

The Power of Sontagraphy

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HUM 103

November 1 2019

*How are scholars using the ideas in Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* in their own intellectual work?*

This topic may require you to learn something about Sontag's broader work as a critic and public intellectual, in order to be able to situate this long essay in the scholarly discussion about this book. It may also be that there are conversations that use her phrase "regarding the pain of others" in ways that are not how she understands it. (Perhaps like how Arendt's "banality" concept takes on a life of its own.)

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag focuses on the effectiveness of the historical uses of photography as well as the various roles and responsibilities of a photograph. Some of the repeated issues that scholars try to answer in their analyses of Sontag include: Do photographs have common functions? Are photographs an effective medium of communication? How have authorities used photography to their benefit?

In exploring *Regarding the Pain of Others*, John Schilb comes to the understanding that photography can act as a single snippet taken from a much larger picture. Sontag says, "The camera brings the viewer close, too close; supplemented by a magnifying glass—for this is a double-lens story—the 'terrible distinctness' of the pictures gives unnecessary, indecent information"¹ That being said, Schilb agrees with Sontag in that photographs can still be influential and hold lots of meaning. "But she wisely presses us to trace how even stark pictures of carnage get variously interpreted, subjected to multiple agendas as they circulate."² Schilb

¹ Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

² Schilb, John. Review of *Review of Regarding The Pain of Others*, by Susan Sontag.

believes that despite Sontag's pessimistic view of photography, there remains value in every photograph. Schilb also shines a light on Sontag's proposition that artwork can actually do more in distancing rather than bringing the viewer closer to the trauma. "As in *On Photography*, she worries about photographs becoming mere aesthetic commodities when they are mounted in art galleries. Just as disturbing to her are the atrocity exhibitions in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, for she believes that these keep Americans from realizing that evil can happen in their own country."³ Schilb realizes that Sontag believes photography innately domesticates the viewer from the event. When photography is presented simply as a simple object, the storytelling power of photographs become limited. Furthermore, Schilb mentions one's privilege in viewing a photograph. He believes Sontag is correct in recognizing how important it is to, "examine our own social privileges as we gaze at an image of someone more abject."⁴ Ultimately, Schilb agrees with Sontag, saying that photographs are an important form of communication, as long as one recognizes the flaws in limiting themselves only to photography, and as long as we are aware of our privilege that allows us to view these photographs from a distance. Schilb says, "I may have given the impression that Sontag is thoroughly bleak about photography's consciousness-raising potential. But, more than in her earlier book, here she acknowledges that some examples of the medium may do good."⁵ A photograph's goodness is often brought up simultaneously with wartime photography.

While Schilb thinks that Sontag is focused more on the frame that photography puts the viewer in, Ganahl believes that Sontag emphasizes the gruesomeness of an image itself. Ganahl

³ Schilb, John. Review of *Review of Regarding The Pain of Others*, by Susan Sontag.

⁴ Schilb, John. Review of *Review of Regarding The Pain of Others*, by Susan Sontag.

⁵ Schilb, John. Review of *Review of Regarding The Pain of Others*, by Susan Sontag.

says that in the context of war, photojournalism is essential because the gut-wrenching photographs that arise can serve as a reminder to the tragedies of humankind. Ganahl believes that Sontag's point of view is "strikingly useful,"⁶ saying that this level of awareness is the first step into being more responsible about what is displayed in the media. Remembering these events is an ethical act; As Sontag puts it, "Heartlessness and amnesia go together."⁷ Ganahl's emphasis on vulgar images is different from most scholars. For example, John Schilb says, "Here, Sontag is especially concerned with photographs of war... 'Images of the sufferings endured in war are so widely disseminated now that it is easy to forget how recently such images became what is expected from photographers of note.'"⁸ Most other scholars, like John Schilb and E Ann. Kaplan, come to understand that Sontag believes society has become desensitized to atrocious pictures, and that the horridness of a picture does not necessarily relate to its positive impact as a photograph.

E Ann. Kaplan has yet another view from Ganahl of tragic photography as she talks about her experience as a photographer in New York following 9/11.⁹ She questions whether there is any benefit in memorializing tragedies through pictures. Ganahl might say that brutal pictures are effective because they can leave a mark on their conscience. However, Kaplan says how using photography can somewhat limit the realness of 9/11. She references *Regarding the Pain of Others*, saying, "Sontag insists that 'such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalization for mass suffering offered by

⁶ Ganahl, Rainer. Review of *Review of REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS*, by Susan Sontag.

