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# Proper distance from ourselves: the potential for estrangement in the mediapolis

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# Proper Distance From Ourselves:
# The Potential for Estrangement in the Mediapolis

**Shani Orgad**

Proper distance refers to our mediated relationship to the other. However, there is little awareness that we, in the U.S. and Western Europe, are also the other of others – especially in today's global media environment, where we become increasingly the objects of others' gaze. Roger Silverstone (2007: 172), albeit briefly, acknowledges that other storytellers than ourselves tell our stories, and that "how we are seen and understood by those far removed from us also matters". I argue that we should extend our concern with proper distance in the contemporary mediated environment beyond our relationship to the other, to include how *we* are seen and understood by the other, and how this influences our self-understanding.

What happens when others tell our story, when we see how far-away-others see us? This paper discusses how, and with what consequences, the media in today's increasingly global and porous environment tell us about ourselves, showing us images and stories that are often uncomfortable, strange and disturbing. In particular, it examines how the news media, in narrating and imaging 'us' as a nation can contribute to an ethical project of estrangement: achieving distance from ourselves, seeing ourselves as others. The discussion explores the ways in which the aesthetics of news can be mobilized for estrangement, what incentives news organizations might have for promoting an ethics of estrangement, and the opportunities and dangers this project entails.

This exploration shows how Silverstone's concept of proper distance may play out in different situations of news coverage of conflict, especially when there is a tension between national and international reporting. Empirically, the analysis is based on a comparison of two cases: the coverage of the 2005 riots in France and the coverage of 2008/9 Gaza war in Israel. France and Israel are deliberately very different cases: the countries are characterized by distinctively different political systems and cultures, occupy very different positions in the international scene, and exist in fundamentally different historical points in relation to their involvement in conflict, peace and war. At

the same time, despite the fundamental differences between these two countries, the analysis reveals that there are important similarities in how these two nations exercise self-distancing, and in how the mediation of this distance is manifested. Thus, these cases raise similar questions about proper distance, and news coverage of conflict and suffering.

## Estrangement

Concern with the mobilization of aesthetics for an ethical project centred on the cultivation of distance from the self evokes the concept of estrangement. The Russian Formalist, Victor Shklovsky, coined the term estrangement (*ostranenie*) to describe a process or act that endows an object or image with strangeness; the replacement of the familiar with the strange. The familiar often becomes habitual that is seen and articulated in an automatic way and the commonplace, thus, tends to become invisible. Familiarity, Shklovsky (1990 [1925]) writes, breeds a particular form of blindness. Estrangement is thus the act of de-familiarization, which, to use Shklovsky's (1990: 6) words, brings out the "stoneness of the stone", makes "one's wife more loveable, and war more terrifying". It makes us aware of what is often taken for granted and goes unnoticed.

Shklovsky explored the act of estrangement in literature; many of his examples refer to the works of Tolstoy. From his reading of Tolstoy's story, *Kholstomer,* Shklovsky offers some useful insights into how estrangement works as an aesthetic technique. The narrator, Kholstomer, is a horse. The horse's point of view makes the things he reflects upon appear strange and unfamiliar to the reader. For example, it de-familiarizes readers from commonsensical understanding of the institution of ownership and private property. The horse makes the observation that (Tolstoy, 1861: 241):

> There are people who call land theirs, and have never seen their land, and have never been on it. There are men who call other people theirs, but have never seen these people; and the whole relationship of these owners, to these people, consists in doing them harm. ... Herein lies the substantial difference between men and us. And therefore, not speaking of other things where we are superior to men, we are able boldly to say that in this one respect at least we stand, in the

scale of living beings, higher than men. The activity of men – at all events, of those with whom I have had to do – is guided by words; ours by deeds.

Estrangement, however, is not just an artistic technique; it can be seen to be an ethical principle. Deanne Bogdan (1992: 180), in her critique of literary education, argues that estrangement "clarifies values by destabilizing ordinary existence - the making strange of reality … opens minds and imaginations by decentering consciousness". Richard Sennett (1994: 374) highlights the fundamental link between self-estrangement – the otherness of ourselves – and our relationship to the 'other': "For without a disturbed sense of ourselves", he asks, "what will prompt most of us…to turn outward toward each other, to experience the Other?" That is, the opacity of the self to itself, the sense of the self as stranger to itself, is the basis for recognising social differences, interest in the other, and a sense of compassion and care for others' suffering.[1] Paul Gilroy (2004: 78) underlines the principled and methodological cultivation of a degree of estrangement from one's own culture, history and local civilization as an essential ethical project, especially in a turbulent political climate. He includes the important caveat that estrangement "cannot guarantee undistorted perception of the world", but argues that it "can still be used to show where overfamiliarity enters and taken-for-grantedness corrupts".

The ethical project of estrangement is closely associated with art and literature, as manifested in the literary works of writers such as Tolstoy and Brecht, and artists such as Dada, Magritte, Duchamp and Richter (notwithstanding the huge differences in their approaches and traditions). Similarly, contemporary intellectuals often act as estrangers. The nation, in particular, emerges as a central object of estrangement, for example, in the reflections of the 20th century modern intellectuals who were refugees from Nazism dissatisfied with patriotism and nationalism (Gilroy, 2004).

But estrangement is not and should not be the privilege of elites. Gilroy draws attention to the potential of the media as symbolic space for estrangement in his discussion of the satirical television show (later a film) *Ali G*. Through the employment of artistic techniques, the character Ali G becomes a stranger (a non-black, suburban male who revels in a mixture of American Gangsta Rap and Jamaican culture) whose strangeness is educative. The satiricism of Ali G's performance estranges viewers from entrenched notions of Britishness and opens up different ways to imagine identities and cultures.

Satire, more generally, is an estranging genre; it disrupts the familiar and commonsensical through the use of wit and ridicule, in order to create a reflexive space to question taken for granted understandings and moral standards.

Can the contemporary mediated space provide resources for estrangement beyond such 'designated' genres as satire, and for wider audiences? I suggest that news (in its multiple contemporary forms and formations) is an interesting and important space where estrangement emerges and can be productively cultivated. However, there is an inherent tension between news and estrangement. News is determined by its highly formulaic, repetitive and habitual form and concurrently symbolizes routine, the familiar, the habitual, while estrangement is geared towards the disruption of the familiar and taken-for-granted. How and why can such a contradiction become morally productive? How can and should estrangement be cultivated in news? These questions are at the heart of the discussion that follows.

