
Regarding the Pain of Others is a work that seeks to retrace, in Sontag’s traditionally elliptical form, the ways in which we view—and have viewed—people’s suffering through images. This book is touted as being “a profound rethinking of the intersection of ‘news,’ art, and understanding in the contemporary depiction of war and disaster” (inside jacket). In it Sontag aims to amend some of the arguments made in her renowned 1973 book, On Photography.

Regarding the Pain of Others is prefaced by a correspondence between Virginia Woolf and a distinguished lawyer in London. In their discussion, the lawyer inquires, “How in your opinion are we to prevent war?” Responding in a deconstructionist manner reminiscent of Derrida, Woolf underlines how the lawyer’s use of “we” belies a commonality between them. However, she claims that the communicative basis between them is fundamentally skewed because of their sexual difference; “the lawyer is a man and she is a woman. Men make war” (p. 3). Sontag invokes this apposite dialogue to stress the importance of defining who is involved in viewing the suffering of others; this is a leitmotif that recurs throughout her book.

Adopting the voice of reason as her rhetorical approach, Sontag is primarily concerned with delineating the complexities of our involvement in the act of beholding. Each chapter addresses one of these elements. The book traverses a number of themes, and it begins by examining the challenge of eliciting a response from a viewer(s).

Sontag first problematizes how we read pictures. She contends that an image reveals a captured moment of reality, however, it concomitantly conceals the history and the identities of that reality—it provides no additional context. Thus, interpretation becomes a very subjective process, as we are likely to read a photograph in ways that reaffirm our beliefs and understandings; “images of dead civilians and smashed houses may serve to quicken hatred of the foe” (p. 10). This idea of interpretation working in such a manner as to reaffirm preconceived notions is an echo of a cogent argument that can be traced back to Jacques Ellul’s Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes (1965). In problematizing the way in which we look at images, Sontag makes the incisive observation that it is not sufficient to glare at these horrible images in disgust as Woolf merely does, because to do so “is to dismiss politics” (p. 9).

Thereafter, Sontag examines how different positions in which the viewers and victims are situated lead to specific forms of preference and privilege. She argues that here is a remarkable inequality in regard to representations of the dead. Her contention is premised upon the notion that “good taste” is always “a repressive standard when invoked by institutions” (p. 68). Sontag recounts how it has traditionally been forbidden, especially in times of war, to depict faces of the deceased. However, Sontag reveals that though representations of North American or European dead are constrained by notions of “good taste” or dignity, the same cannot be said of, say, similar images coming from postcolonial Africa. North American media, Sontag points out, has become imbued with “a succession of unforgettable photographs of large-eyed victims, starting with figures in the famine lands of Biafra in the late 1960s to the survivors of the genocide of nearly a million Rwandan Tutsis in 1994” (p. 71). Sontag concludes that the pervasiveness and regularity with which images of death and suffering in postcolonial Africa appear in our media only serves to normalize these occurrences; in fact, it primes us for the “inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward—that is, poor—parts of the world” (p. 71).

Another issue Sontag takes up is how the surfeit of horrendous images results in a general inability to muster emotional responses. It is here where Regarding the Pain of Others is meant to present its “profound rethinking” of the claims advanced in On Photog-
raphy. However, it is also at this point where the reader might be disappointed with Sontag’s conclusions. When she wrote *On Photography*, Sontag argued that a photograph had an ability to lend a greater reality to those things captured in its frame. Additionally, she also argued that photographs could elicit sympathy on the part of the viewer. Nevertheless, Sontag cautioned that repeated exposure to a photograph quickly attenuated its effectivity. Sontag has since reconsidered her position; now she wonders whether or not the photograph, in the context of today’s media, can even have such an impact.

Sontag’s repositioning is predicated upon the notion that television has had such a profound impact on the way we live that her previous insights are no longer valid. Of all its effects, Sontag claims that television’s hollowing of content has been the most decisive. The surplus of images that we encounter daily is said to foster a form of attention that is “light, mobile, [and] relatively indifferent to content” (p. 106). Due to this capricious form of attention, Sontag alleges that there is a general inability to meditatively engage with content, because this demands “a certain intensity of awareness—just what is weakened by the expectations brought to images disseminated by the media, whose leaching out of content contributes most to the deadening of feeling” (ibid).

