Beyond Susan Sontag: Regarding the Ethics of Witnessing and Portraying Pain

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When scholars discuss the portrayal of human suffering, particularly in a photographic form, Susan Sontag frequently comes up. Many seek to interpret what she wrote. Others apply Sontag's concepts to their own work. As one biographer remarked, "Almost every year since her death in 2004, a new book by or about Susan Sontag has appeared."[1] Though numerous discussions surround Sontag's work, the most common topics appear to be the morality of witnessing photographs and the portrayal of violence.

E. Ann Kaplan, author of *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, breaks down the relationship to a traumatic event into four categories: the victim, the bystander, the image-viewer, and the listener. The first experiences trauma, the second witnesses trauma as it occurs, the third sees it in a photograph, and the fourth hears about it and constructs a mental image. This frame is useful in analyzing Sontag because it contextualizes the proximity of an image-viewer to an event. Kaplan mentions Sontag's idea that photographs invite people to feel compassion from afar—a concept that Kaplan calls "empty empathy."[2] However, Kaplan does state that viewers can develop "vicarious, image-induced trauma" from a picture.[3] As Kaplan points out, Sontag herself was traumatized by Holocaust photographs at age twelve, feeling that "something inside of her went dead"— an experience which may have contributed to her choice of photography as a subject.[4]

In *Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering*, Carrie Rentschler puts Sontag in conversation with other scholars to define and question the ethics of

[1] Rollyson, Carl. "The Legacy." In *Understanding Susan Sontag*. (University of South Carolina Press, 2016), 110.
[2] Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. (Rutgers University Press, 2005), 91.
[3] Kaplan. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. 91.
[4] Kaplan. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature.* 91.

modern-day witnessing. Much like Kaplan, Rentschler sees viewing photographs as a form of participation in trauma. Sontag, according to Rentshler's interpretation, says that witnessing is "a repeated, regular experience of audio-visual news material."[5] Fellow scholar John Ellis "also defines witnessing as a condition made possible by the ubiquitous presence of audio-visual media." Rentschler combines these with the work of John Peters to argue that "witnessing is a form of participation, through mass mediation, in others' suffering."[6] Though I do not believe that Sontag would consider witnessing participatory, despite Kaplan's point about her image-induced trauma, Rentschler's interpretation of her arguments leads to interesting ethical observations.

Rentschler's Sontag asks "whether paying witness is really a right we have as citizens" and declares that fascination with suffering is voyeuristic and even pornographic.[7] Rentschler weaves this argument with her own observations about mass media to describe how the ethics of witnessing can be abused: "'Bearing witness', for example, can provide ethical justification for the commercial imperative of the 'if it bleeds, it leads' mentality of the news industry and when militaries hail us as witnesses to their actions at war, are they not also telling us to support their action?"[8] She indicates, however, that witnessing is useful if viewers can stop the violence or learn from it.

Like Rentschler, Sharon Sliwinski, author of *A Painful Labour: Responsibility and Photography*, questions the ethics of portraying violence; however, she takes a more cynical view of both Sontag's arguments and the usefulness of witnessing violent photography.

[5] Rentschler, Carrie A. 2004. "Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering." *Media, Culture & Society 26.* 297.
[6] Rentschler. "Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering." 297.
[7] Rentschler. "Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering." 302.
[8] Rentschler. "Witnessing: US Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering." 302.

Sliwinski declares that photographs are inadequate ("There is no confusion here about the photograph's inability to depict the reality of those it represents")[9] and witnesses' responses to them are worse ("The second step, the work of *responding*, can never, of course, be adequate to the initial call. The helplessness and horror of bearing witness to suffering brings with it the demand for a *response*, and yet one's response to photographs can do nothing to alleviate the suffering depicted").[10] Sontag, she believes, sees photographs as "almost without exception, a site of absolute ethical failure" and the place where "responsibility lost something of its original meaning" since witnesses.[11] She wraps up this dark assessment by implying that photography perpetuates violence.

Sliwinski's argument is supported by Younes Saramifer in *The Pain of Others: Framing War Photography in Iran*, where she shows that the Iranian state manipulates witnesses to support violence with photographs of the dead framed as martyrs. As Saramifer puts it: "Iranians experience and receive the propagated visual culture of martyrdom within the tension that rises from the aporia, wonder and admiration for martyrdom which is promoted in various seductive depictions by the Iranian state."[12] A photograph's portrayal impacts how violence is viewed. Facing negative portrayals of death, disrupts Iranians' frames of reference, enraging or paralyzing them with distant empathy.