## Estrangement in the News

Considerable attention has been paid to the significant role that news, especially national news, plays in reassuring communities and societies, providing ontological security and a sense of coherence. Silverstone (1994; 1999; 2005) and many others (e.g. Dayan and Katz, 1992; Scannel and Cardiff, 1991; Billig, 1995) explored this dimension. In all this work, the news figures largely in the Durkheimian sense, as the embodiment of the projection of the community ideal, which creates a symbolic order that operates to provide confirmation and control. The value of news is seen as lying in the "presentation of reality that gives life an overall form, order, and tone" (Carey, 1992: 21). Communication more broadly, is viewed as being directed towards the maintenance of society in time and the representation of shared beliefs. Thus, in this model, news is tied closely to the provision of reassurance by creating and sustaining *proximity*: the emphasis is on how the news creates and reproduces the familiar, the ordinary, the ordered and, implicitly, the *proximate*. Studies of the construction of national identity in the news reflect this theoretical orientation vividly. Analysing news as a genre, a form, a text, symbolic content or discourse, studies show how the news participates in the symbolic production and reproduction of the national imagined community as the unit readers and viewers are called on to relate to and to identify with. Even when the news is shown to offer reflections on disturbances to our world,

the notion is that the construction of reality is, or should be directed towards, creating and sustaining reassurance.

However news plays an equally important, both sociological and moral role, in evoking distance, disturbing order, making a nation a stranger to itself. Anthony Cohen (1995, cited in Silverstone, 2005) argues that sociologically, community is claimed through refraction and through moments of symbolic reversal, as much as through activities and representations that present values, ideas and beliefs as being unproblematically shared. Thus, it is precisely because of the ritualistic orientation of the news towards the construction and maintenance of a shared meaningful cultural world and a form of being together, that it has a fundamental role of creating and nourishing *distance*. In this context, Simmel's (1971 [1908]: 144) observation on the stranger (which I return to later) is extremely evocative: "factors of repulsion and distance work to create a form of being together, a form of union based on interaction".

Morally, because of its 'dailiness' and its epistemological claim to be reporting 'the world', the news is a primary resource that feeds our moral judgments and cultivates our capacity to act morally. This work of moral education (Chouliaraki, 2008) centres on the constant production and reproduction of the distinctions between us and them, sameness and otherness – what Silverstone (2007: 19) calls "boundary work". While much discussion in current research and public discourse focuses on the moral implications of the symbolic production of others, the production of ourselves as others – estrangement - is a profound dimension of the media's moral work which has been largely overlooked.

I now want to examine how the news acts like Shklovsky's horse: becomes the foreign outsider that tells 'our' story and cultivates a degree of estrangement, which, I would argue, is vital for interacting with others and for knowing and experiencing the world in more complex, inclusive and moral ways. I analyse the emergence of estrangement in two cases of national conflict reporting: international coverage of the 2005 riots in France, and Israeli media coverage of the 2008/9 Gaza war. National conflicts provide productive contexts to think about the media's role in cultivating estrangement, because they usually give rise to heightened attachment – the conceptual opposite of estrangement. That is, conflict usually promotes intensified ideological and moral

proximity to, and identification with, the nation.[2] And yet the contemporary global, highly porous and competitive media environment has made it almost impossible to contain and control images and stories that disturb national narratives and nationalist sentiments, even, and perhaps especially, during times of conflict.

At the same time, the countries I compare are characterized by very different political systems and cultures, and histories of peace and war, which massively influence degrees of distance and the expression of estrangement within their societies. France's history as an Empire, its political system and culture, and the multicultural composition of French society suggest that expressions of distance of the nation from itself would be practised and would be more legitimated than in Israel. Yet as the analysis shows, the veneer of openness and cosmopolitanism often gives way to articulations of defensive nationalism which block estrangement. Israel is a society in a state of ongoing conflict, largely mobilized towards the nationalist goal of defending its existence. This situation continuously produces and legitimates overt expressions of nationalism, prohibits self-distance and blocks possibilities for estrangement and self-irony. Nevertheless, glimpses of estrangement emerge, despite the overall stubborn denial of alternative points of view, and the continuous legitimation of a dominant narrative of "our" truth.

The analysis of each case highlights ways in which the aesthetics of news can be mobilized for the ethical project of estrangement. It explores visual and discursive modes in the news coverage of two events that disrupt familiar, national narratives and endow them with strangeness. In addition, I examine public reactions to international news coverage of the French riots and Israeli media coverage of the Gaza war, to reflect on the possibilities that estrangement opens up, and dangers and explosiveness it entails.

## On Horses and Strangers

The first case I examine, of international news coverage of the 2005 French urban riots, is an example of the foreign outsider – Tolstoy's horse – disclosing to the French nation a different story from the one governing national screens. The second case, of Israeli media coverage of the 2008/9 Gaza war, focuses on estrangement promoted by the national media, which unlike international media, are members of the group they are

reporting on and to. Thus, they occupy a complex position, which suggests that they may not be able to take on the role – at least not as comfortably as can the international media – of Tolstoy's horse. This problematique suggests that rather than Tolstoy's horse, the Israeli media (and national media more generally) could be conceived of as the Simmelian stranger - who is both "near and far at the same time" (Simmel, 1971: 148). I show that the Israeli media act (albeit in continuous tension with their strong attachment to the nation) like Simmel's stranger. While a distinction between the roles of horse and stranger is important, the focus of my argument is on what these positions jointly contribute to thinking about the news and contemporary media as agents of estrangement.[3]

Admittedly, the actual viewing of international news channels in France and Israel is relatively low. However, as the analyses show, international coverage still has significant influence in these countries. The question of "how the world sees us" is inherent in the political culture of such small-medium sized countries. Indeed, as manifested in the reporting of international news, this question was repeatedly discussed in the national media during and after the conflicts. In the French case, the national press, television and blogsphere made ongoing references to international news reporting. In Israel, the two main television channels incorporated into their reporting excerpts from international coverage, and discussed it frequently. Thus to explore the symbolic production of estrangement, the analyses focus on how international news coverage of the French riots and the Gaza war was understood and received in the public sphere in France and Israel respectively.

