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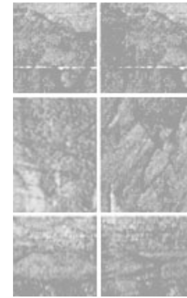

The aestheticization of suffering on television

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses an example of war footage in order to trace the ways in which the tension between presenting airwar as an 'objective' piece of news and as an instance of intense human suffering is resolved in television's strategies of mediation. The bombardment of Baghdad in 2003 during the Iraq war was filmed in long-shot and presented in a quasi-literary narrative that capitalized on an aesthetics of horror, on sublime spectacle (Boltanski). The aestheticization of suffering on television is thus produced by a visual and linguistic complex that eliminates the human pain aspect of suffering, whilst retaining the phantasmagoric effects of a tableau vivant. The argument of this article is that such aestheticization of suffering manages simultaneously to preserve an aura of objectivity and impartiality, and to take a pro-war side in the war footage. The conclusion is that television's participation in the legitimation of war is more open to political and ethical criticism when seen in the light of the semiotic aestheticization of suffering than when it is confined to the general denunciation of 'news bias' and the search for abstract objectivity.

KEY WORDS

aestheticization • analytics of mediation • ethics • Iraq war footage • multimodal semiotics • pity • public sphere • sublime • television

> A suffering child fills our heart with sadness, but we greet the news of a terrible battle with indifference. (Boltanski, 1999:12)

THE ANALYTICS OF MEDIATION

The footage of the Iraq war on western television from March to April 2003 was a paradoxical event. It was the most transparent war footage ever but at the same time it was also condemned as the most manipulative. It was transparent in its first-time use of embedded journalists and in the concentration of an international pool of reporting journalists in Baghdad

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itself. It was manipulative in that this unprecedented proliferation of information and imagery intensified the processes of news regulation and censorship, opening the footage to criticism of a heavy bias in favour of the coalition troops. But, one might ask, haven't such processes always belonged to the propagandist apparatus of warfare? Indeed, to put it provocatively, aren't processes of regulation and bias already inherent in the very logic of broadcasting?

In this article, I address the question of bias by examining a single but illustrative example – the BBC war footage of the bombardment of Baghdad during the early days of 'shock and awe'.[1] Despite its reputed impartiality, the BBC provoked controversy over the side it took during the war and it was specifically its reports from the Baghdad front that played a considerable part in this controversy.[2] My intention in this article is not to rush into taking sides in this news bias controversy but to examine the BBC example in a broader framework in order to understand how the taking of sides may occur in journalistic discourse. I argue that, instead of appealing to the elusive ideal of objective journalism, it is perhaps more useful to consider television footage as a mechanism of representation that by definition involves the taking of sides (Corner, 1995; Fairclough, 1995; Silverstone, 1999). The key question then becomes to find out how this mechanism of representation works: what semiotic and narrative resources the footage employs in order to represent the Iraq conflict, and what effect this construction has in legitimizing the pro- or anti-war side of the conflict.[3] The value of this analytical perspective lies in its capacity to evaluate the moral implications and political agendas of journalistic discourse not through an abstract norm of objectivity but through a concrete description of how war and suffering appear on our television screen.

To this end, the 'analytics of mediation' is a framework for the study of television as a mechanism of representation that construes war and suffering within specific 'regimes of pity'; that is, within specific semantic fields where emotions and dispositions to action vis-a-vis the suffering of 'others' are evoked for the spectator.[4] The 'analytics of mediation' thus conceptualizes war footage as a semiotic accomplishment, which combines camera work and voiceover in order to establish a degree of *proximity* between the spectator and the scene of suffering and to propose certain possibilities of *action* upon the suffering.[5] The assumption behind the 'analytics of mediation' is that choices over how suffering is portrayed – where, when and who are the victims of the suffering – always entail specific ethical dispositions, independent of our own evaluative judgement on these dispositions as undesirable or desirable (Boltanski, 1999).

My discussion of the Baghdad footage is organized around the three categories of the 'analytics of mediation': (i) the *multimodality* of the footage (the moving image–verbal narrative combination onscreen) and the impact of this semiotic combination on (ii) the *space–time* of suffering (how the footage represents the where and when of the bombing event), and on (iii)

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agency in suffering (who is represented to act upon whom and under what capacity in the scene of suffering).

My argument is that the semiotic choices of the footage construe the bombardment of Baghdad in a 'sublime' regime of pity, whereby the phantasmagoria of the spectacle obliterates the humanitarian quality of suffering and whereby the aesthetic of 'shock and awe' takes over other ethical and political considerations of the conduct of war – a construal of the war presented not only in a number of reports on the night-time air operations on Baghdad, but also in other significant aspects of war coverage.[6]

It is important not to consider the sublime to be a fixed and palpable presence on the television screen, that is to say an empirical reality existing in the world 'out there'. As the concept of 'regime of pity' suggests, the sublime is an analytical construct that offers a particular interpretation of how distant suffering appears on television and the possible effects it may have on the ethical dispositions and beliefs of western spectators. In this sense, the sublime is neither the only one nor the most 'correct' perspective on the footage.[7] It is, however, a particularly useful perspective on the study of journalistic discourse in that it avoids being prescriptive without compromising the critical analysis of the footage. Evidently, in choosing not to prescribe what is 'objective' footage, the analysis of the sublime does not abandon the normative perspective. Rather, it tactically sidelines such questions in order to analyse how norms of right and wrong are produced in the course of the footage itself and how such norms construe a certain version of the war as valid and legitimate for western audiences at the expense of other norms of humanity and justice.

PITY AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The regime of pity through which our footage example represents the war takes part in a broader field of journalistic meanings, which attempts to define the ethical and political content of the Iraq conflict across national–cultural contexts and in diverse institutions. In so doing, the footage plays a crucial role in identifying 'good' and 'bad' sides and, broadly, in legitimizing the causes and intended outcomes of the war. However, the taking of sides in public service broadcasting requires that the representation of the conflict and the attempt to engage the spectator take place within the boundaries of the public sphere.[8] This means that the footage cannot resort to common propaganda, openly expressing a pro- or anti-war position or explicitly stirring up emotions. Rather, the footage must appear to be impartial and must gain its legitimacy by offering objective information to the spectator.

In her reports from the front, Christiane Amanpour, CNN Senior International Correspondent, captures the tension between the perspectivalism inherent in the representation of the war and the necessity to maintain an objective distance from it: 'The problem', she says, 'is that the

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coalition troops want to be seen as benefactors not just as bombers' (CNN, 29 March 2003). Amanpour's quote connects the legitimacy of the war with the media image of the troops either as benefactors, doing good to the suffering Iraquis, or as bombers, harming the already suffering Iraquis. In this manner, the notion of 'pity' is elevated to a key component of the representation of the Iraq war on television.

