Reviews


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Like this special issue of JAC, Susan Sontag's latest book focuses on trauma and rhetoric. Specifically, it ponders our responses to visual images of human suffering. What are the social effects of such images? Do they spark civic awareness, or do they dull it? How should we regard their depiction of physical and/or mental trauma? Is it good when they leave us feeling traumatized ourselves? In addressing these questions, Sontag doesn’t provide an elaborate academic treatise. Hers is a short, essayistic text geared to a more general audience. It largely eschews jargon and footnotes. Moreover, it ignores several celebrated theorists of trauma studies, visual culture, and rhetoric. Shoshana Felman doesn’t even appear in a cameo. Still, the book is so thought-provoking that it deserves respect and attention from scholars. As always with Sontag’s writing, the style engages, too. Once again, she proves an expert wielder of aphorisms. If not all of her observations here are original, most are nonetheless bracing, phrased as they are with her usual epigrammatic wit.

In various ways, Regarding The Pain of Others is a sequel to Sontag’s 1977 classic On Photography. The new book extends and refines points made in the old one. Though she alludes here to various modes of visual representation, Sontag remains obsessed with photographs. Of course, even in the 1970s, snapshots competed for social impact with other visual media. Sontag had already directed some films. And today, she acknowledges, “Nonstop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) is our surround.” Yet she builds a good case for her continuing preoccupation. After all, she points out, the still photo remains a prime vehicle of personal and cultural memory. “In an era of information overload,” she notes, this particular medium “provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or
a maxim or proverb.” To be sure, as in her earlier book, Sontag is suspicious of photography’s power to encapsulate.

Here, Sontag is especially concerned with photographs of war. Although cameras have recorded other human torment, she broods most about their depictions of combat. Though evidently not a pacifist, she believes that war constitutes “the largest crime.” In part, her book sketches the history of photography’s fascination with this subject. She reminds us that pictures of combat victims haven’t always proliferated: “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.” For much of the modern age, she notes, “photographers have offered mostly positive images of the warrior’s trade.” She suggests that interest in documenting atrocities swelled when armies began inflicting mass pain and death on civilians. But even today, Sontag remarks, “It takes some very peculiar circumstances for a war to become genuinely unpopular.” Although Sontag wrote before the recent U.S. invasion of Iraq, her observations seem quite applicable to it. At first, a majority of Americans supported the attack, and much of the photojournalism emphasized our military’s valor. The visual climax of this phase was the iconic “Mission Accomplished” image of President Bush, garbed as a pilot as he postured on an aircraft carrier. By now, however, the long and violent occupation has soured many Americans, partly because the media show much of Iraq suffering along with our troops.

Although the term “rhetoric” appears rarely in her book, it fits Sontag’s drift—not that she thinks photographers are able to sway public opinion in their preferred direction. She claims that “The photographer’s intentions do not determine the meaning of the photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it.” But Sontag’s orientation is rhetorical insofar as she holds that a photograph’s message and effect ultimately depend on the context of its reception. For her, the role of interpretive communities is quite strong in the case of war photographs. She points out that “The destructiveness of war . . . is not in itself an argument against waging war unless one thinks (as few people who do think) that violence is always unjustifiable, that force is always and in all circumstances wrong.” Furthermore, “Photographs of atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen.” Sontag observes that much depends, too, on the written text that accompanies photographs, for they “wait to be explained
or falsified by their captions.” Sontag illustrates this latter observation by noting that “During the fighting between Serbs and Croats at the beginning of the recent Balkan wars, the same photographs of children killed in the shelling of a village were passed around at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings.”

Sontag adds that even when groups agree on what a war photograph refers to, they may disagree over whether it is fabricated. She reminds us that quite a few of these pictures have, in fact, been staged. For example, Matthew Brady’s team rearranged corpses on Civil War battlefields, and the famous Iwo Jima flag raising was a reenactment of one that had occurred earlier that day. Will new digital technology increase such artifice? In any event, those implicated by a certain picture of atrocity will be more apt to claim that it’s a computer-generated hoax.

