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Concept Application # 2

Concept Assignment #2

Lilie Chouliaraki's article *The Theatricality of Humanitarianism: A Critique of Celebrity Advocacy* (2012) is a highly opinionated qualitative analysis of how celebrities align themselves to humanitarian activities. Specifically, the author compares the late Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie and attempts to dissect their motives for the work they do. The author concludes that while Hepburn and Jolie appear committed to their humanitarian work through the United Nations, she suggests that they are inauthentic, narcissistic and seek voyeuristic altruism over the true commitment to the cause (p.1). While it can be easy to question the motives of celebrities it appears that Chouliarkai is attempting to justify her disdain of this popular subject and these particular celebrities by writing a dense, difficult to comprehend the article. If the motive is to discredit celebrities who take on humanitarian causes, this article all but forces a reader to question the motives of the researcher more than the subjects.

The author conducts a qualitative analysis based on two subjects. The comparison is between celebrity actors Audrey Hepburn and Angelina Jolie. Each is a highly successful actor within the context of time and audience. Also, each actor is associated with the United Nations as a humanitarian figure. Hepburn as the UNICEF Ambassador (1988 – 1993) and Jolie the UNHCR Ambassador (2001-present). It is clear the method used by the researcher for the article is an interpretive perspective. The article lacks a specific hypothesis but bases its approach on

two open-ended un-labeled research questions. RQ1 seeks to identify the persona, referring to the strategies of humanization that seek to domesticate the extraordinariness of the celebrity and construe an altruistic self that is compatible with the ethos of humanitarianism (p. 7). RQ2 seeks to identify the personification which refers to the strategies the celebrity uses to authenticate suffering of others as a personal testimony of their misfortune (p .7). The interpretive perspective method is supported further by the significant use of the personal pronoun “I” and the absence of primary research. The article contains eighty-five references to articles, films, interviews, websites, and books.

Moreover, while one of the subjects of the article (Hepburn) was already deceased, Jolie was alive, yet no primary interview or correspondence is evident. Also, the author quotes Riina Yrjola a prominent researcher on celebrity humanitarianism from the University of Helsinki who states, about celebrities and humanitarianism that “no research on their representations and truth-claims has been done” (p. 4). The author’s highly subjective approach to the research conducted suggests a particular slant towards the subject. This slant is evident and exposes that solidarity for causes may have become more about the choice of a lifestyle than conviction of the suffering of others.

This theme of self-aggrandizement and self-promotion permeates not only this article but Chouliaraki’s book, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, 2012, published after this article was released. The topic of examination of one's reasons for philanthropic association is not a comfortable subject, which may be why so much research went into this article. To suggest that people only help humanitarian causes because it is fashionable, cool, or the latest thing to do causes us to question our motives of whether we as a society have compassion for those in need if it provides no self-benefits.

The uncomfortableness of the subject can produce a positive message. If the study of celebrity theatricality about humanitarianism causes people to rethink the relationship they share with helping others in need, it is possible that a more critical evaluation can be taken when approaching whether or not to support specific causes that are publicized by celebrities.

Additional study into hyper-celebrity and utilitarian altruism would be worthwhile as well as aspects of social penetration, social movement, and attachment theories. Charitable consumers develop a relationship with the spokesperson of many organizations because people, by nature like to be like people they admire. Chouliaraki suggests that a shift occurs in the relationship between celebrity and humanitarianism. While she points out that Hepburn did not enter the humanitarian sector while at the peak of her stardom, but long after she had left the celebrity spotlight, Jolie entered at the height of her celebrity. Jolie's attachment to the cause became as much about Jolie as the cause itself thereby turning her work into more of a marketing tool than identifying her motives for association with the cause.

In recent years another actor, Glenn Close co-founded the Bring Change 2Mind organization to help remove the stigma associated with bipolar disorder, a condition her sister has suffered with for decades. Close has a direct relationship to this cause because it affects someone in her family. In contrast, to celebrities attached to other organizations, Bring Change 2Mind does not have a worldwide following, and its revenues are under \$1million annually (Watson, 2015). Perhaps as Chouliaraki suggests it is not necessarily the cause that is important but the people who bring celebrity status that make the cause important. The article is as much one for self-reflection as it is an examination of the chosen subjects.

Reference

Chouliaraki, L. (2012). The theatricality of humanitarianism: A critique of celebrity advocacy.

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