**From the Horse's Mouth:**
**International News Coverage of the 2005 French Riots**

The urban riots erupted in October 2005 and were a vivid instance of France becoming the object of the world's gaze. On the night of 27 October youths in Clichy-sous-Bois began torching cars and stoning the police to express their anger at the death of two teenagers of Maghrebi descent, who were electrocuted at a police sub-station in the suburb. The riots escalated rapidly, fuelled by the claims being made by Nicholas Sarkozy, the then Minister of the Interior; curfews were put in force in the suburbs of Paris and some 40 other French towns and cities. After 22 days of rioting involving the

destruction of 9,000 vehicles, 2,921 people taken in for questioning and 126 gendarmes injured, the police announced a 'return to normal'. The curfews were finally lifted on 4 January 2006.

The international media honed in on the riots: their news channels, including CNN International, BBC World and Bloomberg, provided 24-hour coverage with special correspondents reporting live from the *banlieues*, France's impoverished suburbs inhabited mainly by minority ethnic groups, where the rioting had begun. Images of burnt-out vehicles were transmitted under headlines such as CNN's 'Paris in flames', and Fox News headline banner 'Paris Burning'.[4] The mainstream French media, e.g. France's leading commercial TV station LCI and the state-run channel France 3, were more restrained about the images they broadcast - partly as a response to what they saw as the international media's exaggeration and sensationalism. They tended to portray the unrest as a "local problem", seeing their role, in the words of the Director General of LCI, as contributing to "maintaining law and order" (News Xchange, 2005). But it was impossible to control, contain and ignore the images of violence in the *banlieues* that were being broadcast: the "local problem" was being projected onto the international stage.

Debates in the French press and the blogsphere provide useful entry points to understanding how estrangement works: how notions of national identity are articulated and how distance from the national unit is negotiated in response to and in light of the stories that others tell about the nation. Data on the public debate in France cover articles from major newspapers and press agencies during the six-months following the riots. I used Lexis Nexis news database to search articles published in *Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, Les Echos, Agence France Presse*, using the search terms 'émeutes' (riots) AND 'télévision' (television) OR 'médias etrangères' OR 'médias étrangers' OR 'presse etrangère' (foreign media in plural OR foreign media in singular OR foreign press) OR 'médias internationales' (international media) OR 'télévision satellite' (satellite television). I used .fr Google Blog Search and various combinations of these search terms to explore French blogs. For secondary data, I searched transcripts of programmes aired on CNN and BBC, and reviewed the English language literature on the media's role in the events.

The international media largely acted like Tolstoy's horse: they presented a point of view that made the images and narratives being displayed to French viewers strange and unfamiliar. Three ways in which international news channels' coverage promoted estrangement merit attention.

First, the *sheer volume of coverage and the immediacy* with which it was produced and disseminated on international news channels, contributed to a considerable de-familiarization of the events. The French sociologist, Erwan Lecouer (in Bennhold, 2006), describes how the French public "have long become accustomed to sporadic outbreaks of vandalism and violence in suburban housing projects across the country". Hence, the "widespread French incomprehension and outrage" at the riots receiving such wide coverage in so many countries. When events that traditionally receive limited coverage at home are exposed to the world and delivered with the immediacy and a sense of urgency engendered by the 24-hour rhythm of global news networks, their 'normality' and taken-for-granted character are undermined.

A second aesthetic technique that generated estrangement was the *removal of uniqueness and the politicization of the riots*. Estrangement is wont to set in when the feeling of uniqueness is replaced by generalization (Simmel, 1971) – a sense that what *we* are experiencing *here* and *now*, could have happened or has happened to *others*, *then* and *there*. The uniqueness of the *banlieues* riots became questionable because of the analogies made, especially to wars and ethnic conflicts. The international media made comparisons with the Iraq war (e.g. CNN and Fox news), the Palestinian Intifada (Al Jazeera and TV 5, a joint-venture among francophone public broadcasters from across Europe and Quebec) and Apartheid in South Africa (Al Jazeera). These analogies carry a heavy ideological and politicized baggage of racism, oppression and war. Use of these comparisons removes the riots from styles of presentation and rhetoric of crime and order and recontextualizes them in a political-ideological frame. In this political frame, the French government becomes the offender and the participants in the violence the victims. The unrest in the *banlieues* hitherto presented in the French media as a violent expression of an ethnic minority is reframed as a political struggle targeted against oppression and racism exercised by the political powers in France. In a similar vein, the appearance of emblematic CNN war reporter Christiane Amanpour reporting from the *banlieues* against a backdrop of burning cars, radically

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reframes the riots - from events with which French viewers are familiar, and commonly understand within an explanatory framework of domestic crime and order, to a violent political conflict of international significance.

Evidently, these comparisons exploded into passionate debate in the French public sphere (see Orgad, 2008). Whether commentators agreed with or rejected these comparisons, the analogies made opened up a reflexive space for thinking anew about the riots, and the French model of social integration more generally.

A third way in which the international news media promoted estrangement was by *providing the people from the banlieues with a stage*, giving voices to people long excluded from the French national media and public sphere (Harding, 2006; Bourdais, 2004). Once the *banlieues* residents had gained some visibility on international news channels, the French television channels began to include them in their reporting. French blogs[5] written during and after the riots, and commentaries in the French press (e.g. Richebois, 2005) reflect a sense of pride at the emergence of voices silenced and denied for years. Jeff Jarvis (2005) goes so far as to describe their impact as "the storming of the media Bastille". Notwithstanding this over-celebratory tone, Jarvis highlights the role played by the blogsphere and international news channels in legitimizing the inhabitants of the *banlieues* and showing that these minorities, who were absent from French television screens, could no longer be kept invisible.