The notion of pity, in this context, does not refer to our supposedly natural sentiments of empathy and tender-heartedness towards the spectacle of human pain. Pity, rather, refers to a type of social relationship between the spectator and a distant sufferer, which raises the moral obligation for the spectator to respond to the sufferer's misfortune in public – even if, as Boltanski (1999) says, this public response takes the minimal form of a conversation at home (p. 20). Pity here, far from a faculty of the spectator's soul, is a sociological category that is constituted in meaning. As the mechanism of representation that establishes a generalized concern for the suffering 'other', pity is thus central to contemporary conceptions of western sociality and indispensable for the constitution of modern democratic collectivities.[9] Pity, by this token, is also a key signifier in organizing the justification and legitimation strategies of political discourse, including the coalition's decision to overthrow the Saddam Hussein regime by means of a military invasion in Iraq.

'In order to generalize', Boltanski writes, 'pity becomes eloquent, recognizing and discovering itself as emotion and feeling' (p. 6). Indeed, was it not in the name of pity, liberating the Iraqis from long-term suffering under the Saddam Hussein regime and protecting the world from potential suffering caused by his alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction, that the war was launched in the first place?

The focus of the 'analytics of mediation' on the semiotic operations by which television engages the spectator in degrees of proximity and dispositions to action towards suffering stems precisely from the assumption that pity does not precede representation but is produced through representation in a range of public practices and discourses – through what Boltanski calls a 'politics of pity'. The concept of the politics of pity draws attention to the fact that, in order for the television spectator to take sides in the conflict, a mechanism of representation needs to be in place that focuses on the suffering of the Iraqi people and objectively reports on those who act upon this suffering.

But the politics of pity is not a contemporary effect of television's strategic communication. It is a set of historically shaped and culturally specific practices of the public presentation of suffering that can be traced back to the emergence of the modern public sphere in Europe and its Enlightenment ideal of universal moralism.[10] Mediated in public through textual conventions (such as literary language or painting), and public genres (such as the novel or the political manifesto), the idea of pity has shaped the western collective imaginary by connecting the public figure of the citizen to

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the figure of a spectator who contemplates upon and feels for a distant sufferer (Arendt, 1990[1973]: 70).

Today, appropriated and reconfigured by modern technologies of mediation such as television, the politics of pity still performs the crucial political function of presenting human misfortune in public with a view to arousing the emotion of the spectators as well as inviting their impartial deliberation on how-to-act upon the misfortune. The politics of pity, then, is the politics of narrating and portraying suffering on television and thereby producing discourse about how we are connected to the world, what matters to us, what joins us together and how we are supposed to respond to the needs of the suffering. By the same token, however, the clinical narration of suffering, the establishment of a radical distance from the location of suffering or the refusal to humanize the sufferer may indeed come to block an active relationship between spectator and sufferer, but they should not be regarded as semiotic choices that lie outside the enactment of a politics of pity. The interruption of pity is a variation of this enactment and a moral claim in its own right.

Even though the making of a moral claim on the television spectator is a shared aim in the politics of pity as well as in war propaganda, there is a crucial difference. In propaganda, the taking of sides is explicit and the point of view from which the suffering is presented is often partisan-like, either sentimental or polemical.[11] In the politics of pity, there is no explicit perspective from which stories of suffering are narrated but instead suffering is surrounded by an aura of objectivity, of impartial observation. Thus the difference between propaganda and the politics of pity is also a difference in the nature of the public sphere that each mode of mediated communication appeals to. Propaganda presupposes the prior commitment of the spectator to a cause, an already constituted community of shared interests and views – a community, however, whose very homogeneity is often established through coercion or 'brainwashing'. The politics of pity, in contrast, presupposes a public space where the spectator is a citizen with both affective sensibilities (moved by the suffering he or she witnesses) and cognitive capacities (reflecting impartially upon the spectacle of suffering), before exercising his or her right to make the decision on which side to take and what action to take. As Boltanski puts it:

> In the ideal of the public sphere, a local suffering can be conveyed without deformation in such a way that is it there for everyone to examine it, that is to say, for all those who, from the fact of their receptivity arising from a lack of prior commitment, are free to examine this suffering and find themselves sufficiently affected by it to become committed and take it up as their cause. (p. 31)

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PITY AND THE AESTHETICIZATION OF SUFFERING

The Baghdad footage evokes this ideal of the public sphere insofar as it claims to represent the war in Iraq from a perspective of impartiality whilst simultaneously evoking pity for the misfortune of the Iraqi people.[12] But if the production of pity does not involve the explicit naming of the good and the bad, how does it operate? According to Boltanski, the production of pity involves a certain distribution of the spectator's emotions around the two key figures who ultimately organize the spectator's own orientation towards action upon suffering. The first is the figure who alleviates the suffering of the unfortunate and hence wins the spectator's heart and support, what Boltanski, in a telling terminological convergence with Amanpour, calls the 'benefactor'. The second is the figure who inflicts the suffering upon the unfortunate and thus provokes the spectator's indignation, what Boltanksi calls the 'persecutor'.

Depending on the semiotic choices in various sequences, the Baghdad footage manages to construe the Iraq war through two different regimes of pity. A 'regime of care', when beneficiary action organizes the spectacle of suffering around feelings of tender-heartedness for those who comfort the sufferer; and a 'regime of justice', when violent action organizes the spectacle of suffering around feelings of indignation against those who are responsible for the misfortune of the sufferer. Each regime entails its own distributions of agency, e.g. benefactors offering food supplies or medical aid to Iraqis, or of persecutors, e.g. Saddam Hussein – responsible for the country's destitution – and his Republican Guards.

At the same time, each regime also entails its own measure of proximity and distance vis-a-vis the scene of suffering in order for the spectator to contemplate the misfortune of the sufferer from a perspective of (claimed) objectivity. For example, the choice of placing the spectator within the scene of action together with embedded journalists or keeping the spectator outside the scene of action by offering panoramic views of Baghdad creates two different perspectives of observation. As we shall see, the perspective of 'detached' observation makes a distinct claim to impartiality as opposed to the 'involved' perspective and, therefore, it construes a distinct type of public space within which the spectator makes decisions about the suffering he or she witnesses. In this way, even though regimes of pity involve normative views and incite a range of emotions in relation to the suffering, each regime of pity also manages to appear distanced from moralizing norms and can thus be claimed to be objective and representing a public issue.

A difficult question arises, however, when television footage attempts to represent an instance of warfare in which the figure that aspires to be seen as a benefactor, the coalition troops, now coincides with the persecutor, the bombers. Amanpour's dilemmatic formulation of the coalition troops simultaneously as 'benefactors' and as 'bombers' comes to capture the

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contradiction-in-terms inherent in the spectacle of Baghdad burning, insofar as this spectacle fuses both these figures in one and risks blocking the effective production of pity. How does the footage deal with this essentially political question of redistributing the potential for pity in the spectacle of a city blasted by 320 cruise missiles in one night by its own liberators?