⁷ Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*

⁸ Schilb, John. Review of *Review of Regarding The Pain of Others*, by Susan Sontag.

⁹ Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*

established.”¹⁰ Sontag and Kaplan focus on the perspective that the photograph is framed in rather than the actual photograph itself. This is similar to Schilb’s interpretation of Sontag. If all anyone ever sees are solely pictures, it distances the event away from the viewers by making it seem fictitious. In this case, photography acts as an inhibitor by minimizing the entire experience to a still portrait. Another thing that must be taken into account when discussing the power of photography is the intent of sharing images.

Jasmine Alinder talks about the biases photography can create, specifically about the censorship of wartime images in the U.S. in, *Underexposed: The Controversial Censorship of Photographs of US War Dead*.¹¹ In a country that emphasizes its democratic freedom, especially in speech and press, Alinder writes about the irony of the restrictions that the United States are putting on wartime photography. “Efforts to control the creation and publication of photographs of US war dead reveal the desire of the government and military to direct and create the public image of war.”¹² This is a perfect example of an authority using the power of photography to their advantage. Sontag recognizes the controversy of this topic; she realizes that showing dead pictures of our own nation could be “unpatriotic.”¹³ Furthermore, Alinder agrees with Sontag about staging photographs and how that can completely discredit photography’s validity. They both mention the iconic picture of the American flag being raised on Iwo Jima and explains how that picture was staged. Alinder also draws similarities from Kaplan’s 9/11 experience. Kaplan discusses the disparities between reality and what was being shown by the media. “The media aided the attempt to present a united American front. But this proved to be fiction—a construction

¹⁰ Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*

¹¹ Alinder, Jasmine. “Underexposed: The Controversial Censorship of Photographs of US War Dead.”

¹² Alinder, Jasmine. “Underexposed: The Controversial Censorship of Photographs of US War Dead.”

¹³ Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*

of a consensus in a Eurocentric and largely masculine form.”¹⁴ Even in “free” countries, photography can and has been used by higher powers to mislead a large population.

On a related note, Moeller talks about why certain events get more attention in the media than others. Moeller realizes that one common factor of popular events is its relationship with the U.S.¹⁵ No matter what the event is, the U.S. will put a much bigger spotlight on events that affects us. This explains why the Rwandan genocide got so little attention. Everything that happened in Rwanda was horrible, but since it mostly stayed within Africa, Americans were not keen on covering it. Moeller refers to Sontag when talking about the power and limitations of graphic pictures. “The right images can arrest our attention, but that is just the first and perhaps the easiest step to take.” In saying this, Moeller is recognizing the limited power of these explicit photographs. This view, similar to Kaplan and Schilb, is quite different from Ganahl. Moeller, Kaplan, and Schilb are all objectively analyzing photography from an outside perspective, while Ganahl gets caught up in the actual photograph itself.

Compared to the other scholars mentioned, Elizabeth Dauphinée is more concerned about the ethical problems that arise when photographing others’ pain. “Here, we arrive at an ethical impasse of sorts, caught between the imperative to witness and the impossibility of doing so through the visual forms of representation that most often constitute our access.”¹⁶ She is aware of the conflict of experiencing someone else’s pain through the comfort and safety of a photograph. This idea runs parallel to Sontag. As Sontag said, “It seems exploitative to look at harrowing photographs of other people’s pain in an art gallery.”¹⁷ Dauphinée and Sontag both

¹⁴ Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*.

¹⁵ Moeller, Susan D. “‘REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS’: MEDIA, BIAS AND THE COVERAGE OF INTERNATIONAL DISASTERS.”

¹⁶ Dauphinée, Elizabeth. *The Politics of the Body in Pain Reading the Ethi*.Pdf.

¹⁷ Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*

acknowledge the fine line between raising awareness and unfairly claiming one's pain. This idea also has some similarities with Kaplan, as she says, "...I felt conflicted. How could that scroll on display in a museum mean what it had meant being spontaneously written on in those warm September evenings in the days after the attacks?"¹⁸ Kaplan would most likely agree with Dauphinée due to her first-hand experience of the suffering that followed 9/11. The photographer must be aware of the difference between claiming ownership of one's pain and telling a story through a photograph.

¹⁸ Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*.

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