The appearance of *banlieues* residents on television and Internet screens is reminiscent of Usbek and Ibben – the two Persian travellers in Montesquieu's (1923) satirical novel *Persian Letters.* The novel centres on Usbek and Ibben's experience of travelling into the metropolitan centre of France under the *ancien regime*, where, removed from their place of origin and belonging, they observe European and Christian habits in the contested heart of Europe's emergent public world. Gilroy (2004: 78) observes how the experiences of Montesquieu's travellers "establish that being a stranger can be invaluable as an opportunity to know the world better and to experience it in more complex and satisfying forms". The anthropological gaze of a stranger from the point of view of the travellers aims "to reintroduce France to itself and to suggest that critical knowledge of one's own culture and society can only arise from a carefully cultivated degree of estrangement" (ibid.).

Like Montesquieu's imaginary alien visitors offering critical commentary on modern metropolitan life, the *banlieues* youth on international news bulletins and online spaces gave French viewers a critical anthropology of their own society. They endowed commonsensical (and therefore largely unquestioned) conceptions of 'us' and 'them' with strangeness. The media opened the gate to other perceptions: the visibility of the *banlieues* residents in the media acted as a catalyst for a reflection on and rethinking not only of the immediate issue – the deaths of the two youths that provoked the revolts - and their solution, but also of French society and its relationship with these marginalized groups, the processes and mechanisms of this marginalization, and the urgent need to challenge them. They reintroduced France to itself – a process that triggered changes in media regulation policy in France, which I discuss later.

An article published in *Les Echos* describes France following the events as "a France that doubts herself" (Hubert-Rodier 2005, my translation). This neatly captures that sense of a nation's opacity to itself, triggered by, among other things, the considerable discrepancy between the volume of coverage and the way that events were covered by the French and international media, and the international criticism that was levelled against France. Estrangement emerges precisely from and through this sense of the self as stranger to itself, and through feelings of self-doubt, disturbance, incomprehension and shock.

**The Stranger:**

**Strangeness and Distance in the Israeli Media Coverage of the Gaza War**

The international media are not bound through established or symbolic ties to the national community on which they report. They can make the nation strange, sometimes radically so, to itself. National media, on the other hand, are members of the national group on which and to which they are reporting and thus occupy a much more complex position. They are the stranger "who comes today and stays tomorrow – the potential wanderer, so to speak, who, although he [sic.] has gone no further, he [sic.] has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going" (Simmel, 1971: 143). The position of the stranger is one of proximity and distance at the same time – resonating with Silverstone's (2007: 48) notion of proper distance as that which is "both close and far".

On the one hand, a degree of closeness to and identification with the reporter's national community is inevitable and perhaps expected and acceptable; it could be argued that it is necessary for audiences to be able to trust the reporting of a war in which their country is involved. On the other hand, it is expected that journalists will maintain some fundamental distance from the events they report and sustain freedom. The stranger's freedom, Simmel (1971: 146) writes, permits him "to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird's-eye view."

The 2008/9 Gaza war is a fascinating case for elucidating the complexity of this synthetic position required from national media as the stranger - standing simultaneously close to and far from the nation. On 19 June, Israel and Hamas agreed to a period of calm, a Tahadiyeh. When the agreement expired Hamas resumed its rocket attacks on villages and towns in Southern Israel. Israel responded, on Saturday, 27 December, with operation Cast Lead - the most ferocious attack on the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The onslaught began with two phases of ongoing air strikes in the first week, followed in the second week by a ground offensive. Hamas, meanwhile, retaliated by escalating its rocket attacks on Israel, hitting major cities, such as Beer Sheva and Ashdod—only 20 km from Tel-Aviv. 13 Israelis and over 1,300 Palestinians (many of them children) were killed. On Saturday, 17 January, the Israeli government decided to adopt a unilateral cease fire, maintaining deployment of its army in the Gaza Strip. On 18 January, Hamas reciprocated, demanding withdrawal of Israel's forces from the Gaza Strip within a week (Aran, 2009).

For the first 12 days of the war, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) banned correspondents from crossing into the Gaza strip, defying a Supreme Court order to let in a pool of reporters. The reporters were confined to a designated hill overlooking the territory, away from the fighting – a decision that angered and frustrated international news organizations. While Reuters, AP, Al Jazeera and BBC (whose reporters were in the Gaza strip before the war started), were able to send out some picture, the major networks mostly were left pacing the Israeli side of the border. Unlike international journalists, Israeli reporters were used to covering Gaza from a distance: since 2006 they had been forbidden by law from entering the territory. The Israeli media operated

in an uncommonly bizarre situation of forced alienation and distance: the media ban constituted Gaza and its Palestinian population as a far away Other, who cannot and should not be known directly. This, in Silverstone's terms, is an ultimate manifestation of the 'too far': distancing and annihilation of the Other, beyond access, recognition and understanding.

The ban on entering Gaza, which throughout the war extended to the international media, to a large extent was a reaction to Israel's experience of the 2006 Lebanon war against Hezbollah when the media had nearly unfettered access to the front lines. Then, the networks continuously projected pictures in real time from the battlefield. In the heated public debate during and after the war in Israel, it was claimed that this helped Hezbollah and destabilized home front morale. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that IDF's decision to ban access of the media to Gaza was generally not disputed by the Israeli public and reporters, despite the frustration, anger and international criticism it generated. For the Israeli public (although clearly not a singular entity) the national media coverage of the 2006 Lebanon war was "too far": national reporters were accused of being too distanced from their own community. The Gaza war was an opportunity for the national media to correct this 'improper' distance, to regain the public's trust. Israeli media coverage was characterized by strong tendencies of attachment: articulations of self-righteousness and support for the military action (for a detailed analysis, see Orgad 2009; Keshev, 2008, 2009a, 2009b).

Nevertheless, even within a political atmosphere characterized largely by attachment and entrenchment in nationalistic scripts, and at an enforced distance from the other (prohibited from access to Gaza), estrangement emerges. An important source of defamiliarization with and distancing from national narratives comes from the ongoing encounter with international media coverage, seen to represent "what the world says". Discussions in the mainstream Israeli media, both during and after the end of the war, included ongoing references to international coverage of the war, with footage from international news networks often incorporated and replayed. I next analyse the reporting on the two Israeli commercial television channels that enjoy the largest viewership (Channel 2 and Channel 10) from the beginning of the war (27 December 2008) until two days after the ceasefire came into effect (19 January 2009). I focus only on reports[6] that make reference to the international coverage, but this is not to suggest

that estrangement does not emerge in other reports, nor does it imply that it simply or necessarily depends on knowledge and the use of images and accounts of international coverage.