This hoary argument is perhaps not entirely accurate. The problem is rooted in Sontag’s assumption that television has rendered viewers as passive consumers who have lost the capacity to focus; she confidently asserts: “[T]he whole point of television is that one can switch channels, that it is normal to switch channels, to become restless, bored. Consumers droop” (ibid). Sontag’s comment indicates that she has not considered the idea that television viewers are indeed critical and that they are completely able to concentrate on programs that appeal to them, or that their compulsion to switch channels is often reserved for segments with commercials. Moreover, it is difficult to agree with the argument that our intensity of awareness has waned so severely. For example, is it not that same intensity of awareness that contributed to mobilizing the sizable protests against America’s war in Iraq? Granted, engagement with content and war protests are initially somewhat disparate, however, they are linked by the fact that they both hinge upon the viewer or citizen possessing a certain measure of critical awareness. Additionally, it is equally difficult to dismiss the impact of a photograph, especially after the gruesome images of Uday and Qusay Hussein were proudly disseminated by the United States government for all to see; those images were primarily shown based on the assumption that they would have an impact. Sontag’s attention deficit argument is merely another variation of the compassion fatigue thesis. Although these terms address different issues, they are both predicated upon assumptions of audience passivity; it is important to be wary of such assumptions because they give rise to concepts that limit further thought rather than opening it up.

As a whole, *Regarding the Pain of Others* is a persuasive investigation of the complexities involved in viewing other people’s suffering. It owes its success both to the number of incisive arguments it puts forth and to the passionate, sparkling, and elegant language in which it is written. Sontag’s writing ability inarguably deserves further qualification. Each phrase, carefully crafted in a natural and lucid fashion, offers further evidence that few command Sontag’s rich control of the English language. This depth of language allows her to adorn each and every argument of her exegesis. Additionally, Sontag invokes a number of artworks, media texts, and written works to substantiate her claims, and this affords her examination a historical dimension; from this perspective, she identifies the ways in which different images, and their corresponding media, played a decisive role in our act of beholding.

Lastly, there is something particularly distinct about Sontag and her work. It is not simply that her written approach is replete with traces that divulge her fondness for Walter Benjamin; her elliptical style is certainly one of these. Nor is it solely the interdisciplinary nature of her texts. Rather, the key to this mystery lies in how Sontag manages to defy being
associated with an easily defined readership. She is an author of many faces. There are those who know her as the American essayist, or the famous novelist, or simply as a writer of short stories—then again, there are those who regard her as one of the important voices in the experimental art of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, she always seems to be lurking in a no man’s land—trying to avoid being assigned a specific designation by one of her communities of readership. Among academics, she is greatly appreciated for her style and wit; however, she is nevertheless sometimes reproached for either not sufficiently problematizing or not fleshing out her arguments.

For Sontag to author a book on how we regard the suffering of others through photographs and other media without including any of the images referred to (these include Goya’s *Disasters of War*, Jeff Wall’s *Dead Troops Talk*, Jacques Callot’s *Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre*) suggests that she is writing to an audience who is—at the very least—familiar with them. Thus, this audience must be a learned one, because Sontag’s works are always an imbrication of history, journalism, literature, art, and politics. This transdisciplinary approach affords her a certain measure of freedom. It gives her the latitude to say those things that others choose not to; her post-9/11 diatribe in *The New Yorker* is a perfect example. This independence, however, comes at a certain price. Sontag’s arguments must stand on their own. To stand alone in no man’s land requires courage, and this is an attribute that Sontag has aplenty. Satiating most but catering to none, Sontag seems content to occupy that nebulous position. She does so because it is no one else’s; she does so because it is her own.

**Notes**

1. The correlation between Sontag’s contention and Jacques Ellul’s work on propaganda is the notion that individuals will naturally classify the things that they experience as either good or bad depending on their personal contexts. “To those who are sure that right is on one side, oppression and injustice on the other, and that the fighting must go on, what matters is precisely who is killed and by whom” (Sontag, p. 10). Ellul, when defining *sociological propaganda*, underlines how individuals become accustomed to a certain way of life, and “everything that expresses this particular way of life, that reinforces and improves it, is good; everything that tends to disturb, criticize, or destroy it is bad” (Ellul, 1965, p. 67). Developing this line of thought further, Sontag explains how photographs without captions are likely to be interpreted in a similarly binary fashion; thus, photographs of the dead will generally lead people to hold their enemies responsible for the crimes.

2. “Compassion fatigue means becoming so used to the spectacle of dreadful events, misery or suffering that we stop noticing them” (p. 13). This is a term that Keith Tester (2001) has refused to accept at face value; instead he has sought to canvass it further in the bid to offer insights that are more useful to work with. Susan Moeller (1999) also examines the notion of *compassion fatigue*; however, her focus deals with studying how the media attempt to sell only some of the multitude of global tragedies to its audience. Her analysis is particularly useful because instead of treating *compassion fatigue* as a conclusive term, she seeks to flesh it out so as to productively examine its relationship with news media.

**References**


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