Perhaps Sontag overstates the case when she denies the individual photographer any power to influence. At the very least, a well-known one may be able to shape how the public decodes his or her work. Nevertheless, Sontag’s emphasis on reception is salutary. It nicely counters a still-prominent tendency in cultural studies: the impulse to determine a text’s politics by focusing on the artifact itself. In visual studies, often this habit involves ascribing a particular ideology to the artist’s style. Actually, I don’t think Sontag wants us to dismiss completely a photographer’s apparent biases. I assume that she would have us take them into account. But she wisely presses us to trace how even stark pictures of carnage get variously interpreted, subjected to multiple agendas as they circulate.

If Sontag’s book amounts to rhetorical criticism, it engages in ethical critique as well. Repeatedly she questions the adequacy of typical responses to war photographs. She recognizes that the horror of some of these pictures may fade, and that others of them may seem so artistically crafted that they enthrall rather than shock in the first place. As in On Photography, she worries about photographs” becoming mere aesthetic commodities if and 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. She is skeptical even when people respond to war photography with sympathy or pity, for such moods may lead to paralysis rather than activism. “Compassion is an unstable emotion,” she declares. “It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated.” Passages like these are daunting in their pessimism. They make me think Sontag would
shudder at any of my reactions to an image of war. Still, she performs a valuable service when she identifies ways in which such images may leave oppressive conditions intact.

Again echoing her earlier book, Sontag argues that a photography’s ability to serve as a “quotation, or a maxim or proverb” threatens to displace true historical understanding. Often, she suggests, contemporary society dwells on pictures of concentration camps instead of thoroughly studying the causes, policies, and results of Naziism. “The problem is not,” she observes, “that people remember only through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs.” Taking this argument further, she submits that memory itself can be an evasion of history. An individual’s recollections, or even those of an entire culture, may be a facile version of the past. In Sontag’s view, “Perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking”—a harsh statement, I suppose, and yet I find myself wishing it at the masthead of every composition journal tempted to publish still another issue on personal writing. Of course, by “thinking” Sontag means rigorous analysis of history, which can be thwarted by written testimonies as well as pictorial records.

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. “Let the atrocious images haunt us,” she proclaims, for at least they indicate human beings’ capacity for evil. Moreover, she seems to believe that people can achieve in-depth comprehension of history, and she provides some sensible hints for doing so. One is to consider who and what is not being photographed these days. Another is to examine our own social privileges as we gaze at an image of someone more abject. A third is to think about why, in full-frontal photographs of suffering, formerly colonized people are so often the subject.

Sontag’s most provocative recommendation is to dismiss any idea that all of civilization has become a Society of the Spectacle. Clearly, she is concerned that readers of On Photography saw her as expressing this very notion. Now, however, she takes aim at exponents of it, particularly Jean Baudrillard and Guy Debord. Departing from her book’s generally calm tone, she asserts that “To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world.” Media empires have, in fact, become utterly globalized, and probably Sontag believes their far-flung operations are worth tracing. Meanwhile, her declaration
is a useful corrective to any theorizing that would overlook the many material differences that still exist.

At the same time, ironically, her statement opens a door for hope, since it insists that not everyone is mesmerized by simulations.

Sontag concludes her book by discussing a photograph that she actually appreciates: Jeff Walls’s monumental 1992 tableau entitled “Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986). Interestingly, however, Wall’s picture isn’t a record of a real event. Staged with actors in his own studio, it depicts Russian soldiers talking with one another after they have all been slain. Sontag admires Wall’s seemingly perverse fantasy because it doesn’t pretend to be realistic. Also, she likes that it prevents viewers from easily identifying with war victims. In other words, for her this is a picture that encourages critical consciousness. So, too, does her own book.

Just before the book appeared, Sontag published her discussion of Wall’s photograph in the December 9, 2002 issue of The New Yorker. Her article was accompanied by a two-page reproduction of the picture. But if you page through Regarding The Pain of Others, you won’t find Wall’s creation. Indeed, you won’t find any photographs at all. As with On Photography, Sontag has chosen not to include them in the body of her text. In one respect, this decision is sheer prudence. It enables Sontag to avoid any charge that she, too, is exploiting images for dubious purposes. A better reason for her strategy, though, is that it forces her readers to think about photographs rather than simply behold them. “Regarding” comes to mean active contemplation instead of an awestruck gaze.