Chapter 1. Solidarity and Spectatorship

Introduction: 'Find your feeling'

'Get involved. Feeling inspired? ActionAid's supporters experience incredible feelings of happiness, warmth and pride all the time. There's no limit to the scale of amazing feelings you can get by getting involved. To discover what your feeling might be, take the ActionAid interactive quiz today'[i].

'Find your Feeling: How could Action Aid make you feel?' is a thirty-second quiz that invites us to explore what our 'true feeling' towards this major humanitarian brand might be, by clicking on a number of questions: which picture moves us most, for instance? the child 'next door' happily swinging away? a group of protesters in Latin America or a couple of women hugging and smiling at the camera? Depending on our choice of emotions towards these distant others, we are offered a certain self-description: we might be 'warm and fluffy' or 'inspired and excited', and, having been in touch with our emotions, we are then invited to 'click on the link' and 'find out more about Action Aid'.

It is the relationship between 'how I feel' and 'what I can do' about distant others, so clearly thrown into relief in the Action Aid appeal, that concerns me in this book. There is no doubt that emotion has always played a central role in the communication of solidarity, yet, I argue, there is something distinct about the ways in which the self figures in contemporary humanitarianism. This is obvious when we consider earlier, Red Cross appeals, for instance, where the question of 'what I can do' is raised through shocking images of emaciated children or Amnesty

International ones, where the question is answered through a call to personalised letter-writing for the liberation of prisoners of conscience. Neither of these two examples returns the imperative to act on vulnerable strangers to ourselves, asking us to get in touch with our feelings in order to express our solidarity with them.

Taking my point of departure in this new emotionality, I explore the ways in which the communication of solidarity has changed in the course of the past four decades. A crucial period for humanitarianism, the 1970-2010 timespan is characterised by three major, seemingly unconnected but ultimately intersecting, transformations: the instrumentalisation of the aid and development field; the retreat of the 'grand narratives' of solidarity; and the increasing technologisation of communication. Whilst each transformation has been extensively explored in its own right, the co-articulation of the three and, importantly, the implications of this co-articulation for the changing meaning of solidarity have remained relatively untouched.

In drawing attention to the new emotionality of the '*Find your Feeling*' appeal, then, what I propose is that the meaning of solidarity today should be approached as simultaneously defined, or over-determined, by the branding strategies of Action Aid, by a generalised reluctance to accept 'common humanity' as the motivation for our actions and by the interactive possibilities of online media. It is, I argue, only when we examine solidarity as a problem of communication, that is as a moral claim seeking to reconcile the competing demands of market, politics and the media, that we can better understand how the spectacle of suffering is subtly but surely turning the West into a specific kind of public actor – the ironic spectator of vulnerable others.

Irony refers to a disposition of detached knowingness, a self-conscious

suspicion vis

a vis all claims to truth, which comes from acknowledging that there is always a

disjunction between what is said and what exists – that there are no longer 'grand

narratives' to hold the two together (Rorty 1989). Whilst irony is often translated into

'post-modern' postures of cool cynicism that reject moral attachment in favour of

playful agnosticism, the spectacle of vulnerable others, I argue, complicates this

posture in that, by virtue of confronting us with their suffering, it continues to raise

the question of 'what to do' – it continues to call upon us as moral actors. The ironic

spectator is, in this sense, an impure or ambivalent figure that stands, at once,

sceptical towards any moral appeal to solidary action and, yet,

open to doing something about those who suffer. How has, then, the ironic spectator

emerged through the communicative structure of solidarity today? and how does

this twilight figure manage to negotiate and resolve the tensions (political, economic,

technological) of solidarity that our times press upon us?

The story of this book is, in this sense, a story of the communication of

solidarity in the West at a historical turning point of its imaginary, when the

expansion of the field, the end of the Cold War and the explosion of the media came

together in new ways and ushered a paradigmatic change in the ways in which we

are invited to perceive ourselves as moral actors. Even though the West cannot be

regarded as a homogenous sphere of safety, just as the global South cannot equally

be seen as one single sphere of vulnerability, my use of these terms preserves

nonetheless a historical and political distinction that is crucial to my story: the global

division of power that, in unequally distributing resources along the West/South

axis, reproduces the prosperity of the former whilst perpetuating the poverty of the latter. In the light of this division, the communication of solidarity becomes simultaneously the communication of cosmopolitan dispositions – public dispositions towards vulnerable others shaped by the moral imperative to act not only on people close to 'us' but also on distant others, strangers we will never meet, without the anticipation of reciprocation (Calhoun 2002; 2007).