My own response is that the footage of the Baghdad bombardment enacts a third possibility for the representation of suffering, which does not seek to mediate the emotional potential of the spectator through the figures of pity. Pity in this piece of footage involves neither a celebration of the good, in the action of benefactors, nor a denunciation of evil, in the action of persecutors. As a consequence of the effacement of the figures of pity, the spectacle of Baghdad offers to the spectator a scene of action without enemies or victims. Rather, the emotional potential of the bombardment is intended to 'stay with' the spectator as the experience of a sensational performance.

The moralization of the spectator now takes place through a mechanism of 'sublimation', the representation of suffering through an aesthetic register that discourages spectators from feeling for or denouncing the suffering and invites them to contemplate the horror of the spectacle, the 'shock and awe' of the bombardment (Boltanski, 1999). The emphasis of sublimation on the aesthetic elements of suffering raises the question of how the footage manages to articulate a moral argument and induce the taking of sides: What are the semiotic features of the sublime regime and how do these features construe the scene of suffering both as an aesthetic experience and as an objective space of reflection? What consequences does this aestheticization of suffering have upon the moralization of the spectator? How is the taking of sides ultimately induced in the footage?

I address these questions through the 'analytics of mediation', focusing on the *multimodal* semiotic properties of the 'update' text and on the *space–times* and *agency* options within the scene of suffering that this text construes. I conclude that the question of how television participates in the legitimation of the war becomes more amenable to political and ethical criticism when seen in the light of the semiotic aestheticization of suffering than when it is confined to the general denunciation of 'news bias' and in the pursuit of an abstract objectivity.

THE BAGHDAD BOMBARDMENT ON BBC: THE POLITICS OF PITY

The Baghdad bombardments, one of the most visually arresting and emotionally compelling pieces of warfare on television, were broadcast live on *BBC World* at approximately 19.00 CET and were subsequently inserted as regular 'updates' in the channel's 24–7 footage flow. The piece under study is the next-morning update of the 26 March night bombing, shown on 23 March 2003 (see Appendix) at around 09.00 CET, in-between visuals from

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the battle of Basra and on-location reports from the port of Umm Qasr. The update was introduced by Nik Gowing, the BBC's main presenter, from Doha, Qatar. Gowing invited the spectator 'to reflect upon the scale of the operation' – tellingly, the word 'reflect' involves the contemplative attitude of both looking at a spectacle and thinking about it – and informed viewers about the types of weaponry used in the operation. 'What was the impact upon Baghdad?', he asks and rounds off his introduction by mentioning that 'this report by Rageh Omaar has been subject to scrutiny by the Iraqi authorities'. The circulation of war news thus appears to be subjected to regulative principles, which include not only the concerns of the coalition but also those of the Iraqi side. Such concerns evidently complicate the regulative regime in which the footage was edited and narrated; nevertheless, they do not remove the key question of how the footage takes sides between benefactors and bombers. They intensify it.[13] In order to see exactly how the taking of sides is subtly managed, I begin with the *multimodality* of the 'update' before I move on to its *space–time* and *agency* properties.

Multimodality

The mode of presentation of the 'update' is moving image (the edited video of the previous night's footage) accompanied by a running voiceover, which comments on the image broken up by occasional pauses to allow for the harsh sounds of the bombardment to take over – a powerful audio effect (see Appendix).

On the visual plane, the *point of view* of the filming is from afar and above with a steady camera, probably from a terrace of the 'Palestine' hotel where foreign journalists stayed during the war. The camera captures Baghdad in its visual plenitude, tracking swiftly across the dimly lit cityscape at night. This introductory shot of the 'update' is filmed 'seconds' before 'the attack began in earnest', to use Rageh Omaar's words, so that images still have the tranquil spectacularity of a nocturnal city panorama – illuminated darkness without a sense of movement. As the air strikes begin, movement is introduced to the spectacle of the cityscape. *Movement* is visualized on screen through camera tracks and zooms, as they seek to capture the hectic 'explosions' of shapes and colours against the dark background of the cityscape. First, movement is an effect of the city building contours, which, once hit by missiles, become illuminated before they fade out of sight again, in smoke and fire. Second, movement is the effect of weapon fire: of 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. Finally, movement is visualized as the vector of a blue blinking light on an ambulance vehicle, dashing over a Tigris bridge and being reflected in the river water. This pictorial composition, a shape and colour panorama, is accompanied twice by the sound effect of

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rattles and blasts and of the howling ambulance siren, which come to amplify the visual effect of unrelenting action taking place in this obscure cityscape. On the whole, the Baghdad bombing is a phantasmagoric spectacle of rare audio-visual power and immense intensity.

On the verbal plane, the onscreen spectacle is framed by a complex narrative, which simultaneously achieves multiple functions. Adapting Chatman's three narrative categories (1991), I would claim that Rageh Omaar's voiceover is a hybrid text that combines description with narration and exposition.[14] Whereas *description* is the 'this-is-what-we-see' narrative type that uses language referentially to put words onto and illustrate visual action, *narration* introduces elements of story-telling proper, such as opening and closing conventions of the 'once-upon-a time' type; finally, *exposition* carries the evaluative element of the voiceover, implicitly articulating a moral stance vis-a-vis the visual text, such as 'isn't-this-horrific, extraordinary or sad?' But it is not exclusively the expository talk that frames the scene of suffering in moral discourse. It is, as we shall see, the combination of all three narrative types added to the power of the moving image that together determine the overall moralizing function of the footage. Let us now look more closely into selected instances, where the narrative types of the voiceover interact with the visual mode.

Narration both introduces and rounds off the voiceover. The opening frame, a long-shot of the Baghdad cityscape before the attack, is accompanied by 'Baghdad was bracing itself for a ferocious night', a sentence that not only construes the city of Bagdhad as a human agent but also begins to build a climaxing plot, as it anticipates an ominous change in the visual stillness of the screen. The temporal circumstance – '. . . **But seconds later** it began in earnest' – is a marker of chronological (rather than causal) cohesion in the voiceover, which propels a narrative climax from the previous visual shot, by articulating the verbal contrast between before and after with the visual contrast between tranquility and bombing hell. The closing sentence – 'And all **this is not the end**. The president of the US said that this is just the beginning ' – imitates a conventional ending to the 'story' but also acts as an ironic hint, intertextually referring to 'This is the end', the song by The Doors that concluded one of the most memorable war movies of all times, *Apocalypse Now*.