I identify three ways in which estrangement emerged in the coverage. The analysis focuses on the visual and discursive elements that help to evoke distance, and their tension and conflict with elements that reinforce attachment. In the majority of the reports this tension is suppressed because the estrangement is blocked. Only a very few retain this unresolved friction between attachment and estrangement; which, I suggest, is where proper distance – both near and far - is enabled. I show how this tension is manifested in the analysis of the final example and explain why it is productive.

The *removal of uniqueness* is evident in Israeli media coverage. As in the French case, this was achieved through the use of analogies. For example, the shelling of the UN school in the Jabaliya refugee camp on 6 January, which according to UN reports killed 43 Palestinian civilians including many children, and which was roundly condemned by the international community, was compared to the tragic Qana event in the 2006 Lebanon war, which has disturbing connotations for Israeli consciousness. "An event that turned Israel from a state operating its army to a war criminal," declares Channel 10's reporter Ilan Goren in the voiceover accompanying pictures from the Qana footage of weeping Lebanese women and dead children evacuated from the rubbles.

However, more powerful than the use of analogies, a discursive technique that challenges the framing of the war as unique and idiosyncratic (and therefore justified: you cannot compare it to anything else), is the use of vocabulary that is fundamentally more dramatic than the language normally used by the Israeli media. This was most evident after UN school bombing, when Israeli reports showed international footage of wounded children and dead bodies described by foreign correspondents as "Carnage in Gaza" (Sky News), "Gaza Offensive" (CNN); "Panic and chaos and many bodies" (Sky News); "School Slaughter" (Irish Independent), "murder…genocide…real massacre" (Hugo Chavez on Venezuelan television). This contrasts with the Israeli media's embrace of the IDF narrative, which described the shelling as a response to Hamas launching attacks from the school compound (Keshev, 2009b), and used words such as "bombing", "attack", and "hit", to refer to Israel's actions. The dramatic terms used by

the foreign media position the event in a fundamentally different realm of understanding to the one established by the Israeli media. The international media's terms introduce a rhetorical comparison that puts Israel's acts outside the framework of "normal" war, placing them in the deviant category, that of crimes against humanity. Foregoing conventional names and describing them as if seen for the first time, writes Shklovsky (1990 [1925]: 6), calls attention to language thus making "perception long and 'laborious' instead of automatic".

A second element in the reporting which engendered estrangement was *reversal*: the overturning of commonsensical roles and unquestioned categories of 'we' and 'them'. Reversal was created by showing highly graphic images of the suffering of Gazan civilians, which contrasted with the imagery and narratives dominating the mainstream Israeli media coverage of the war. The international news reports all showed distraught Palestinians amid scenes of devastation, weeping women, wounded adults and children, and dead bodies. These images disrupted the dominant Israeli media representations of the war. Not only was the "enemy's" suffering, normally almost entirely absent from national coverage, made visible, but commonsensical roles were reversed - the victims are 'them', and the aggressor is 'us'.

The third way that Israeli reporting of the war created estrangement with reference to the international coverage, was through *visualization and voicing criticism.* Footage from international news shown in Israeli media included world leaders, e.g. Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, condemning Israel's "massacre" (Channel 10); well known intellectuals, citizens and celebrities, e.g. the singer Annie Lenox demonstrating against Israel in London (Channel 10); and angry and frustrated foreign correspondents expressing their strong criticism of Israel's media ban and military operation (Channel 2, Channel 10). These faces of strangers appeared on Israeli screens, demanding viewers to face things as seen through the other's lenses. They call the viewer to doubt themselves. At the same time, the international criticism voiced by world politicians, intellectuals, artists and media, was commonly seen in the Israeli public sphere as another version of Israel-hatred and anti-Semitism. Thus the potential self-distancing opened up by exposing criticisms of Israel from around the world, was contained and suppressed by the interpretation of this international criticism within the

Israeli society's siege mentality (Bar-Tal and Antebi, 1992) and the familiar "the world is against us" narrative.

In the international media coverage of the French riots and the Israeli media coverage of the Gaza war estrangement was achieved through fairly similar aesthetic and discursive techniques. However, as mentioned earlier, there is a fundamental difference between the two cases. In the French case the political system and the French culture allows relatively high degrees of self-distancing. Estrangement emerged through the continuous flow of images and stories that essentially disrupted the coherence and legitimacy of the French media narratives. Conversely, the Israeli political system and culture do not allow meaningful expressions of self-distance. The common perception among Israelis of a state under siege (Bar-Tal and Antebi, 1992; Fisk, 2010) generates and promotes strong nationalist sentiments and discourages self-estrangement. Indeed, in the Israeli coverage of the Gaza war, estrangement was continuously in extreme tension with the elements that reinforced attachment (Orgad, 2009). This was manifested in footage of international coverage which was often reappropriated to reassert rather than to challenge the dominant narrative of self-righteousness and to reaffirm the fathomless distance from the Palestinian people - "the enemy". Thus estrangement when it emerged was only glimpsed, it was momentary in the reporting. Such moments of defamiliarization are often collapsed into a broader narrative of the familiar and the consensual, rendering their potential for creating distance from the familiar, destabilizing the commonsensical, and opening up critical discussion, largely denied. I now give an example of how 'glimpses' of estrangement enabled by use of international coverage, are suppressed by reproduction and reassertion of the familiar, dominant, national narrative. It is followed by an example of a report that admits simultaneously estrangement and attachment – a tension which I suggest, is productive.

