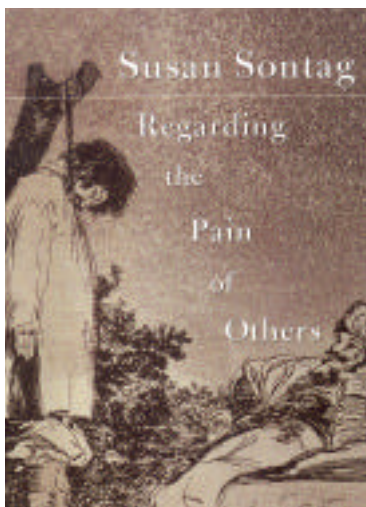


REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS

BY SUSAN SONTAG

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Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* is a book about the politics of war photography, a topic that may not greatly occupy the imagination of most, but is nonetheless, one of increasing importance. The book begins with a discussion of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, an essay on the nature of war. After describing images of war, Woolf concludes that such depictions of atrocity can only create consensus among all that war is an aberration that must be ended. This is the starting point for Sontag's incisive critique of both the uses and meaning of war photography as well as the modern-day preoccupation with observing people's suffering through this medium. She questions Woolf's assumption that a picture of war can only elicit one reaction, and argues instead, that pictures take on different meanings and interpretations based on who is doing the viewing. While the case against war needs only anonymous images of slaughter, the case for why it could be morally justifiable depends directly on the identity of who is being killed, by whom, and why.

Sontag writes dryly that being a voyeur to calamities happening all over the world is the 'quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists'. While the gruesome images on television or in newspapers are excessive, they are at the same time a result of the media's conscious decision of what news and which images are worthy of being shown and which are not. In Sontag's words, 'to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude'. She makes the brilliant observation that since pictures serve the dual purpose of being visual art as well as historical documentaries, viewers have the contradictory expectation of wanting 'the weight of witnessing without the taint of artistry'. Pictures showing death and destruction have no business being beautiful, because this takes attention away from the subject and draws it towards the medium of representation. Yet, there are also cases where the real thing might not be dramatic enough and requires enhancement through photography. Alternatively, pictures that are perceived as depicting reality too closely are often suppressed for strategic reasons.

The U.S. media in the aftermath of 9/11, for instance, suppressed pictures taken of the dead at the World Trade Centre not only in deference to the victims' families, but also in the name of good taste and decency. However, this is not a courtesy afforded to people in other countries. Explicit pictures depicting the effects of famine and genocide on African women and children abound. Not only do they perpetuate colonial stereotypes of the poor, backward native, but it is through these fragments caught on film that people who have never experienced atrocity understand it. The problem with this, she argues, is not so much that photographs are a way of understanding and remembering, but that these have become the only means of doing so. Increasingly, 'to remember is not to recall a story, but to be able to call up a picture.' Still, Sontag is quick to remind her reader that she does not share the frequently-heard sentiment that reality itself has become a spectacle, for it assumes naively that the viewing habits of the elite are universal, and that everyone is a spectator.

Ultimately, *Regarding the Pain of Others* asks the reader a number of questions. How is one to make sense of the act of viewing the suffering of others? Are depictions of atrocity meant to shock, to spur us to action, to confirm what is already known, or to generate new understanding? Sontag demonstrates precisely that these questions have no easy answers, and in doing so, she fundamentally transforms and problematizes the previously simple act of looking at a picture