In this way, a link is forged between television war footage and Hollywood dramaturgy, blurring the distinction between the historical world and the world of cinema. Narration then makes a sporadic but instrumental appearance in the voiceover, in two ways. First, narration introduces drama, by climaxing and contrasting moments of the event of bombardment; second, it amplifies the appeal to the audience by alluding to and capitalizing upon popular genres of story-telling, a movie and a song. Both the drama and the allusion to cinematic experience, important as they are in triggering emotion, place the event in the grey area between the genre of fact and the genre of fiction.

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Description works in the opposite direction, namely by establishing a relationship of factual correspondence between visual and verbal text. This is obvious in the references: 'The **anti-aircraft gunner** desperately trying to . . .', 'You'll see the **missiles** actually ripping into . . .', 'Beneath all of this, **emergency teams** raced . . .', and finally, 'what looks like a **surface-to-air missile**. This was Iraq retaliating'. All these statements take the moving image to be the external reality that language refers to, singles out and illustrates. The linguistic referents of these statements, highlighted in bold, may appear on screen as vague shapes and random colours but their naming endows them with physical appearance and function. Description, in this sense, works to create an indexical relationship between the nominal use of gunner, missile or emergency teams and the pictorial composition of the glowing white light, the orange-coloured flash or the blue blinking vector. At the same time, the references 'you see . . .', 'we saw . . .', 'take a closer look . . .', and 'what looks like . . .' capitalize upon the semiotic function of the camera zoom to focus on detail and use the power of vision to validate the reality bond between the name and its external referent that each description forges. The narrative type of description is, in this sense, instrumental in establishing objectivity, the quality of broadcasting necessary to legitimize the television footage as a public sphere genre.

Finally, *Exposition* works through both narration and description to provide a point of view, a value judgement on the spectacle we witness. In this respect, exposition signals a shift from description's 'look-at-this' mode of address to a 'this-is-what-it-means' mode of address that also carries the moralizing function of the 'update'. An example of expository narrative follows the harsh rattling sounds of the bombardment, in the statement: 'Even this city that has been through so much has not experienced anything like this'. This statement not only humanizes Baghdad as a sufferer – this city 'has been through so much' – but it further stresses the intensity of its suffering – has 'not experienced anything like this'. In combination with the visuals of unrelenting bombing action, this statement is moralizing in that it seeks to evoke a sense of humanity that we all share and that is now challenged by the ferocity of the bombardment – notice the use of superlatives in 'even this', 'so much', 'anything like this'. A moralizing act that similarly intends to evoke a sense of common humanity among spectators takes place in the next sentence. This is the sentence: 'The strikes appear to be carefully targeted but just think of those ordinary Iraqis living near these targets', where the use of an explicit and, for that matter, quite unique exhortation, 'just think of', seeks to render the distant sufferer the object of the spectator's reflection and concern, at the same time rendering the spectator a global citizen with empathetic sensibilities.

Which politics of pity is played out in this particular combination of moral talk with objective description and dramatic narration? The 'update' no doubt manages to evoke the idea of Baghdad as a sufferer and moreover to invite the spectator to relate with empathy to the ordinary Iraqi. Nevertheless, it does so in an ambivalent manner.

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One indication of ambivalence is that the exhortation to think about the Iraqi sufferer does not stand on its own. It is not an autonomous statement but linguistically subordinated, by use of the adversative 'but', to the main clause 'the strikes appear to be carefully targeted' – itself an intertextual echo of Donald Rumsfeld's comment the previous evening on the 'high precision' weapons used in the strikes. But the key semiotic feature of ambivalence is the formulation 'This is what shock and awe looked like as it tore into Iraq's capital'. Inserted between pauses that foreground the bombing sound effects, this explicit reference to 'shock and awe' steers the emotional potential of the spectator away from empathy, by performing two functions at once. On the one hand, it describes reality as it is. The use of the deictic '**this** is what shock and awe looked like' reinforces the indexical link between what we see on screen and the official code-name of the airborne operations in the early days of the war. On the other hand, it also invites the spectator to relate to this reality in a specific manner. This happens through the reference to 'shock and awe', which in this context stands not only literally for the name of the operations – the *locutionary* meaning of the wording – but also signifies, in a more metaphorical sense, an emotional orientation to the spectacle of the bombings itself: the *perlocutionary* meaning of the wording.[15] By capitalizing upon the meaning potential of 'shock and awe', then, the voiceover manages to convey a balanced sense of description and exposition, fact and emotion. The dual meaning of this nominal clause, at once locutionary and perlocutionary, combined with the rare visual intensity of the action onscreen strongly urges the spectator of the 'update' to indulge in the bombardment as a spectacle, sidelining the sporadic and subordinate references to 'ordinary Iraqis' or to 'a city that has been through so much'.[16]

Let me now move on to the effects that the multimodality of the 'update' has upon the sense of proximity that the spectator has to the suffering he or she witnesses (space–time) and upon the spectator's inclination to feel and act towards the suffering Iraqis (agency).

Space–time

The presence of the camera in the city of Baghdad and the sheer visualization of warfare certainly bring the western spectator closer to the scene of this suffering than ever before in any previous war coverage. The spectators not only hear, read about or skim through snapshots of bombed buildings, but can actually witness the bombardment as a reality unfolding in front of their own eyes – although in the 'update' the dimension of live broadcasting is obviously lost. It is the total visibility enabled by the on-location camera that has provided justification for the celebratory argument that this war footage was the most transparent ever.

Let us recall, however, that the point of view of the camera is from afar and above, providing spectators with panoramic views of the city. Despite the total visibility that this point of view offers, or precisely because

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of this, spectators of the 'update' are simultaneously kept resolutely outside the scene of action. They are onlookers, watching the action from a safe distance. One consequence of the combination between distance and total visibility is 'detached' observation, a witness position that turns the reality of the war into a *tableau vivant*. In a similar vein to Rageh Omaar's verbal allusion to *Apocalypse Now*, the war panorama on our television screen bears an eerie resemblance to the opening frame of *Blade Runner*, itself a night cityscape regularly punctuated by orange flashes. Indeed, the quality of proximity that this 'detached' observation provides to the spectator is cinematic. This is not so much the proximity to a lived space populated by people but more to a screen animated by alternating colours, shapes and sounds. Another consequence of the steady camera is that the 'update' does not alternate between different points of views and is therefore unable to shift the position of the spectator from 'detached' to 'involved' observation, by moving through the streets of Baghdad, into the home of an ordinary Iraqi, into hospitals or indeed the city morgues (as for example Al-Jazeera was able to do).