*Estrangement denied*
On 1 January 2009, Channel 2 broadcast a piece about how the IDF military operation is perceived by foreign media. The reporter purports to present viewers with "a range of reports from around the world", though the collection is highly selective, including edited footage from only two networks: CNN and Sky News. The edited excerpts tell similar stories: the destruction in Gaza on that day following Israel's killing of leading Hamas commander, Niza Rayan. While both lots of footage include images of

devastated civilians facing ruins, the emphasis is on Rayan's background as "one of the most… outspoken supporters of suicide bombings" (Sky News) and on Israel's satisfaction with the "major success" of its operation (Sky News). These accounts largely mirror the official narrative that dominated the Israeli media, which emphasized the military and strategic success of the operation (Keshev 2008; 2009a; 2009b) and justified the lives it claimed and the suffering and destruction it caused. Thus, the selection and presentation of foreign news reproduce a narrative based on "implicatory denial" (Cohen, 2001). There is no attempt to deny either the facts or their conventional interpretation; rather, the moral implications are minimized by justifying the killing and wounding of civilians and the destruction caused by Israel as acts of necessity.

This narrative is approved and legitimized by two authorities in the studio. First, anchor Arad Nir praises the coverage as "informed and balanced reporting", while the Israeli government spokesperson, Yosi Levi, commends the foreign media for demonstrating a "sober understanding of Israel's motive to defend itself". Thus, the international coverage is used to underpin reiterations of familiar, commonplace justifications for Israel's military action and denial of alternative explanations for this act and its consequences.

Following the images from the CNN and Sky broadcasts, in the second part of the piece Yosi Levi is interviewed at length. Levi describes Israel's efforts to explain its story to the world:

> Our story is for the most part a very rational story. Unlike the Palestinian propaganda which gallops in the fields of emotion… we try to bring this emotional story to the realms of reason…
> Our story is of a democratic and liberal country which gave a chance to co-existence with Gaza, despite Hamas' horror government, and in return got missiles, terror, suicide bombings --- an impossible situation.

If the CNN and Sky News pictures of devastated Palestinian civilians, shown in the first part of the report, evoked compassion towards Palestinian suffering –if only momentarily and to a limited degree - Levi's reframing of these images as the manipulative acts of the irrational Orient erased this. It fervently espouses the deep-

seated binary opposition between 'them' - the irrational, depraved and violent Arabs - and 'us' - the rational, reasoned and 'normal' Israelis. Ultimately, then, while the projection of a foreigner's view may encourage a degree of distance from Israelis' narratives and perceptions of their nation, its appropriation by the national media may further extend the dehumanization of the other.

Then there is a moment of estrangement when anchor Arad Nir comments on the international coverage shown to challenge the dominant IDF narrative. He asks Levi: "But how do you explain that we are a liberal and democratic country in view of these very difficult pictures of children being evacuated from the rubbles of Niza Rayan's house?" This question goes unanswered; the uncanny is again repressed. Nir's question is quickly 'buried' by Levi expounding on the familiar explanatory framework established earlier by him.

*Estrangement unlocked*

On 19 January 2009, Assaf Yehezkeli, one of Channel 2's leading journalists, broadcast on the main evening news bulletin, a piece entitled "The foreign media stormed Gaza". It opens with the reporter's voiceover: "And now, the pictures we did not see, or did not want to see, or could not see. Today, there is a foreign reporter standing by every house in Jabaliya, showing the world, without censorship, what they are seeing". This rather dramatic introduction speaks precisely to the ethical project, in which both national and international media are involved, of creating distance and its political force of battling denial: acknowledging what we could not or did not want to know. It is followed by a collection of footage from BBC, ABC, TVE, CNN and Al Jazeera in which foreign reporters are shown standing amongst the rubble of Gaza, describing the huge destruction and utter helplessness of the survivors returning to what once were their homes. The editing of these extracts is minimal; the reporting is subtitled in Hebrew. The excerpts pose critical questions rarely voiced in the Israeli public sphere during the war: the CNN piece suggests vandalism by Israeli soldiers; the ABC reporter discusses accusations that Israel deliberately tried to destroy mosques and gives voice to Palestinian victims who ask "why they have been punished so hard"; Al Jazeera quotes a Palestinian returning to his home to find his money and jewellery have been plundered, who asks: "What kind of human does this to someone's home?"

The piece decentres consciousness through seeing oneself as another; its use and discussion of international news reports invites defamiliarization from the commonsensical narratives and imagery of the war. At the same time it maintains a clear sense of the reporter standing *within* the national community he is reporting on, primarily through employment of the collective "we". The reporter, Yehezkeli, is the estranger, but fundamentally, is also estranged, as an Israeli, by the pictures from international networks. The international media, he tells his audience, might have a point, which we cannot simply dismiss. Furthermore, the piece includes footage of Palestinian civilians criticizing Israel and Hamas – both sides are presented as accountable for the war; both sides are called on to take responsibility for helping the survivors. The familiar binary oppositions between us and them, right and wrong, are challenged. So while use of footage from international network coverage provides viewers with the gaze of a stranger, it is the gaze of Simmel's stranger: near and remote at the same time. It allows a more ambivalent and complex narrative to emerge: the distance invoked is neither too great nor too small; it is that "more or less precise degree" that Silverstone (2007: 47) describes as proper distance. Whether this proposal made by the text for the viewer to establish a 'proper distance' is actually taken by audiences remains to be investigated.

## Estrangement: Possibilities, dangers and incentives

### Possibilities

Estrangement has become an inevitable, and arguably a more central feature in today's mediated environment. This capacity to impede the automatic perception of things and to see things anew can become meaningful, productive and transformative forces that enhance democratic public spheres. In France, the processes of doubting and the acknowledgment of issues and voices that for decades had been repressed, among other things, gave a substantial push towards media diversity and representation of minorities in the French media (Malonga, cited in Harding, 2006). At the height of the riots, President Chirac acknowledged that "the [French] media must do more to reflect the reality of France today" (Harding, 2006). Less than a year after the riots, Edouard Pellet, France Télévisions' adviser to the president on integration issues, presented a plan for "positive action for integration aimed at repairing inequalities and 'dewhitening' the screens, structures and mentalities" (European Broadcasting Union,

2006). In 2009, President Nicolas Sarkozy announced new measures to bring diversity to elitist institutions, the civil service, politics and the media (Poggioli, 2009). Of course, multiple political, social, cultural and economic factors led to the positioning of diversity, discrimination and racism at the top of France's political agenda; how or whether they will be addressed remains to be seen. But the estrangement that emerged from the stark discrepancy between the international and French media coverage made a significant contribution towards acknowledgement of these issues and their inclusion in the national public sphere.

