



Current Results

Revise Search

Main Menu

Help

"Exposures"

Critic: Tzvetan Todorov
Source: *New Republic* 228, nos. 4605-06
(21-28 April 2003): 28-31.
Criticism about: Susan Sontag (1933-)

"Exposures",

[essay date 21-28 April 2003] *In the following essay, Todorov analyzes human preoccupation with suffering, and categorizes* Regarding the Pain of Others *as a valuable study in this phenomenon.*

One of the great platitudes of our epoch is that images, in particular photographic or filmed images, transmit messages that are much clearer and stronger than words, which disguise the truth more than they reveal it. But in truth nothing could be less certain: a photograph can stun us, but taken out of context it may not convey any significant meaning. You see a mutilated corpse, you are moved and overcome by shock or pity; but you do not yet know who this corpse is, nor why this person has been killed, nor by whom; nor whether this is a case that warrants an appeal to vengeance, or on the contrary an appeal for peace, or whether it is only an incitement to meditate on the fragility of human existence. Sentences have a subject and a predicate, a part that delimits what is being discussed and another part that says something about it. But images are subjects without predicates: they evoke the world intensely, but they do not tell us, of themselves, what we should think about it.

Susan Sontag's small and rather digressive book [*Regarding the Pain of Others*] suggests this idea, among many others; but in a way the book resembles its subject, the photographic image, in that it contains more evocations than judgments. Sontag summons facts, and summarizes the different interpretations to which they lend themselves, but she does not hasten to formulate arguments. Often her analyses end with a question for which we must ourselves find the answer; or indeed by refuting all the possible answers that come to mind.

The essay's structure is not scholarly. Its principal theme is articulated by its title: why do we take pleasure in seeing the suffering of others? And, supposing that we do, does this not entail certain political and moral perplexities? Around this vast subject Sontag hangs observations and musings on a variety of themes. One sometimes has the impression of a long fireside conversation from which we have only the contributions of one participant. Sontag knows her subject well, and she expresses herself elegantly. She is at ease in the history of photography and in the history of painting, in the analysis of history and in the analysis of the media, and she never slides into pedantry. Nor does she seek to force her ideas upon us, but rather to make us reflect, with some melancholy, upon a range of troublesome topics.

Even if it does not directly pertain to the book's central subject, for example, there is the fact, well known by twentieth-century historians, that military action was long considered perfectly legitimate as long as its victims were colonized populations, far away and exotic. When they took place in Europe, however, such actions risked being seen as war crimes. Thus General Franco commanded the extermination of "enemies" in Morocco in the 1920s without provoking a single raised eyebrow; but transposed to his native country in the 1930s, these same methods aroused widespread indignation. Arthur Harris, a young commander in the Royal Air Force, could boast in 1924 of the systematic destruction that he wreaked upon the "rebel" villages of Iraq, when "within forty-five minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed by four or five machines which offer them no real target." He could do the same again when, on February 13, 1945, he ordered the incineration of "more than a hundred thousand civilians, three-fourths of them women," during the RAF firebombing of Dresden. But sixty years later many people question the legitimacy of this latter massacre. We continue to discriminate between "us" and "them" in the infinitely less murderous domain that is the circulation of photographic images: "we" appear in images as individuals, if not with proper names; "they" illustrate always and only a situation, an attitude, an emotion.

Then, too, there are the multiple uses that we make of memory--a human capacity that is much more ambiguous than the new cultural popularity of commemoration would have us believe. For one thing, the constant reminders of the past keep wounds open, and thereby lead to violence. "Too much remembering (of ancient grievances: Serbs, Irish) embitters," Sontag remarks. "To make peace is to forget." Moreover, memory usually serves simply as a reinforcement of the self--a pardonable but not particularly laudable activity. One likes to recall one's past as a hero or a victim, rather than the situations in which one's group played a less glorious role. In this regard Sontag writes that "to have a museum chronicling the great crime that was African slavery in the United States of America would be to acknowledge that the evil was here. Americans prefer to picture the evil that was *there*, and from which the United States is

exempt."