The temporality of the 'update', narrated in time past – 'was bracing', 'it began', 'looked like' – reinforces the emotional distance that cinematic proximity imposes upon the scene of suffering. This is the temporality of an already finalized event, which opens up the possibility for analytical engagement with it: '**This is what** shock and awe looked like . . . '. There are further instances in the voiceover suggesting that we are now analysing the details of the military operation: '**Look carefully and you'll see** the missile . . .', '**In the distance what looks like** surface-to-air missiles . . .', '**This is** Iraq **retaliating** . . .'. There is, in these statements, an orientation towards the impartial contemplation of the scene of suffering as a terrain for the study of the logistics of war rather than as a political or moral fact.

Agency

In this section, I examine mainly the two agency categories in the 'update': the sufferer and the persecutor (or the 'bomber'), but I also briefly mention the benefactor, who makes a passing appearance in the scene of suffering.

The <u>sufferer</u> of the bombing is represented largely in non-human terms. Specifically, the sufferer is verbalized as 'compounds' and 'buildings', that is as the physical but non-living targets of coalition fire; naturally, such targets are also visualized by camera zooms upon concrete blasts and explosions in the night cityscape. The sufferer is also verbalized as a diffused entity, in formulations such as 'Baghdad', 'this city' and 'Iraq's capital'. These formulations may act to humanize the city (as we saw in 'even this city that has been through so much . . .'), but they also collectivize the sufferer and, in this way, work to subtract from the intensity that singular and personalized cases of suffering bear. Whereas a city can only feel in a metaphorical way, the physical and psychological pain of a single human being is a strong point of

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identification for the spectator, as the idea behind the politics of pity suggests. In this respect, the collective verbalization of the sufferer parallels the visual effect of the long shot as they both offer a 'panorama' of the city at the cost of failing to evoke any proximity – geographical or emotional – between the spectator and the sufferer. But the construal of the non-human sufferer is not only passive, 'a building' or 'Iraq's capital'. It is also active. The sufferer appears in the rather ambivalent but nonetheless active position of the retaliator, in the collective wordings of 'anti-aircraft gunners' or 'fluorescent tracers'. At the same time, the use of adverbials, either of manner, '**desperately** trying . . .', or of location, '**in the distance** what looks like . . .' or '**beneath** all of this . . .', convey a sense of asymmetry in the warfare and signal the incapacity of the Iraqi side to properly retaliate or to act effectively as a benefactor for the suffering Iraqis – in the single reference to 'emergency teams'. The vague gesture of sympathy for such powerlessness has, however, no recipient. Indeed, the only reference to the sufferer as a human being lies in the sentence 'the ordinary Iraqis living near these targets', which is simply verbal. Unlike the references to 'anti-aircraft gunners' or 'emergency teams', which are simultaneously visualized in a spectacular manner, the 'ordinary Iraqi' is a significant visual absence in the footage of the bombardment of Baghdad.

The persecutor of the Iraqi sufferer is represented in non-human terms, too. This happens through verbal references such as 'the plane' and 'the strikes'. The former, 'the plane', remains non-visualized but the latter, 'the strikes', obviously the main topic of the 'update', occupies the pictorial mass of the screen throughout the report. In so doing, it performs the same semiotic role as the collective naming of the sufferer. 'The strikes' diffuses the figure of the persecutor and, in so doing, it avoids evoking the emotional potential of the spectator to take a denunciatory attitude towards the bombardment. However, this does not necessarily mean that the spectators of the 'update' would not feel indignation or empathy vis-a-vis what they witness; this would be a naïve assumption as the spectators' reflexivity amounts to much more than the television text itself 'imagines' or expects of them. What the diffusion of the persecutor points to, however, is that the representation of suffering in this piece of the footage systematically steers away from emotional engagement with the figures of pity and proposes to the spectator a different approach to the element of suffering.[17]

This reluctance to semiotize the persecutor becomes more obvious when we turn to other references to this figure, all of which are not only non-visualized but also non-visualizable. First, it becomes obvious in the use of passive voice, '[some of these compounds] being hit repeatedly', which effectively erases any sense of agency from the act of *hitting* and, second, in the use of third person constructions, '**it** began . . .', '**it** was unrelenting . . .', which dehumanizes the act of bombing by reducing agency to the neutral pronoun *it*. The only reference that could be interpreted as evoking a human persecutor is that to 'the president of the United States [who] says that this is

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the beginning of a new phase in airwar'. To be sure, the reference to the US president already formulates some form of causal link with the Baghdad bombardment. But how is this link semiotized? First, it is a linguistic link that lacks the power of pictorial presence. Furthermore, in linking the president with a verbal process, 'says' (rather than the material processes: *does* or *executes*, or the existential processes: *is responsible for*, etc.), the reference places this actor outside the realm of 'dirty action' and construes him primarily as a strategic planner, 'the beginning of a new phase of airwar'.

To sum up, the 'update' contains no visualization of human beings but only a panorama of obscure action. At the same time, the verbalization of figures of pity deprives these figures of any sense of humanness. The sufferer is mostly a collective entity or a non-living being, the benefactor makes a marginal appearance in the form of a blinking light and the persecutor is either diffused in the hectic activity of 'the strikes' or completely erased from the narrative. As a consequence, the potential for pity in the 'update' is seriously hampered insofar as this potential depends on the distribution of action upon suffering and the 'landscape' of human emotions that this distribution of agents organizes on screen.

SUBLIME WARFARE

The regime of pity constituted through the semiotic features of the 'update' is characterized by a hybrid multimodal text that invests the panorama of airwar with factual description, dramatic narration and moralizing exposition. This combination, whilst authenticating the event of bombardment as an objective reality, ultimately invites the spectator to study the event as a spectacle. This occurs within a space–time of cinematic proximity and analytical temporality, which is devoid of human agency but full of the spectacularity of striking action.

In short, the 'update' construes suffering within a 'sublime' regime of pity. The sublime is, in this context, a regime of representation traditionally inscribed into the aesthetic register and historically associated with the representation of suffering in the public genre of painting – as Boltanski's (1999) extended reference to Baudelaire's 'The painter of modern life' testifies (p. 117). The complex and multidisciplinary use of the term 'sublime' granted, I here take it to refer to a specific regime of pity that constitutes distant suffering less through emotions towards the sufferer and primarily through aesthetic appreciation derived from the horror of suffering itself. Such aesthetic pleasure comes about in a double movement:

> an initial movement of horror, which would be confused with fear if the spectator was not . . . personally sheltered from danger . . . is transformed by a second movement which appropriates and thereby appreciates and enhances what an ordinary perception would have rejected. (p. 121)

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How can we semiotically differentiate between the two movements that bring about aesthetic pleasure in the 'update'? The 'initial movement of horror' is clearly evoked in the visualization of the strikes, that is the camera zooms in on the explosions and the gunfire, and it is particularly intense in the sound effects of blasts and rattles; verbal choices of dramatic narration such as 'Baghdad was bracing itself for a ferocious night' and 'even this city . . . has not experienced anything like this' further contribute to amplifying the horror effect of the images of warfare. However, the transformation of horror into pleasure, whereby the spectator comes to appreciate the horrific sight of suffering, must be mediated by the spectators' realization that they are 'personally sheltered from danger'. Evidently, this realization is already inherent in the condition of spectatorship itself, which rests on the technological mediation of suffering and hence on the clear separation of the zone of dangerous living (which is being watched) from the zone of safety (from which the spectator is watching).[18] And isn't the reporter's intertextual reference to *Apocalypse Now* an attempt to register the horror of the bombing spectacle in another order of experience, that of fiction, and hence to moderate its traumatic effect upon the spectator?

