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Proper Distance: Mediation, Ethics, Otherness

[insert Roger Silverstone's photo here]

In memory of Roger Silverstone, 1945-2006

Proper Distance: Mediation, Ethics, Otherness

Lilie Chouliaraki and Shani Orgad, LSE (eds)

In his last book, *Media and Morality*, Roger Silverstone argues that one of the crucial moral challenges in the global media landscape, what he calls the 'mediapolis', concerns our relationship to the different, the unfamiliar, the other. He puts forward an ethics of care – an ethical proposal which begins by recognising unfamiliar others as others with humanity. This ethics of care, Silverstone argues, is predicated on a particular politics of the representation of otherness which he calls 'proper distance' (2004, 2006).

Proper distance invites the impossible question: can we imagine the other in her or his own terms? And momentarily it seduces us into thinking that perhaps there is an answer. After all, 'proper' announces an ethical norm. Which is this norm? Which is this ethics of care that allows the mediated other to emerge in her/his sovereignty and humanity?

This special issue is dedicated to engaging with Roger Silverstone's 'proper distance' as a concept which opens up an analytical space through which we can examine how the mediated social relationships produce ethical norms by which the humanity of others is constantly defined and negotiated. The articles included in this issue explore various aspects of our mediated relationships with others, suggesting how proper distance may be used to engage with otherness as a problem of representation, and to account for the role of the media as a force of moral imagination in public life.

To this end, the special issue situates proper distance within the conceptual terrain of the ethics of mediation and its two competing discourses on the other: the discourse

of 'common humanity' and the discourse of 'strangeness' – what Eagleton (2009) refers to as an 'imaginary' and a 'symbolic' ethics, respectively. The imaginary ethics of 'common humanity', which is grounded in the 18th century philosophy of 'sentiment and sensibility', postulates that moral imagination is a universally shared capacity, which is predicated upon the fact that 'we', self and other, share a space of proximity: the all-inclusive space of the human species (Eagleton, 2009: 12-28). By contrast, the symbolic ethics of 'strangeness' is associated with the 20th century philosophy of language and postulates that moral imagination is doomed to failure, by virtue of the fact that both self and other always emerge as effects of representation and, therefore, can never appear as fully transparent and intelligible to 'us'. It is only by acknowledging this irreparable distance both between self and other and within the self that, according to the discourse of 'strangeness', we can ever begin to form moral bonds with this other (Eagleton, 2009: 83- 90).

Rather than treating these two major discourses as categorical moral positions regulated by their equivalent spatial category, 'common humanity' by proximity and 'strangeness' by distance, the papers in the issue follow Silverstone in seeking to capture the dialectic co-existence of these moral/spatial categories within specific practices of mediation. 'Common humanity', the articles demonstrate, evokes visions of *both* shared belonging *and* hierarchical exclusion whilst 'strangeness' evokes *both* the recognition of irreducible otherness *and* the threat of the other who is beyond comprehension. Far from a field with definitive normative proposals for 'best practice', the ethics of mediation emerges here as a field of radically contested representations of proximity and distance, where the construal of the other as 'an other with humanity' is a crucial stake.

'Common humanity', an influential discourse with a formative impact on the field of media and communications, foregrounds practices of mediating the other, which emphasise the moral value of cultural proximity. It is manifest in visions of

cosmopolitanism that welcome the media for bringing the world closer together (Tomlinson), in practices of altruism that urge the West to empathize with distant others (Chouliaraki), in forms of re-enactment which create recognition of and empathy towards the other (Sturken) and in the communicative practices that promote tolerance and cultural pluralism, on which the global media depend (Orgad).

Despite its profound influence, however, 'common humanity' has been roundly problematized. It fails to recognize, many have argued, that the proximity it celebrates is, in fact, grounded in a Western conception of the human, thus ignoring the specificity of its own account. As authors of this issue claim, it is, therefore, precisely by appealing to 'our' essential commonality that practices of mediation fail to recognize the radical plurality of world histories and cultures and ultimately exclude those who do not fit the cultural norms of the West. The discourse of 'common humanity' is, in this sense, a form of symbolic violence that aspires to expand our sense of care and responsibility towards those who are not like 'us', yet manages to only confirm our existing communities of belonging.

The discourse of 'strangeness', suspicious of the benign aspirations of 'common humanity', foregrounds instead practices of mediation that emphasize the irreducible 'otherness' of the other as the only condition of the possibility for a moral encounter with cultural difference. The influence of the discourse of 'strangeness' is vividly evident in contemporary debates on the cosmopolitan potential of technological mediation. Rather than focusing on the moral content of our relationship to the other, these debates draw attention to media technologies as 'acts of connectivity' that mundanely cultivate our 'phatic' familiarity with the other (Frosh); act as catalysts for self-estrangement which reflexively mirror in 'us' the 'other within' (Orgad); and as devices of irony that, through kitsch consumerism (Sturken) or mainstream entertainment (Chouliaraki), show how reflecting on the

representation of 'otherness' may mobilise sensibilities of care, both within and beyond our own communities of belonging.