The simple evocation of a painful past awakens emotion, but this of itself is an insufficient response: it is always better to analyze and to think. The compassion felt in the face of disaster must not become a substitute for the need for action. And a lucid analysis, in its turn, demands that we discard our egocentric preconceptions. Sontag recounts, in this regard, a very telling anecdote about the inhabitants of Sarajevo, who protested against an exhibition that mixed the images of their sufferings with those of similar atrocities committed in Somalia: "It's intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's." Intolerable, yes; but it is also indispensable to anyone who wishes to think, rather than simply to be outraged.

Finally, too--though the list of possible subjects is far from being exhausted--there is the singular status of images, and in particular of photographic images. Wherein does their specificity lie? Is it that, unlike words, but also unlike painted pictures, they present us with an authentic piece of reality and lead us, by this shortcut, directly to the truth? Clearly not. It is hardly necessary to mention the many cases in which photographs have been retouched, or, more numerous still, in which the photographed objects have been arranged to create a better effect. (This was the case with some of the most celebrated war photographs by Roger Fenton and Matthew Brady, by Robert Capa and Yevgeny Khaldei.) What is decisive is the choice to photograph *this* and not *that*. "It is always the image that someone chose," Sontag observes; "to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude." For this reason, photography is as subjective as drawing or narrative--even if it has a less determined meaning than the latter. The specificity of the photographic image lies elsewhere: not in the greatest fidelity to the exterior world, but in the physical continuity between the object represented and the subject taking the picture. That is why we experience a certain discomfort when the scene photographed is particularly violent: looking at images of lynchings and executions, one wonders whether the photographer, rather than seeking a better angle for his photograph, ought not to have thrown himself upon the torturers in an effort to disarm them.

Sontag's main theme is hardly new. Since time immemorial we have been aware of the fascination provoked by the misery of others. She cites a famous passage from Plato's *Republic*, to which one might add Lucretius: "Tis sweet, when the sea is high and winds are driving, / To watch from shore another's anguished striving." Or Montaigne: "In the midst of compassion we feel within us I know not what bittersweet pricking of malicious pleasure in seeing others suffer." Or La Rochefoucauld: "We all have strength enough to endure the troubles of others." Or Burke, or Hazlitt, or Balzac. Or the French writer and philosopher Georges Bataille, who admitted that he gazed at least once a day at an especially atrocious photograph from China in which one sees a man skinned alive. But why? What is gained from the contemplation of such sadistic images? Why does a great proportion of Western painting represent the Massacre of the Innocents, and the flaying of Marsyas, and the agony of Laocoön--when it is not depicting the slow and agonizing death of a man named Jesus?

It is not enough to say that suffering sells better than happiness; this only begs the question. The moralists of the past provided a first reply to the question, which one could summarize thus: watching the suffering of others brings us a certain pleasure because we recognize at the same time that we ourselves are exempt from this distress. No man is an island; whether we wish it or not, we are constantly comparing ourselves to others, and to see them unhappy throws into relief our own happiness, just as the sight of their triumphs can plunge us into melancholy. Why do they enjoy such good fortune, and we do not?

But this explanation seems limited when one tries to comprehend the spell that has been cast upon the faithful, for centuries, by the bloodied body of the crucified messiah. And the same is true, in its way, of Bataille's tortured Chinese prisoner. The answer here would be, rather, that the image of Christ's suffering has this effect because it embodies, for believing Christians, an essential aspect of the human condition. Christ sacrificed himself to save mankind; owing to his sacrifice, salvation is possible. He suffered greatly, to be sure, but he thereby fulfilled the divine plan, and we owe him gratitude. In a similar but secular way, when we look--without pleasure, perhaps, but with an undeniable fascination--at the bodies of lynched African Americans, or at Japanese carbonized by atomic explosions, or at Vietnamese transformed into purulent sores by napalm, we, too, discover an essential truth--about human nature or, more modestly, about human politics. Such images remind us of the evil of which we and those like us are capable, and so they are very welcome, in all their disturbing ugliness, because they shake us out of our complacency about ourselves. We generally prefer to anesthetize ourselves with notions that are more flattering to us, to see ourselves as rational beings toiling ceaselessly for the universal good.