But the realization that the spectator is personally sheltered from danger is also achieved on screen through the semiotic construal of space–time. As we saw, instead of an 'involved' perspective, the bombing spectacle is represented from afar and above, giving spectators an 'imperial' perspective from which to gaze on the scene of suffering and providing them with a commentary on what is happening. As a consequence of this spatio-temporal arrangement, the second movement in the construal of the sublime regime rests on the careful study of warfare, which ultimately opens up the possibility of 'appropriat[ing] . . . , appreciat[ing] and enhanc[ing] what an ordinary perception would have rejected'. The process of enhancing ordinary perception is evident in the verbal choices of description – 'look carefully and you'll see . . .', 'in the distance what looks like . . .', 'this is Iraq retaliating' – that urge the spectator to 'stay with' the spectacle and appreciate the detail of visual experience. Sublimation is finally rounded off by the use of expository talk, which makes an explicit gesture to *the shock and awe* manner of relating to the bombing event – 'this is what shock and awe looks like' – and which further intensifies this manner of relating by the use of superlative formulations: 'even this city . . . has not experienced anything like this'.

Sublimation and the public sphere

What are the consequences of the sublimation of warfare for the public sphere of television? I discuss two consequences. First, obviously, the effacement of figures of pity produces the effect of impartiality. Without a benefactor or a bomber, the 'update' does not appear to take sides in the Iraq conflict and, in this way, it considerably strengthens its claim to represent the war with objectivity. Indeed, in the absence of figures of pity and, thus, free of the urgent obligation with which these figures engage the spectator in

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emotion and commitment, the sublime allows the spectator to engage with the scene of suffering through reflexive contemplation. Reflexive contemplation can be understood as an arrangement which turns this scene into a passive object of the spectator's gaze, and the spectator into a gazing subject aware of his or her own act of seeing, a 'meta-describer' (Boltanski, 1999: 19). Of crucial importance for the moralization of the spectator is the fact that this arrangement does not entail empathy or indignation, but emotion distantiated from its object: 'The beauty extracted from the horrific through this process of sublimation of the gaze, which is "able to transform any object whatever into a work of art", *owes nothing therefore to the object*' (p. 127, emphasis added).

The implication of the non-obligation to the suffering object is this: the spectator is given the option of pondering upon the horror of war outside its specific historical context and vested interests. Although links to both empathy ('just think of those ordinary Iraqis . . .') and to denunciation ('the President of the US says that this is the beginning of a new phase of airwar') are present in the 'update', they are too weak to carry through a sustained orientation either towards the 'benefactors' or towards the 'bombers', towards, that is, the practical and ethical tensions that traverse historical action. As a consequence of this politics of pity, the BBC footage lives up to its role as a global news channel that disseminates information without bias and operates within the premises of legitimacy which the public sphere sets and which the channel's logo itself upholds: 'demand a broader view'. However, as argued in the introduction, television footage is a mechanism of representation that, despite its claim to objectivity, inevitably involves the taking of sides. In placing the scene of suffering at centre stage, the footage of the Baghdad bombing throws into relief precisely this tension of the public sphere between reporting on the bombing as objective fact and an instance of suffering that demands a response.

This tension between fact and emotion, both of which are qualities of the spectator as a public figure (see the 'Pity and the public sphere' section), introduces the second consequence of the 'sublime' regime of pity on the public sphere of television. This consequence is related to the danger, inherent in the sublimation of suffering, of refraining from any moral stance vis-a-vis the suffering it reports and thereby completely blocking the capacity of the spectator to feel pity for the sufferer. The relevant question, in this context, is how the spectacle of suffering can provoke the spectator's emotion if it does not, at the same time, portray any of the dynamics of beneficiary or persecutory action. The answer is that the sublime seeks to moralize the spectator by simply making suffering visible. Rather than resorting to easy sentimentalism or angry denunciation, the sublime enables the spectator's encounter with suffering on the minimum condition that the latter is put on view.

In spectacularizing suffering, then, the sublime seeks to create the public space of emotion and deliberation in the face of suffering not through

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political or moral argument but through aesthetic representation, through 'an aesthetic grasp of the world' (Boltanski, 1999: 128–9). Indeed, doesn't the combination of cinematic visuals with verbal prompts such as '. . . we saw this building take a direct hit. Look carefully and you'll see. . .', 'this is what shock and awe looked like . . .', cultivate precisely this aesthetic grasp of the world through which the sublime aspires to capture the essence of suffering? At the same time, the hybridity of the 'update', combining dramatic description with moralizing exposition, testifies to the function of the sublime to bring together a strong appreciation of sensual experience with a – weaker, to be sure – norm of right and wrong: 'think of the ordinary Iraqis', 'even this city . . . has never experienced anything like this'. The sublime regime then constitutes the public sphere of television through articulating aesthetic judgement together with the 'quasi-political requirement of common humanity' (p. 124). Common humanity is this 'universal' principle that aspires to co-ordinate the spectator's encounter with the sufferer into the civic disposition of detached and analytical observation without rendering the encounter an explicit pro- or anti-war statement; hence its '*quasi*-political' character. The spectatorial public thus constituted is a public of reflexive contemplators that 'feel together' at the moment of witnessing the naked fact of destruction and death. As Schaeffer puts it, 'the feeling of aesthetic pleasure is nothing other than the feeling of this *communicability of judgement*' (1992: 32, in Boltanski, 1999: 125, emphasis added).

There are, nevertheless, two problems with the sublimation of suffering. To begin with, this is a regime of pity that does not dispose the spectator towards action. Unlike the regimes of 'care' or 'justice', which enable the imaginary identification of the spectator with the figures for pity and therefore are action-oriented dispositions (even if this action is often only action at a distance), the regime of the sublime is founded upon the condition of inaction. This is because, in order to grasp the suffering, the spectator must do nothing but 'be subjected to the gaze' and to 'feel penetrated and possessed by the other' (Boltanski, 1999: 128–9, drawing on Sartre, 1947: 141–2). Should, however, the report on a fact as controversial politically and as dubious ethically as the 'shock and awe' attacks on Baghdad be articulated through a register of pity that suppresses precisely these political and ethical tensions? Should such a report seek to propose to its spectators the attitude of contemplative inaction whilst, by opening up the report to the historicity of the event – practically to its benefactors and persecutors – it could place them in a broader field of options for agency?

