to another boundary that war and conflict reporting continuously negotiates – the boundary between friend and enemy, self and Other.

This leads me to the second function of the sublimation of suffering in journalism: imagining community. Aesthetic choices of war and conflict reporting, as we saw,

also have important implications as to who we care for and who we do not, thereby configuring collective dispositions to emotion and action that exclude Others who lie outside this boundary. Differences in the communities they imagine granted, a significant similarity between the two cases is that they employ the aesthetics of pathos and the tableau vivant in order to strategically move the self/Other boundary in terms of a West/non-West distinction – thereby subjecting the Other to the discursive trope of *annihilation: the denial of both a common humanity and closeness* between us and them (Silverstone 2002: 14).

In the Greek-Cypriot conflict, annihilation is ethical and cultural: the enemy is construed as an Other on the basis of a sharp distinction between Western civility and Oriental barbarism, which places the Turkish ‘assassins’ beyond the pale of civilised humanity, progress or reason. In the Iraq war case, annihilation is semiotic: the Iraqi population, a sufferer as well as an enemy, is physically absent from the war footage and linguistically suppressed through non-human terms such as ‘city’, ‘compound’ or ‘building’ – thus removing this population from the order of ‘our own’ humanity and the scope of our empathy and care.

Journalistic reflexivity, in this context, entails an awareness of the fact that strategies of sublimation do not lie beyond political questions and the power relations of conflict and belonging but are, in fact, constitutive of these questions. Specifically, we saw that aesthetic choices, such as the death of a hero or the war in Baghdad, strategically balance out the two journalistic requirements, to record (eye-witnessing) and to evaluate reality (bearing witness), in politically productive ways. In the Baghdad footage, the position of bearing witness subordinates the fact of bombing civilians to a cinematic spectacle, promoting a view of the war as a game and so construing a community of contemplation without action. In the Greek-Cypriot footage, in contrast, the contemplative position of the death of the hero quickly gives way to a politics of justice, introducing the perspective of denunciation in the name of human rights, and so imagining a community of action.

The crucial difference here seems to be not one between fact and fiction or objectivity and patriotism, but between a purely aesthetic politics of pity leading to inaction and one that makes an explicitly political demand for action – thereby framing the imagery of war and conflict within a discourse of denunciation in the name of international law. In the light of such differences in journalistic witnessing, we need to revisit the criticism that reporting on war and conflict one-sidedly excludes the spectacle of suffering from Western media at the expense of enabling an ethical politics of responsibility (Boltanski 1999; Campbell 2005). We could argue instead that such reporting capitalises on various synergies between the journalistic economies of regulation and their politics of pity in order to make distinct claims to authenticity – supporting not one constant ‘truth’ but selectively upholding many. The pathos formula, on the one hand, is strategically used to sideline ‘taste and decency’-related offences in order to re-imagine an already-existing national community as a community of political action, where Greeks protest against the killing of a fellow citizen. The tableau vivant, on the other, conveniently stages a controversial war as a spectacle without victims, at the service of a political agenda that imagines the trans-national community, deeply torn

over this war, as united in its silent contemplation of evil and humanity – rather than active in denouncing this war as illegal in line with UN Security Council resolutions and international law.

Journalistic reflexivity, in this respect, involves an increased awareness of the aesthetic choices through which these multiple ‘truths’ come into being and of the political implications they may have in terms of the kinds of communities they bring into being. Central to this political project of imagining community is the requirement for action, either against injustice or in support of human needs, as a possible response of these communities in contexts of war and conflict. As public controversies over other examples of reporting, such as the Lebanon (2006) and Gaza (2009) wars, have shown, the systematic analysis of the aesthetic staging of action constitutes an important priority in the critical study of war and conflict reporting. Such analysis can positively contribute to our understanding of the interplay between journalistic discourse and the dynamics of collective belonging and can increase reflexivity over the ways in which economies of regulation may be selectively used not only to reproduce but also to challenge existing West/Other distinctions in war and conflict reporting.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I used the ‘analytics of mediation’ in order to discuss how war and conflict reporting participates in the imagination of (Western) community. Drawing on the concept of a politics of pity to identify the aesthetic strategies used in two radically different cases of reporting, I conclude that the imagination of community occurs through a moral economy of journalistic witnessing that regulates the boundaries of journalistic discourse between fact and fiction, as well as between us and the Other.

The ethical obligation of journalists here consists not simply in following the professional codes of conduct in terms of proper ‘display’ or ‘taste and decency’. In a fundamental manner, it consists in the obligation to recognise the responsibility they have in constituting media viewers as moral and political communities at the moment that they appear to simply inform – or entertain them.

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Notes

- 1 Flyvebjerg (2001: 79) for the maximum variation principle in case study selection.
- 2 Boltanski (1999: 46–8) for the three 'tropes of suffering'; Zelizer (2004: 120–25) for the historical iteration of aesthetic motifs in war photography; Machin (2007: 123–42) for the contemporary dominance of the 'symbolic photograph' at the expense of realistic depictions of war.
- 3 Campbell's third economy, 'indifference', already presupposes a particular public attitude towards spectacles of war and conflict. Indifference, I argue, is not a regulative mechanism of journalistic reports but instead a consequence of the intersection between the economies of display, taste & decency and witnessing (see also Fishman 2002: 53–70).
- 4 For journalism as witnessing, Allan & Zelizer (2004: 3–22), Zelizer (2004: 115–35); for witnessing as central to journalism Peters (2001), Frosh & Pinchevski (2008); for a shift from journalism as dangerous profession to traumatic witnessing, Rentschler (2008).
- 5 The multidisciplinary uses of the term the 'sublime' granted, I here take it to refer to a regime of pity that constitutes suffering less through emotions towards the sufferer and primarily through aesthetic appreciation derived from the horror of suffering (Boltanski 1999: 121).
- 6 Exemplars including the death-in-action shot of the Civil War soldier (Robert Kappa 1936); and the death of a French First World War soldier captured on film (Stepan 2000:30 quoted in Zelizer 2004: 124).

- 7 The killing as a human rights crime is confirmed in the judgement of the European Court of Human Rights, which, upon visual testimony and UN Peacekeepers accounts, found the incident to constitute a violation of Article 2 ECHR (verdict, July 1st 2008).
- 8 Examples drawing on 27 March and 8 April reports (Chouliaraki 2007a;c).
- 9 This stands in contrast to Al Jazeera: *Al Jazeera television . . . showed bloody pictures of civilian casualties night after night. An Egyptian parliamentarian observed: 'You can't imagine how the military strikes on Baghdad and other cities are provoking people every night'*. (Nye 2004: 29).
- 10 Lewis (2004: 305) claims that the quality of UK Iraq war footage *could make war seem too much like fiction, and make it too easy to forget people are dying*.
- 11 Tumber & Prentoulis (2004: 215-30) for objectivity in war reporting; Tuchman (1972: 660-79; Schudson 2002: 149-70) for objectivity as a ritual and the public norms of objectivity in US and European press.