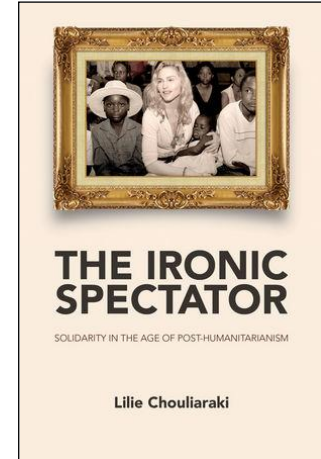


Lilie Chouliaraki, **The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism**, 2013, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 238 pp., \$56.19 (hardcover), \$24.95 (paperback).

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In 2006, Lilie Chouliaraki published *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, which is commonly considered to be a seminal work within the young and emerging field of research that concerns itself with the issue of mediated disasters and human suffering. With her book, Chouliaraki moved the debate beyond the then relatively abstract generalizing and often speculative statements about the representation of human suffering. Her subsequent scholarly work continued to plea for a critical observation and profound empirical analysis of the discursive reproduction of injustice, symbolic inequalities, and representational hierarchies in the mediation of suffering. It is fair to say that Chouliaraki has raised the bar once more with her most recent contribution to this field, ***The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism***, which discerns important differentiations, distinctions, and transformations at work in the mediation of human suffering while also reflecting on broader societal developments.



Intelligently written and dwelling on an impressive literature review—particularly wide in its range of consulted works from different theoretical strands and disciplinary backgrounds—the book features seven chapters that provide a thoughtful, theoretical conceptualization of some of the key issues at play, as well as an empirical and analytical engagement with four distinct genres or popular practices of humanitarian communication: appeals, celebrity, concerts, and news. Looking at *The Ironic Spectator* in greater detail, the first two and the last chapters lay down the broad theoretical and conceptual foundations of the book’s themes. These chapters deal with, among other issues, conceptualizations of humanitarianism and posthumanitarianism, solidarity, theatricality of humanitarianism, and irony. The latter is obviously linked to the central theme or actor of the book, that is, the ironic spectator who is defined as “an impure or ambivalent figure that stands, at once, as sceptical [*sic*] towards any moral appeal to solidary action and, yet, open to doing something about those who suffer” (p. 2). Chouliaraki also pays substantial attention to the historical dimension and is henceforth able to discern important shifts and transformations. In this respect, *The Ironic Spectator* is one of the first scholarly works to explore the coarticulation of three major transformations and its implications: (1) the instrumentalization of the aid and development field that is characterized by tendencies of (NGO) branding and the marketization of humanitarian practice; (2) the retreat of “grand narratives” of solidarity resulting in an individualist morality of “feel-good” activism or what Chouliaraki calls an ironic solidarity that rewards the self and is motivated by the emotionality of the donor rather than by the vulnerability of the other; and (3) the increasing technologization of communication leading to a new communicative structure that is predominantly defined by an invitation to self-expression through new media platforms and by the absence of normative morality. Drawing on an informed and detailed understanding of these historical transformations, the author primarily focuses on the issue of “how changes in the aesthetics of

humanitarian communication are also changes in the ethics of solidarity" (p. 3). In other words, central to this book is a theoretical and empirical exploration of a shift in the communication of solidarity from an ethics of pity (anchored on the spectacle of the other) to a dominant ethics of irony (anchored on the spectacle of the others like us and hence self-reflexive)—a shift, Chouliaraki asserts, that, more than ever, needs to be addressed with caution and a critical spirit.

Putting the theoretical ideas and concepts to practice, the subsequent empirically driven chapters on appeals, celebrity, concerts, and news insightfully illustrate that the humanitarian imaginary does not exist in a media vacuum but instead is part of a wider and enveloping culture and society that have significantly changed over the last few decades. In problematizing contemporary humanitarianism, *The Ironic Spectator* makes good use of relevant and well-chosen examples that will appeal to and resonate with the broader public, including popular humanitarian campaigns such as "Make Poverty History" and concerts like "Live 8," as well as the recruitment of international celebrities, such as Angelina Jolie and Bono. For each of the four performative genres of the humanitarian imaginary, Chouliaraki aims to identify change in their employed strategies of authentication and moralization by considering the time span of the past 40 years. From documentary to increasingly brand-oriented appeals (Chapter 3), from Audrey Hepburn to Angelina Jolie (Chapter 4 on celebrity), from "Live Aid" to "Live 8" (Chapter 5 on concerts), and from expert to ordinary (citizen) witnessing (Chapter 6 on news), all discussed comparisons attribute to a general understanding of the epistemic transformations of solidarity and moralization. In developing the different arguments, concepts, and communicative structures, the book also provides the reader with thoughts on how to further open up the (academic and public) debate and explore new directions to move the research forward.

Given its merits, Chouliaraki's book is one with which it is difficult to find fault. Whereas some readers might, for instance, find the content to be repetitive at times or that it recalls certain claims too often, others will probably praise this particular discursive or rhetorical choice of the author for contributing to the book's clear intentions and sound argumentation. Another minor point of criticism that can be raised concerns the lack of empirical audience research, although the author justifies her specific empirical approach and objectives in this regard on several occasions.

The Ironic Spectator is an insightful, comprehensive, and significant contribution to the literature and academic debate on media, humanitarianism, and suffering. It represents a relevant and wide-ranging discussion of a topical issue that will undoubtedly be of interest to graduate students and scholars working in the broad field of social sciences and humanities in general and media and communication studies in particular. Alongside its many academic merits, the book also addresses its readers as (cosmopolitan) citizens and as humans by holding us up to a mirror concerning our disposition toward the other. Vital in this respect is the author's central argument for a theatricality of humanitarian communication in the sense of a communicative structure that has the capacity "to stage human vulnerability as an object of our empathy as well as of critical reflection and deliberation" (p. 22). In Chouliaraki's final remarks in the book, she comes full circle and identifies such theatricality as a potential and unique moral force, because "we, ironic spectators, need the theatre now, more than ever—it may not make us become good but, as W. H. Auden put it, it can at least prevent us from imagining that we already are" (p. 205).

Reference

Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.