If I look at humanitarian communication as the main carrier of this imperative, this is because humanitarianism has successfully incorporated into its seld-description a series of distinct altruistic claims, from the religious tradition of *agape* or care towards the stranger-in-need to the secular requirements to saving lives or protecting rights, which, despite their differences, have managed to create a relatively coherent moral order that defines our times as an *'empathic civilization'* (Rifkin 2009). Instead of understanding humanitarian communication in a narrow manner, as institutional appeals strictly emanating from the field of international organisations, however, I treat it as involving a range of popular practices beyond appeals, such as celebrities, concerts and news. I consider these practices to be humanitarian to the extent that each uses its distinct aesthetic logic, for instance the personifying power of celebrity, the enchantment of the rock concert or the professional witnessing of the journalist, so as to confront us with the spectacle of distant sufferers as a cause that demands our response. In so doing, these practices form part of a dispersed communicative structure of cosmopolitan ethics that mundanely acts as a moralising force upon Western public life – what, in chapter 2, I introduce as the 'humanitarian imaginary'.

In following the mutations of these communicative practices across time, the story of the book is essentially a story of how changes in the aesthetics of humanitarian communication are also changes in the ethics of solidarity. It is a story about how the move from an objective representation of suffering, as something separate from us that invites us to contemplate the condition of distant others, towards a subjective representation of suffering, as something inseparable from our own 'truths' that invites contemplation on our own condition, is also a move from a ethics of *pity* to an ethics of *irony*. This is an epistemic shift[ii] in the communication of solidarity, I contend, in that it signals the retreat of an other-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about our common humanity and asks nothing back, and the emergence of a self-oriented morality, where doing good to others is about 'how I feel' and must, therefore, be rewarded by minor gratifications to the self – the new emotionality of the quiz, the confessions of our favourite celebrity, the thrill of the rock concert and twitter journalism being only some of its manifestations.

Whilst all ethics of solidarity involves an element of 'egoistic altruism', ironic solidarity differs from other versions in that it explicitly situates the pleasures of the self at the heart of moral action, thereby rendering solidarity a contingent ethics that no longer aspires to a reflexive engagement with the political conditions of human vulnerability. The decline of grand narratives has undoubtedly contributed to the rise of the ironic disposition, but, as I show below, this contingent ethics of solidarity has a more complex history that forces us to examine all three dimensions of its emergence - not only the political, but also the professional and the technological. In telling the story of humanitarianism's four key communicative practices, I, therefore, choose to focus on the various ways through which appeals,

celebrities, concerts and news have, in time, come to accommodate the tensions of the field by increasingly relying on the marketing logic of the corporate world as well as the digital technologies of media culture – and, in so doing, they have also come to respond to the political collapse of narratives of common humanity with the celebration of a neo-liberal lifestyle of 'feel good' altruism.

At the heart of these aesthetic and ethical transformations, I conclude, lies a fundamental mutation in the communicative structure of humanitarianism. This is the retreat of the theatrical structure of solidarity, where the encounter between Western spectator and vulnerable other takes place as an ethical and political event, in favour of a mirror structure, where this encounter is reduced to an often narcissistic self-reflection that involves people like 'us'. Any alternative to this dominant ethics of solidarity, I propose, needs to start by reclaiming the *theatricality* of the public realm, the sense of the world beyond the West as a really existing, albeit different world, which confronts us with the uncomfortable but vital questions of power, otherness and justice and, in so doing, keeps the possibility of social change in the global divisions of our world alive.

But first things first. In this introductory chapter, I set the scene for the exploration of solidarity as a problem of communication, by introducing each of the three key dimensions of this communication: the *institutional*, where I discuss the implications of the radical expansion and concomitant instrumentalisation of the aid and development field; the *political*, where I address the end of grand narratives and the ensuing rise of individualist morality as a motivation for action; and the *technological*, where I show how the new media have facilitated an unprecedented explosion of public self-expression, thereby also changing the premises upon which

solidarity is communicated. It is, as I have said, only in the light of these three

dimensions that we can begin to make sense of the shift from the objectivity of the

theatre to the new emotionality of the mirror as a paradigmatic shift in the very

meaning of solidarity.

CHAPTER 1

i See http://www.allaboutyou.com/lifestyle/live-for-the-moment-actionaid-58250 for the 'Find your Feeling' appeal (Accessed 29 December 2011). Permission was not granted for the use of a visual of the appeal in this book.

ii See Foucault for the term 'epistemic shift', which refers to a shift in the claims to knowledge that a specific field of institutional practices, or discursive formation, makes at particular points in time, thereby catalysing changes in the intellectual worldviews and moral sensibilities of a culture (Foucault 1972/2008). The term bears important similarities to Kuhn's 'paradigm' shift, a term I also use throughout in this book – emphasising, however, that, unlike a paradigm, an epistemic shift does not refer to a revolutionary break with previous scientific 'paradigms' but rather to incremental and dispersed discursive mutations that progressively change the scientific rationalities, procedures and moral norms of their field (see Best and kellner 1997: x-xii for a discussion of the two terms).