

The Politics of Pity: suffering as spectacle (guest blog)

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We live in a world where we can watch disasters and suffering unfold around the world. New technologies mean that every war, every famine, every hurricane can be covered live and direct. But do we actually notice what is happening to those involved? Polis Summer School student Andrea Abril has been thinking through the moral dilemmas. This is her report:

[Hannah Arendt](#), the German political theorist, wrote about the “Politics of Pity”. Firstly, she made the distinction between those who suffer and those who do not. She also wrote that ‘seeing’ and ‘looking’ are considered as different concepts because sufferer and observer are physically distant – despite the closeness that modern media brings. This creates the “spectacle of suffering”, unfortunate people are observed by those who do not share their suffering, who do not experience it directly and who, as such, may be regarded as fortunate people.

This theory can be applied to sufferings representation in media. Audiences are observers of the misery of the unfortunate but within a distance, which is not just geographical, but also emotional.

Adam Smith, in [The Theory of the Moral Sentiments](#), said:

“Pain besides, whether of mind or body, is a more pungent sensation than pleasure, and our sympathy with pain, though it falls greatly short of what is naturally felt by the sufferer, is generally a more lively and distinct perception than our sympathy with pleasure. [...] Over and above all this, we often struggle to keep down our sympathy with the sorrow of others. Whenever we are not under the observation of the sufferer, we endeavour, for our own sake, to suppress it as much as we can”.

People get used to avoiding other people’s suffering, especially when they can not do anything to resolve the problem. So when society is exposed to media as much as it is at present, sometimes the result is that we observe the world’s problems from a distance, knowing their existence and assuming they can not disappear.

A vicious circle starts when the media, facing an anesthetized public, decides to give more visibility to the most eye-catching disasters in order to attract the attention of the audience. By chance, these events usually are related with economically powerful countries or with these countries which have a direct relation with world powers. All of this has a negative effect: people are more and more insensible while watching the news.

Is there any way of changing this situation?

Is it possible to separate the world’s suffering from media business?

Should the media change the way it presents news of suffering or should the public learn how to feel other’s suffering?

This article was by Polis Summer School student Andrea Abril.