**Dangers**

That said, there are clearly significant challenges and dangers in realizing the ethical project of estrangement. The freedom of the stranger, as Simmel (1971: 146) notes, contains many dangerous possibilities: "From earliest times, in uprising of all sorts the attacked part has claimed that there has been incitement from the outside, by foreign emissaries and agitators". The French media's reaction to international coverage of the unrest vividly exemplifies this: international media were accused of being sensationalist, their coverage was blamed for being excessive, exaggerated and fanning the flames (Cozens, 2005; News Xchange 2005). Similarly, during the Gaza war, Yonit Levy, one of Israel's most popular news anchors, was accused of expressing what was perceived as excessive sympathy for the enemy in her coverage. Channel 2, which enjoys the highest number of viewers among Israel's television stations, was inundated with complaints and demands that she be fired. An online petition entitled "Yonit Levy? Go Home!" attracted more than 35,500 signatures. Unlike Assaf Yehezkeli whose report was analyzed before, Yonit Levy was seen by Israeli viewers as an alienated estranger, standing too far from her national community, disengaged from her viewers. Rather than a productive force that invites viewers to consider a different point of view and entertain the opportunity of expressing some distance from their own convictions and truths, Levy's style of estrangement was perceived as alienation, her criticism as illegitimate.

Thus the split between self and other on which estrangement is based has negative implications and even an explosive potential. It can engender substantial mistrust in the storytellers on which we rely to make sense of our lives in this world. This mistrust can surface in alienation and disorientation, and the discomfort and disturbance created can

be transformed into denial rather than acknowledgement; the blocking of new visions in place of opening up a reflexive space. This is what happened in the Israeli case: Levy was seen as a traitor, an "inner enemy"; the disturbing pictures from international news channels, for the most part, were framed as incitement by foreign agitators, to use Simmel's phrase: as anti-Semitic, faux, taking things out of context. Similarly, the French public sphere was replete with expressions of defensiveness, entrenchment in 'our' truth and 'our' moral superiority, denial, hostility and arrogance towards the international media and other countries (especially the US), accompanied sometimes by nationalist sentiments and xenophobic discourses. For example, writing on his blog French politician Alain Juppé accused the American press of 'unleashing itself against France' and 'taking revenge after Katrina and the ironic condescension demonstrated by us [the French] towards the American authorities' (Pégard, 2005). The ultimate consequence of estrangement therefore might be the reinforcement of its conceptual opposite: attachment and entrenchment, encouraging the emergence of a France and an Israel ever more confident, rather than doubtful, of their actions.

Furthermore, while the sensational pictures of the French riots shown on international news may have played a positive role for French audiences, in offering them a different vision of themselves and French politics, for international audiences the coverage arguably reinforced stereotypical ways of seeing France. Some even argue that international news reports misinformed their audiences: "contrary to the breathless dispatches from the American press, Paris was most certainly not burning…To say that all of the French suburbs are hotbeds of radicalized passion (which TV images imply) is also an overstatement. In fact, reaction from *banlieue* residents to the riots ranges from angry to cynical to oddly hopeful" (Ng, 2005). Thus, while estrangement can become a productive and progressive ethical project, it is crucial to recognize its ambivalence, that is, to consider also it dangers and potential misuses.

**Incentives**

So why would and should news organizations 'do' estrangement? The international media are not bound as are national reporters, by established ties to the national communities to which and on which they report. They have ties to an international audience and to more universalist values. They can afford, therefore, to be the estranging horse.[7] At the same time, international news channels might not accept that

estrangement is their role. In a private meeting held in June 2010[8] to discuss BBC coverage of the Middle East, one of the participants commented (following Israel's raid on the aid flotilla to Gaza in May 2010) that we are witnessing a growing gulf between how the world perceives Israel and how Israel perceives itself. "What does the BBC intend to do about that?" he asked. A very senior BBC editor replied dismissively: "with due respect, this is not the BBC's responsibility to try to bridge this gulf". I agree wholeheartedly that bridging this gap is not the BBC's responsibility. However, I also would claim that the BBC - and other international media - have a significant role to play in the contemporary global age, in offering nations a foreign vision of themselves, to encourage them to gain a distance from their own cultures and narratives that national media are often incapable of providing. I would argue that the moral task of international networks such as the BBC is to increase the gap, to offer nations different visions of themselves from the ones that may dominate national screens. Italian cities used to recruit their judges from other cities to secure themselves against the influence of family interests and factionalism on the legal system (Simmel, 1964). We might think of international news channels in terms of such external judges who could offer us, as national peoples, judgments that would be much more difficult, if not impossible, for us to hand down about ourselves. Unlike the residents of those Italian cities, we do not have to necessarily accept the stranger's judgments, but neither can we – as I hope my analysis shows – pretend total ignorance of them.

National media (anywhere) cannot afford to be, and nor perhaps should be, Tolstoy's horse. There is a huge tension between the national media's "care structures" (Scannell, 1996), their work of symbolically 'gluing' together national communities and providing them with a constant resource for community and a sense of belonging, and the ethical project of symbolic distancing and decentring national consciousness. Yet the national media have a pivotal responsibility to work towards the synthetic position of Simmel's stranger and Silverstone's proper distance – both close and far. It might be that this can be only achieved, especially during times when the nation is perceived to be under threat, in momentary "glimpses". The moral and political force of these glimpses might be weak; they may fail to destabilize the far more forceful dominant narrative that governs the screen. But it does not mean that the potential significance of such moments of estrangement should be dismissed. Rather, the focus should be on

how their potential could be better realized. The value of detailed analyses of media texts such as news reports is to locate such moments in order to consider ways in which they can be mobilized for the creation of proper distance, or at least, a more appropriate distance.

The moral argument aside, who would fund estrangement? What are the incentives for the media to foster this ethical project and manage its potential explosiveness?[9] After all, rather than disturbance, the increasingly commercially-driven, commodified and consumerist orientation of the mediapolis promotes a "comfort culture" (Sturken, in this volume), which sells the idea of proximity, emotional connection, pacification and reassurance. I would like to propose four reasons why the media might be motivated to 'do' estrangement.