This question may not allow for a straightforward response, but it does point to the second problem with the sublimation of suffering in the war footage. Because no regime of pity is able to bear the weight of representing the suffering of the war alone, the aesthetic register alternates and often fuses with other regimes of pity and their orientation to emotion and practical action. It is therefore the broader context of spectatorial dispositions within which the spectator as a reflexive contemplator is located

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that decides how the regime of the sublime participates in the taking of sides. In the course of the 24–7 footage flow, this 'update' is immediately sequenced by a regime of care that foregrounds the role of the coalition forces as benefactors of the Iraqi population. After having introduced the update through the prompt to 'reflect upon' the scale of the airwar, Nik Gowing now speaks over the direct visual shift from the obscurity of the Baghdad hell to clear, bright morning pictures from the port of Umm Qasr. Here, a convoy of military trucks filmed at street level, and therefore through an 'involved' visual perspective, is crossing the highway: '. . . This port will be the crucial entry for any humanitarian supplies. There are already ships at sea with humanitarian supplies waiting to be brought in. These are live pictures . . .', as the on-location reporter describes it. In other words, from a regime of representation, which suppressed the possibility of pity when Baghdad was being blasted to pieces, we shift to a regime where the benefactor is reported to be fully active even before Umm Qasr itself was securely in coalition hands; let us recall that reports on ongoing fighting in the port continued well into week three of the invasion. Thanks to the strategic sequencing of the footage, however, the contemplative spectator can now sigh in relief as the coalition forces take care of the 'ordinary Iraqis'. It appears that the troops' dilemma of being seen as benefactors and not just bombers, in Amanpour's words, is continually constituted through the alternating regimes of pity that the footage involves and is provisionally resolved in the transition points between sequences and the shifts between regimes. The taking of sides in the BBC footage takes place not through campaigning and propaganda but through the aesthetic register and at the 'edges' of the representation of the war.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have made use of the 'analytics of mediation' in order to study the question of news bias from the perspective of how television regulates what is possible to hear and see in the case of the war footage of the Baghdad bombardment that took place in March 2003. Moving away from a simplistic understanding of television footage as an overtly propagandist representation that takes explicit sides in the Iraq conflict, the aim of this article was to study television as a politics of pity. The politics of pity reformulates the question of bias by looking into the manner in which television's representations of distant suffering articulate implicit moral norms and, in so doing, manage to take sides in the conflict without violating the principle of objectivity – a principle necessary for the credibility of public service broadcasting. The analysis shows that the catastrophic spectacle of the Baghdad bombardment is filmed so that it can be contemplated at a distance and without a human presence. This combination is instrumental in aestheticizing the horror of war at the expense of raising issues around the legitimacy and effects of the war.

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In the light of this analysis, I would suggest that the televisual sublimation of suffering constitutes a form of regulation of the public sphere that does not simply impact upon what we actually see or hear but, as Butler (2003) further claims, poses a deeper constraint upon 'what *"can"* be heard, read, seen, felt and known' (p. xx, emphasis in the original). It is this constraint on how it is at all possible to represent the war on television that is thrown into relief by the inscription of the suffering of Iraqi people in the aesthetic register. As we saw, this inscription endows the journalistic genre of the 'update' with an important ethical and political function.

As part of a broader field of regimes of pity, the sublime helps to even out the unresolved or, more accurately, the unresolvable tension in the identity of the coalition forces as benefactors or bombers, by suppressing rather than producing pity for the suffering Iraqis. It proposes to the spectator neither the regime of care – and the emotional and practical option of empathizing with the civil population of Baghdad – nor the regime of justice and the option of denouncing the invasion and demanding another resolution to the crisis in Iraq. In this way, the sublime becomes instrumental in taking sides in the conflict not by regulating the actors on screen but by rendering their identities irrelevant in the public sphere of television.

This conclusion has implications for our understanding of the relationship between television and the public sphere. Although we often understand the public sphere as political in the sense of generating argument and of disposing citizens towards action – 'care' or 'justice'-oriented – this analysis suggests that we should expand our view of the public sphere to include the space which delimits what is possible to make visible and stage – the public as a 'space of appearance'.[19] The sublime politicizes the public sphere precisely by intervening in the space of appearance and by construing suffering as a spectacle with its own 'universal' claim to objectivity and to morality. Without overtly campaigning for the good nor even regulating the presence of good and bad on screen, the sublime plays upon absences. It plays upon the fact that human misfortune can be staged in different ways, seeking to shape our feelings and attitudes vis-a-vis the distant sufferer.

NOTES

1. See Rageh Omaar's report, 26–7 March 2003. For an analysis of a similar footage extract (Omaar, 8 April 2003), but from the perspective of political communication and the question of political legitimacy in the media, see Chouliaraki (2005).
2. For a criticism of the BBC as *pro-war* see, for example, John Pilger (*New Statesman*, December 2003). The controversy around Omaar's style of reporting was reflected in the BBC's website open debate on the question:

   > UK cabinet minister David Blunkett has attacked some media outlets for their coverage of the war in Iraq, particularly those

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working in Baghdad . . . What's your opinion on the way this war has been reported? Is Mr Blunkett right?' (website closed 9 April 2003). Here are some characteristic contributions:

'Rageh Omaar's reporting from Baghdad has been superb in its objectivity and lack of propaganda. Well done and I do hope that his sacrifices for the BBC will be rewarded.' (Allan Karell, Estonia)

'We watch the *BBC News* every night in addition to American news broadcasts. Your reporters give the impression of being objective, but they fling quite a few barbs at the US and anyone who supports this war. If one only listened to Rageh Omaar or Gavin Hewitt, they would think that the US troops were the oppressors and not the liberators. Is there nothing left in this world that is worth fighting for?' (Andrew McNeil, USA)

'What is the reality of war? Slick videos and talking heads or death and destruction? If you are not showing the death and destruction, then you are utterly failing to show us the reality of war. If you are failing miserably at this, then you cannot be real journalists, you are merely propagandists. It's not a question of taste, it's a question of speaking the truth or not. The BBC, along with the rest of the UK/US media, is not speaking the truth.' (John Kaiser, France; US citizen)