By asserting the active participation of the self in the construal of 'our' relationships to the other, authors in this issue demonstrate how 'strangeness' challenges the naïve self-righteousness of 'common humanity' and allows for a more complex conception of mediated connectivity and its fragility. This conception, which is at the heart of self-reflexivity, is a necessary condition for a cosmopolitan imagination. Yet, it is precisely this orientation towards the self that entails risks for the formation of moral bonds with the other, as such orientation may not necessarily lead to a sensitising familiarity with the other but rather to a narcissistic engagement with 'our' own pleasures and desires in the face of disconcerting difference. Frosh's view of the media as a reliable rustle of companionship, Orgad's account of audiences' denial of disturbing visions of the nation, Sturken's critique of the domestication of torture in a 'comfort culture' of Western innocence, or Chouliaraki's notion of 'ironic solidarity' of online donations and Hollywood celebrity - all, in this sense, can be seen as forms of symbolic violence that subordinate the enabling distance of 'strangeness' to the blinding proximity of sameness. Thus, the discourse of 'strangeness' has a similarly ambivalent potential as that of 'common humanity'. It facilitates self-distance as a condition for our encounter with the other and, at the same time, catalyses a self-indulgent connectivity premised upon cultural proximity.

Suspended between the two historical discourses of the ethics of mediation, 'common humanity' and 'strangeness', the moral imagination of otherness cannot but navigate a precarious territory. Against the logic of sameness, it must reflexively assert the irreducibly distinct quality of the other whilst, against the logic of difference, it must sustain an empathetic sense of the other as a figure endowed with her own humanity. Acknowledging this precariousness of moral imagination, the contributions to the issue seek to employ the concept of proper distance, in order to

reflect on mediation precisely as a struggle to represent the elusive relationship of self and other, in ways that may, or may not, *'preserve the other through difference as well as through shared identity'* (Silverstone, 2002: 770).

Precarious as this project may appear, it remains, we collectively argue, the best option we have to sustain a robust critical hermeneutic inquiry into the ways in which mediapolis may also become a cosmopolis: a space wherein we can imagine ourselves caring for others not because they are reflections of ourselves but precisely because they are different from us. By treasuring this intellectual vision of mediated cosmopolitanism, this special issue simultaneously celebrates the work of Roger Silverstone as one of the most original thinkers in the field of media and communications but also as a visionary humanist with a deep commitment to addressing the moral implications of mediation in our public life.

Outline of contributions

John Tomlinson and Lilie Chouliaraki whose papers open the special issue draw attention to some of the key problems involved in the historical discourse of 'common humanity' and its normative privileging of cultural proximity. Tomlinson addresses the prospects of the media's pedagogic role by outlining a move from the cosmopolitan imagination in the 1930s, which was typical of European left-leaning intellectuals of that time and characterized by a confident, assertive and optimistic yet un-reflexive conception of internationalism and mediated connectivity, to contemporary discourse on cosmopolitanism, which 'is elaborated around notions of dialogue, value pluralism, reflexivity and empathetic imagination' (p. xx).

Juxtaposing these two intellectual discourses leads Tomlinson to question, echoing Jurgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib, the capacity of contemporary media and new media technologies in particular, to enable a progressive cosmopolitan pedagogy, which is committed to a deep and critical pluralist dialogue.

Lilie Chouliaraki uses the concept of proper distance to demonstrate how the categories of proximity and distance are articulated in contemporary practices of solidarity. Examining the mediation of humanitarianism in its various genres, she identifies two dominant paradigms of solidarity: pity, which relies on the cultural proximity of 'common humanity' and irony, which relies upon the reflexivity of self-distance. Given that neither paradigm, notwithstanding their contesting premises, manages to construe a cosmopolitan imagination, Chouliaraki proposes an alternative paradigm of 'agonistic solidarity', which is predicated upon the mediation of proper distance so as to dialectically preserve otherness as an object of our 'reflexive judgement'.

The dialectical thinking which is inherent in the concept of proper distance constitutes the point of departure for Paul Frosh's essay on the moral implications of televisual connectivity. Frosh uses the concept of proper distance in a suggestive, if somewhat surprising, way. Rather than an 'ideal position between mediated closeness and distance' (p.xx), proper distance inspires Frosh to theorise the moral possibilities of aspects of mediation that are usually understood as 'impersonal, non-intimate, indifferent' (p. xx). Exploring aspects such as non-reciprocity or transience, Frosh convincingly argues that they can, in fact, be morally enabling.

Shani Orgad develops the concern with the potential of mediated distance, which, she argues, should be extended beyond the relationship to the other, to consider the relationship to oneself. Evoking links between Silverstone's notion of proper distance and the concepts of estrangement and Simmel's Stranger, Orgad examines how the aesthetics of news may be mobilized for cultivating distance from the self, specifically in the national context. There is an echo in her essay of the question that Tomlinson raises in his article, about how the cosmopolitan moral agency of the media might be exercised, by whom and in what institutional contexts.

The concern with self-distance is also central to Marita Sturken, who argues that mediation, specifically cultural representations of torture, works to create and sustain comfort culture – a culture that offers ‘comfortable modes of distancing’ (p. xx). By carefully identifying discursive and aesthetic strategies through which torture is made acceptable in American culture, Sturken tries to employ Silverstone’s notion of proper distance as a kind of a ‘yardstick’, however imprecise and slippery, against which we can critique mediation and its multiple consequences.

In conclusion, John Peters engages with the arguments of this volume in order to provide a series of reflections on the value of the concept of proper distance as an analytical and normative tool in the critical study of mediation.

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