It is a good thing, therefore, that these horrific images exist. "It seems a good in itself," Sontag suggests, "to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others." But many other questions are born of this answer. Doesn't the multiplicity--and therefore the familiarity--of these images destroy the disabused feeling about the world that they are charged with eliciting? By seeing so many massacres, do we not become numbed to the blood? Sontag does not think so. Anyway, there is a practical consideration: it is hard to imagine a way of supervising all the world's televisions so that they do not exceed some daily quota of brutality. Another facet of the same problem concerns the blurring of fiction and reality, of virtual images and real wars: having seen so many disaster films, so many acted murders, will we still be able to be moved by a catastrophe in our own town? Sontag thinks this danger is exaggerated, that most people are morally and cognitively sound enough to see the difference between entertainment and reality. "To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism," she properly asserts. "It universalizes the viewing

habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world. ... It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world. ... There are hundreds of millions of television watchers who are far from inured to what they see on television. They do not have the luxury of patronizing reality."

Images of distress and suffering are threatened also from another side: they risk being beautiful. We experience a certain malaise when we come away with this perversely pleasing impression. It is a reproach frequently leveled at Sebastião Salgado, and in particular at his series *Migrations*. The offense here is aestheticism: to avoid making a moral judgment by making an aesthetic one, to limit one's reaction to "it's beautiful" or "it's not beautiful," even in the face of revolting events to which one expects the reaction "this is evil." Nero fiddled while Rome burned, and Ukrainian scientists stood on a balcony to admire the fireworks produced by the explosion of the central reactor at Chernobyl.

There are several sides to this problem. One is linked to the presence of the photographer: he must not give us the impression that he could have prevented the disaster but refrained from doing so in order to come away with a fine photograph or to experience an intense sensation. What can shock in some of Salgado's images is not their beauty but their generality--all the exoduses of the earth are confused and run together, severed from their concrete political contexts--and the anonymity of his photographic subjects, stripped of their individuality and transformed into symbols of distress. "It is significant," Sontag notes, "that the powerless are not named in the captions."

Moreover, the discomfort evoked by certain images of catastrophe--the ones that we say are "too beautiful to be true"--proceeds from an aesthetic judgment rather than an ethical one. They lack internal coherence. If their purpose is to make us more sensitive to disaster, then the very beauty of the image becomes a distraction and a discomfort. And if they are designed to make us admire beauty, why focus only upon the children in rags, or upon the emaciated man? What we call the truth of an image--which is not reducible to the fact that the object photographed exists somewhere in the world--is at the same time its beauty; and if the truth and the beauty are separated, both suffer.

That we choose to look at the suffering of others should not make us feel guilty, but neither should it be a source of pride. For the word is as necessary as the image: the latter strikes the imagination (which is always too weak), the former helps us to understand. Moreover, representation, even with the best will in the world, cannot replace experience. No filmed bombardment can reproduce the effect of actual falling bombs, of the bodies of loved ones dug from the ruins. This is doubtless one of the reasons why wars, the most abundantly represented events in the history of mankind, still continue. We never seem to know them well enough.

[Biographical/Critical Introduction to Susan Sontag](#)

Source: Tzvetan Todorov, "Exposures." *New Republic* 228, nos. 4605-06 (21-28 April 2003): 28-31.

Gale Database: Contemporary Literary Criticism

[First Document](#) [Previous Document](#) [Next Document](#) [Last Document](#)

THOMSON [Copyright](#) and [Terms of Use](#)
GALE