The first derives from the simple fact that the media are competing businesses: each wants to be the first to show the images that will attract as wide an audience as possible. "If they do not show them, others will, and indeed are doing so, on the internet at least, and on global satellite channels" (Silverstone, 2007: 26). Estrangement is often the product of those disturbing images that are uncomfortable to show and see, and yet this is precisely why everybody wants to see them. To be clear, I am not arguing for cynical and irresponsible use of estranging images, nor for a pornography of horror and pain. But since "once the media have opened the door to the visibility of the world, we cannot pretend that it is not there" (Silverstone, 2007: 26), avoiding estrangement is no longer an option. Instead, the task is to estrange with responsibility, to confront and engage rather than to disavow the uncanny.

The second incentive, which is related to the former point, is explained succinctly by Simmel (1964: 218) (although of course the context is totally different): "Contrast excites and simulates; similarity reassures". The media's enterprise is to excite and stimulate us, and audiences derive pleasures from the strange, which contrasts and disrupts their sense of self (see, e.g. the fascinating discussion in Griffin (1994), of the pleasures of satire, especially self-satirizing, i.e. that is directed against ourselves). Thus while there is a fundamental tension between the news and estrangement, they can be mutually reinforcing. Estrangement might go hand in hand with exciting, stimulating and perhaps even pleasing audiences (though this should not be the motivation for estrangement).

The third reason why the media should invest in the project of estrangement is that it constitutes a significant basis for public trust. This might seem a contradiction in terms: why would the public trust media that estrange them? They surely prefer media that reassure, that give them the feeling that their particular existence is legitimate. However, media that only or mainly reassure and comfort, media that are "too close" in Silverstone's terms, not only betray their moral responsibility, they ultimately fail to constitute a meaningful (and thus in the long-term trustable) resource for the conduct of our lives, as individuals and as a community. As Simmel (1964) argues, it is *both* the similar *and* the contrasting, the near *and* the far, though by very different means, that give us the feeling that our existence is legitimate. We need continuously to maintain the reality that we have produced and to repair it "for it consistently breaks down"; and we must also, often, "with fear and regret, toss away our authoritative representations of reality and begin to build the world anew" (Carey, 1992: 30). Estrangement is thus a vital resource that the media *have* to offer us, if they are to sustain their relevance to our lives and to ensure our trust in them in the long run.

The fourth reason refers specifically to why the global media might have an interest in "doing" estrangement. The global media depend on communicative ethos and practice that promote openness, freedom of expression, information flow, tolerance and cultural pluralism. However "capitalist" they are, and notwithstanding the implications of their commercial interests, global media prosper if their work furthers an open, democratic communication. Estrangement precisely fits with these values and practice – it presents opportunities to express different views and thus different degrees of distance, specifically from nationalist narratives. It is therefore in the global media's self-interest to encourage estrangement, as it ultimately strengthens their democratic character, which makes them more sustainable.

## Conclusion

A degree of estrangement from one's own culture and history is essential if one is to consider seriously how to cultivate the capacity to act morally and justly in the world (Gilroy, 2004). For Sennett (1994) and Gilroy (2004), like Montesquieu writing more than two centuries earlier, the prime location for the cultivation of estrangement is the metropolis. Today, another location, if not *the* prime location for this moral project is

the mediapolis. Silverstone (2007) suggests that the mediapolis is the mediated public space of appearance where the materiality of the world is constructed through electronically communicated public speech and action. It is where judgements and decisions are presented and represented, debated, and sometimes made. It is where public life happens in contemporary societies.

The mediapolis should therefore be a primary location where we can learn to practise forms of disloyalty to our own cultures, histories and narratives, if we seek to understand them, or to interact equitably with cultures, narratives and histories established elsewhere. The news offers a particularly productive site for estrangement: the strange and the unfamiliar are interwoven with the ordinary, the familiar, and the routine; distance is evoked within a space that embodies the habitual, the normality of our everyday life, the proximate. At the same time, the news cannot engage in systematic estrangement - this remains the privilege of art, literature and estranging genres such as satire. The very essence of estrangement, after all, is that it is *not* systematic: it removes us from the ordinary taken-for-granted perceptions. The media can and should strive to lift the most meaningful, yet often taken-for-granted elements of our culture and social order for contemplation and reflection, to allow us significant experiences of self-displacement, in order to helps us know the world and its others better and to experience them in more complex, inclusive, moral and satisfying forms.

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[1] Estrangement has a more negative connotation in a pathological sense. Laing (1990 [1967]), in relation to psychosis and mental illness, wrote influentially about the experience of the split between self and the other, in which the self reverses its role as the observer of others, to being looked upon by itself.

[2] Research consistently shows how journalism during crisis is characterized by the assumption of shared values, with journalists reporting events as members of the national community and invoking patriotism and a generalized consensual "we", the adoption of unquestioned binary categories of 'us' and 'them' and a reassertion of the dominant national narratives (Peri, 1999; Schudson, 2002; Waisbord, 2002; Zandberg and Neiger, 2005). Hallin (1986, cited in Schudson, 2002, p. 40) describes this as the journalist's tendency during war and crisis to move towards a "sphere of consensus".

[3] The scope of this paper and the space available makes it impossible to provide an elaborated analysis of the coverage of each of these cases (see Orgad 2008, 2009). I use examples only in order to support the broader argument about the potential role of the media in cultivating estrangement.

[4] The blogsphere also played a role, with bloggers reporting from the scene of the uprisings, but this aspect is beyond the scope of this paper.

[5] See, e.g., Blog TV, 6 November; Un Blog de bretagne, 6 November 2005.

[6] Twelve news items were analysed. All citations from the reports are my translation.

[7] Al Jazeera is often seen as occupying this role by bringing audiences content and style of reporting that divorce things from the meanings usually ascribed to them by western viewers, and presenting fundamentally different understandings (although more research on Al Jazeera is needed to evaluate and substantiate this claim).

[8] The meeting was held under Chatham House Rules, i.e. neither the identities nor affiliations of the speakers or any other participants can be revealed

[9] I thank John Peters for raising this question and encouraging me to address it.