
[Thesis. Sontag debunks a certain number of commonplaces (including some that she herself endorsed on earlier occasions) concerning images of war and atrocity, underscoring the importance of these images but also undercutting hopes that they can convey very much. Ultimately, she concludes that narrative and framing establish meaning more than images, and that those who have not lived through war or other extreme experiences can't understand images of them. — NOTE: Titles have been attached to Sontag's untitled sections.]

1 [The delusion]. Sontag disagrees with Virginia Woolf, who wrote about photographs of the Spanish Civil War in Three Guineas (1938): "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain" (7; 3-7). Only those regarding "war" generically see such photographs as condemning "war" itself; those "sure that right is on one side," or who are convinced of the inevitability of war, do not (10; 7-14). Ernst Friedrich (Krieg dem Kreige! [1924] and Abel Gance (J'accuse [1938]) also shared the enduring delusion that "if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war" (14; 14-16).

2 [The reality]. Being a spectator of other people's wars is "a quintessential modern experience" (18). How we respond to this situation has been a matter for concern for more than a century (19-21). Photography has a "deeper bite" than video (22-24). The "era of shock" from photographic images lasted from 1914 (beginning of World War I; Henry James wrote in 1915 that "The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorates") to 1945 (liberation of Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau) (24-25). Photographs unite two contradictory features: objectivity and point of view (26). Those who stress the "punch" of photography "have to finesse the question of the subjectivity of the image-maker" (26; 26-29). But it is on words that the reception of a photograph depends (29-32). Images may have to compete with other images, including advertising (32-33). War photography creates "star witnesses," like Robert Capa (33-35). But the memory of war is local (35-38). Photographs can be used to promote war as easily as to oppose it (38-39).

3 [Historical]. Gruesome images invite us to be "either spectators or cowards" (42; 40-42). Using images to protest suffering appeared alongside secularism: Jacques Callot in the 1630s (42-44). Hans Ulrich Franck (44). Goya introduced to art "a new standard for responsiveness to suffering" (44-46). But a photograph is more than just a representation; it constitutes evidence (47; cf. 83-84). The early history of war photography: Roger Fenton (Crimean War), Matthew Brady (Civil War) (47-53). Photographs are often staged (53-57). Photographs that were not set-ups only become "virtually certain" with the Vietnam War (57-58).

4 [Spectators and censors]. Photos of the moment of death are among the most celebrated (59-60). Photos of those condemned to die are "[m]ore upsetting" (60-61). Various degrees of spectators' distance exist (61-63). Increasingly, demands are made on images, including censorship (63-67). The "current American way of war-making" is bringing new developments in this regard, including arguments for suppression (67-70). Remoteness of locale increases the willingness to represent the dead and dying (70-72).

5 [The modern critique of war]. That peace is the norm and war an aberration is an attitude characteristic of modernity, which is uneasy about regarding the representation of misery aesthetically because this is seen as distancing—hence the criticism of Sebastião Salgado (74-81). An inventory of various and mutable ways photographs change viewers, about which it is difficult to generalize (81-88).
Understanding requires narrative; a key question is: "Whom do we believe we have the right to blame?"—and the answer depends largely on social consensus (93; 88-94).

6 [Why we look]. Looking at gruesome photographs mingles moral duty with prurience (95-99). One can choose to stop looking for different reasons that are quite various—indifference, revulsion, fear, boredom, etc. (99-103).

7 [Self-criticism]. Sontag used to believe (cf. On Photography) that photographs have come to possess the power to make real but also tend to make viewers of them callous; now she regards this as a dubious cliché (104-13).

8 [Morality and ethics]. No one has the right not to know "what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans" (114-15). But too much remembering is an impediment to peace: "If the goal is having some space in which to live one's own life, then it is desirable that the account of specific injustices dissolve into a more general understanding that human beings everywhere do terrible things to one another" (115-16). There is probably not more bad news than before, it is just more widespread (116). It is not a defect in our nature that we are not more affected by it (116-17). Complaints about watching "from a distance" are unfair, because all vision takes place at a distance (117-18).

9 [We can't understand]. The framing of an image of suffering, and the time the framing is made, matter (119-20). "[T]here seems no way to guarantee contemplative or inhibiting space for anything now," however (121). Narrative "likely" has more power to mobilize against war than images do (122). The book concludes with a discussion of Jeff Wall's enormous Goya-influenced computer-generated piece created in 1992 from staged photographs; "Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)" is "the antithesis of a document," but this depiction of "a made-up event" is "exemplary in its thoughtfulness and power" (123; 123-26). "Engulfed by the image, which is so accusatory, one could fantasize that the soldiers might turn and talk to us. But no, no one is looking out of the picture. There's no threat of protest. . . . And [the dead] are not represented as terrifying to others. . . . These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses—and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? 'We'—this 'we' is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it. . . . Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right" (125-26; these are the abrupt last words of Regarding the Pain of Others).

Acknowledgments. The book evolved from an Amnesty Lecture at Oxford University in February 2001 (129). Four articles and seven books mentioned as sources (129-31).

About the Author. Susan Sontag has written four novels, a collection of stories, several plays, and seven works of non-fiction; her books have been translated into thirty-two languages. In 2001 the Jerusalem Prize recognized the body of her work; she received the Prince of Asturias Prize for Literature and the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2003.

[Additional information. Susan Sontag was born on Jan. 16, 1933, in New York City. After the death of her father when she was five, her mother remarried and moved to Tucson and then Los Angeles, where Sontag graduated from high school at 15. She began studies at Berkeley but transferred to the University of Chicago, where at 17 she met and married Philip Rieff. Her marriage with Rieff lasted eight years; in 1952 they had a son, David Rieff, now a writer. Sontag taught at Sarah Lawrence, CUNY, and Columbia, and published an experimental novel in 1963. Her intellectual celebrity was established by her 1964 essay "Notes on 'Camp'" and her critical collection Against Interpretation (1966). On Photography (1977) was influential. She championed a number of European writers, including Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. In her later
years Sontag was more politically active, assuming the presidency of PEN American Center in 1989, rallying writers to Salman Rushdie's support, visiting Sarajevo, and criticizing U.S. policies. Sontag was openly bisexual; at the time of her death in New York City of cancer on Dec. 28, 2004, she was in a committed relationship with the American portrait photographer Annie Liebovitz (born 1949). — *Regarding the Pain of Other* is her last book.

**Critique.** Sontag's style here, as elsewhere, is characterized by a tough-minded *nil admirari* incisive seriousness that reflects her high conception of the vocation of literature. Extreme concision (on occasion to the point of being cryptic), a paucity of transitions, and a grave humorlessness make her prose seem rugged and rambling. Typically, she challenges some truism, introduces fine distinctions, historicizes what is regarded often regarded as universal, or pronounces in an authoritative manner on moral questions. — The conclusion of the book is more effective if one can view a reproduction of Wall's disturbing, "cinematographic" work while reading; unfortunately, no image appears in the book. An illustrated edition of *Regarding the Pain of Others* would be a project worth undertaking. — Sontag may be right to conclude that those who have not lived through war or other extreme experiences "can't understand, can't imagine" (126) what images of them represent, but one wishes she had commented on the fact that the "exemplary" work she cites in her conclusion was produced by an artist with no such experience. Moreover, her conclusion that those who have not lived through war can't really understand images of it should provoke her to inquire how those who have lived through it respond, but she never addresses this question. — A better title would have been *Regarding Pain Caused by Others*; Sontag has no interest here in pain *per se*—from disease, for example.]