In *Torture and the Ethics of Photography,* Judith Butler agrees with Saramifer that suffering's response depends on its portrayal; specifically, Butler analyzes how the presentation of suffering in photographs humanizes or dehumanizes different people. Turning to Sontag's

[9] Sliwinski, Sharon. 2004. "A Painful Labour: Responsibility and Photography." *Visual Studies 19*. 158.
[10] Sliwinski. "A Painful Labour: Responsibility and Photography. 154.
[11] Sliwinski. "A Painful Labour: Responsibility and Photography. 150.
[12] Saramifar, Younes. 2019. "The Pain of Others: Framing War Photography in Iran." *Ethnos 84*: 490.

example of covering American casualties' faces and wrapping their bodies in flags, Butler says that responses to suffering not only depend on how someone is portrayed but whether they are shown at all: "If, as Sontag claims, the contemporary notion of atrocity requires photographic evidence, then the only way to establish that torture or atrocity has taken place is through photographic evidence, at which point the evidence constitutes the phenomenon. Put another way, the photograph builds the act of torture in its evidentiary form."[13] Photographing something acknowledges it, Butler argues. Photographing a subject declares that person human. Everything left out of the frame is consequently dehumanized and denied a place in reality.

Butler also joins Sliwinski in questioning the value of witnessing photography. Sontag, Butler says, expresses frustration with photographs "not only for making her feel outrage, but for failing to show her how to transform that affect into effective political action."[14] However, Butler herself is more frustrated by the implicit assumptions in photographs which reinforce pre-existing narratives:

> it is also our inability to see what we see that is also of critical concern. To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter. And if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war it is precisely to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm. The restriction we are asked to live with not only impose constraints on what 'can' be heard, read, seen, felt, and known… This not seeing' in the midst of seeing, this not-seeing that is the condition of seeing, has become the visual norm.[15]

Viewers are unable to truly see what is going on in photographs behind the scenes. Witnesses need to unlearn their frames of reference, but photographs do not help with

[13] Butler, Judith. 2007. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space.* 957.
[14] Butler. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography." 966.
[15] Butler. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography." 966.

that process. Butler believes that witnessing traumatic photographs desensitizes the viewer to violence and reinforces existing visual narratives.

Like Butler's visual narratives, Roland Bleiker and Amy Kay argue in *Representing HIV/AIDS in Africa: Pluralist Photography and Local Empowerment* that violent photographs and poorly-placed witnessing perpetuate stereotypes. They present Sontag's ideas from her response to the AIDS crisis in support of their point:

> Stereotypical portrayals of Africa are epitomized by assumptions surrounding the sexual transmission of HIV. Rather than relying on scientific data or pragmatic policy deliberations, western perceptions of HIV/AIDS in Africa have been dominated by moral judgments and prejudices… As with previous epidemics, such as cholera, the disease is being interpreted 'as a sign of moral laxity or political decline'… The result is a public discourse based on an entrenched suspicion about the disease and, more importantly, about the people who live with it.[16]

Photographs, the pair declare, perpetuate stereotypes because photographers carry their own implicit biases, remove context, and mistake causing shock for raising awareness. Above all, photographs are dangerous because the public assumes they present the truth. Drawing on Sontag's framework of witnessing "the pain of others," the authors argue that photography is harmful unless the subjects themselves choose to take the photographs, and, even then, they can be dangerous because of viewers' preconceived notions.

While authors like Blieker and Kay present a cautionary tale, others like Rentschler are more optimistic—and all of them depend on Sontag to construct their arguments. Varying interpretations of Sontag's work exist on every subject, from when—if ever—witnessing violent images has value, to whose truth photography

[16] Bleiker, Roland, and Amy Kay. 2007. "Representing HIV/AIDS in Africa: Pluralist Photography and Local Empowerment." *International Studies Quarterly* 51. 145.

represents. Though Sontag is no longer alive, her ideas continue to inspire a plethora of engagement. I doubt very much if Sontag and *Regarding the Pain of Others* will disappear from scholarly consciousness any time soon.

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