3. Sociological research on how the British television coverage of the Iraq issue influenced public opinion on the war shows that such coverage has indeed helped create a pro-war climate but, significantly, not as a consequence of 'crude forms of bias', but 'as the product of news values which privileged certain assumptions and narratives over others' (Lewis, 2004: 295).
4. For the Foucauldian term 'analytics' see Flyvbjerg (1999), Rose (1999), Barnett (2003); for the 'analytics of mediation', see Chouliaraki (2004, 2005, 2006).
5. For semiotic analyses of suffering, see Van Leeuwen and Jaworski (2002) on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; Perlmutter and Wagner (2004) on the violent conflicts at the G8 Summit in Genoa; for the language of mourning in public and, specifically, media discourse see Butler (2003); see Martin (2004) on the language of mourning concerning the September 11 events.
6. Lewis (2004) and Brooks et al. (2003) also discuss the fictionalization of the spectacle of war broadly in British television, due both to the long-shot filming and to front-line reporting that often portrayed the events as a 'war film' (Brooks et al., 2003: 84). They link this criticism to other features of journalistic discourse in the war coverage. These features include the celebratory discourse of Iraqi liberation that aligned the Iraqi population as a whole with

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anti-Saddam Hussein feelings and tendencies; and the celebratory discourse employed by studio anchors to refer to the advancement of coalition troops towards Baghdad (in contrast to the embedded journalists' reports that were more contradictory and sceptical).

7. In fact, Discourse Analytical studies should be complemented by other types of study, quantitative and qualitative, which investigate the functions and effects of war journalism from different perspectives, including of course the perspective of how audiences interpret the footage. This is because war journalism is a complex genre that weaves together various discourse types, such as updates, embedded journalists' reports, street interviews, studio analysis and debate – each discourse type construing its own framework for the representation and interpretation of the war.
8. For this and relevant notions of the public sphere, see Boltanski (1999: 1–19); Chartier (1999: 20–37); Butler (2003:128–151).
9. For the connection between pity and citizenship see Boltanski (1999: 20–34); Arendt (1990[1973]: 59–114); for the connection between private and public disposition see Peters (1999: 214–25) and for the connection between the communication of the private self and the public sphere of television see Scannell (1991: 1–9).
10. For relevant discussions of iconography see Boltanski (1999: 51–4); Van Leeuwen (2001: 92); Tester (2001: 92–103); Cohen (2001: 168–95).
11. For propaganda as strategic communication see, for example, McNair (2003), particularly his discussion of propaganda in the Gulf War (pp. 210–20).
12. It is beyond the scope of this article to approach the question of the public sphere in the context of *global* media, which the *BBC World* is part of. For the relationship between the public sphere and global television see Dayan and Katz (1994); Tomlinson (1999: 32–70); Hannerz (1996: 112–24); and Silverstone (2005).
13. The multilateral pressure on the BBC to perform with objectivity, relevant as it is in the case of the Iraq war, transcends this particular coverage. Responding to a *BBC Watch* critical report on the channel's use of the term 'terrorist', the channel argues that the BBC Producers' Guidelines increasingly need to be in line with an international rather than domestic audience:

    > Reporting terrorist violence is an area that particularly tests our international services. *Our credibility is severely undermined if international audiences detect a bias for or against any of those involved. Neutral language is the key*: even the word 'terrorist' can appear judgmental in parts of the world where there is no clear consensus about the legitimacy of militant political groups. (Richard Sambrook, letter to *BBC Watch*, December 2002, emphasis added)

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14. I here adapt Chatman's (1991) categories of three main text-types in communicative practice: 'description', 'argument' and 'narrative'. I keep the description with its original use in Chatman and use exposition instead of argument because the news genre does not really develop an argument but usually presents a mixture of description of events with moralizing argument – yet, as Chatman also admits, these are semantically familial terms (p. 9).
15. See Silverstone (1984) for the Austin-based distinction of television meanings as 'locutionary acts', that is meanings which are 'a matter of sense and reference', and as 'perlocutionary acts', that is meanings which are 'an attempt to convince, persuade or deter' (p. 387).
16. This perspective is formulated in a denunciatory mode by a BBC website debate contribution:

> Shock and awe? Reporters standing in front of a backdrop of burning buildings and bombs bursting declaring the coalition's actions awesome? I turned the news off that first day and have rarely turned the TV back on. Not only is the news coverage here not balanced, it is shameful. War is not entertainment. There is nothing 'awesome' about thousands of pounds of explosives being dropped on the homes and heads of Iraqi civilians. No matter what your opinion of this war, 'news' coverage that tries to spin civilian death and tragedy as 'awesome' entertainment to boost ratings whether for our president or for their network is downright sickening. (Marguerite O'Connell, USA cited in the BBC website's open debate page, 9 April 2003)

17. Lewis (2004), for instance, draws attention to the fact that the overwhelming majority of reports (92% in the BBC) were about specific war operations rather than broader war-related issues. This insistence in reporting on war action combined with the lack of graphic images of destruction and death, Lewis argues,

> explains the findings of an Independent Television Commission (ITC) survey in which a majority (52%) said this kind of front-line reporting *could make war seem too much like fiction, and make it too easy to forget people are dying*. (p. 305, emphasis added)

In contrast, channels that did not have this descriptive orientation to the war, but instead insisted on showing the effects of persecuting action on civilians, proposed to their spectators a different attitude towards the war:

> 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)

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18. For this geo-political topography of viewing relationships, see Chilton (2004), Chouliaraki (2006), Silverstone (1999, 2002, 2006), Tester (2001).
19. The idea of the public sphere as a 'space of appearance' comes from Arendt (1958); for a discussion, see Sennett (1992[1974]: 3–27), Villa (1999: 128–54); also Butler (2003), Chouliaraki (2006), Silverstone (2005).

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APPENDIX

Figure 1 Shock and awe. Reproduced with permission of *BBC World*.

TRANSCRIPT OF VOICEOVER, 23 MARCH 2003

Baghdad was bracing itself for a ferocious night. The anti-aircraft gunner desperately trying to lay out defensive fire.

But seconds later it began in earnest [sound effects for a few seconds].

This is what shock and awe looked like as it tore into Iraq's capital [sound effects].

It was unrelenting. Building after building, some of the compounds being hit repeatedly.

Even this city that has been through so much has not experienced anything like this.

The strikes appear to be carefully targeted but just think of those ordinary Iraqis living near these targets.

We saw this building take a direct hit. Look carefully and you'll see the missiles actually ripping into the structure. It was still standing but its inside is left ablaze.

Beneath all of this, emergency teams raced across the city [sound of sirens].

In the distance what looks like a surface-to-air missile. This was Iraq retaliating trying to bring down the planes attacking Baghdad.

And all this is not the end. The President of the United States says that this is the beginning of a new phase in the airwar.

Rageh Omaar, BBC Baghdad

[Voice of Nic Gowing from Doha, Qatar]

From Baghdad straight to live pictures from Umm Qasr . . .

[The shot of Baghdad fades away and fuses with the bright morning light showing a highway with military convoy]

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