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## Sontag Reconsidered

*Susan Sontag*

**Regarding the Pain of Others**

*Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003,  
144 pages.*

*Reviewed by Joshua Ellenbogen*

In the year that has passed since Susan Sontag's death last December, much has been written about her thinking. While Sontag's mythological status as a cultural critic and public intellectual saw to it that she confronted a wide range of subjects, attempting to break each one open

for the light it could shed on our contemporary world, certain themes occupied pride of place. While Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp" (1964) will be remembered as one of the first efforts to scrutinize the camp sensibility, and while her book *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989) made up part of a recurring interest in the body and its suffering, photography represented a subject to which she was irresistibly and repeatedly drawn. From *On Photography* (1977), to *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), to her 2004 article "Regarding the Torture of Others" on the images of prisoner abuse at Abu

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Ghraib, photography was a subject that Sontag believed throughout her career was of paramount importance for understanding the world and our place in it. Her final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, affords us an opportunity to do more than what many of Sontag's obituaries have already ably accomplished: The appraisal of her persona on the international cultural scene of the last half-century. Instead, we can try to take her seriously as a critic on the plane that ostensibly mattered most to her, that of art and ideas. Above all, by considering her final study in relation to its predecessor, *On Photography*, we can elucidate the central terms of Sontag's thinking on the medium, both the real insights contained in it, as well as the profound limitations that marked it.

Towards the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag herself addresses the orientation of the book to her earlier account. Attempting to formulate the changes that her understanding of the medium had undergone over the previous twenty-five years, Sontag writes:

I argued [in 1977] that while an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been had one never seen the photographs, after repeated exposure it also becomes less real. As much as they create sympathy, I

wrote, photographs shrivel sympathy. Is this true? I thought it was when I wrote it. I'm not so sure now.

Although this 2003 account of her 1977 argument provides only a limited sense of the difficulties she originally had with photography, it does at least point to the primary way in which Sontag's new book diverges from her earlier thinking. To the extent that *Regarding the Pain of Others* represents a departure from *On Photography*, it does so by exhibiting Sontag's willingness to reach an accommodation with photography and its characteristics that profoundly unsettle her. The troublesome features themselves, however, remain remarkably constant.

For Sontag, photography is troublesome first because of the question of reference: "The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs." The photograph ceases to be a way of referring to a separate, original object that one wishes to remember or upon which one wishes to reflect, and instead pushes that object aside, increasingly standing in for it and taking on the status of an original. In a way that is reminiscent of certain modes of idolatry, the image ceases to refer to an external original object, and instead comes to be treated as the object in its own right. Just as the idol

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no longer functions to signify a holy signified beyond the materiality of its representation, becoming an object of veneration itself, Sontag worries that the photograph supplants the reality to which it should merely refer. The “partial identity of image and object” that Sontag imagines principally concerns the way in which human beings conceive the objects of the world. According to Sontag, we think of objects and individuals “photographically,” as having the character that belongs to them in their photographic images.

Of the numerous reasons why photographs represent a species of imagery especially susceptible to idolatrous treatment, Sontag chooses to emphasize the well-worn question of photographic “indexicality.” In many theories of photography, the characterization of photography as a “copy of nature” was restated by means of this notion: Indexical signs such as the smoke of a fire, footprints in the sand and the like have a physical—one could also say causal—connection to their referent. In this understanding, the photographic image is a “trace” or the “effect” of the object that was photographed. Thus the photographic depiction of an object is at the same time verification of its existence, even if this applies to a past moment.

Because she stresses the photograph’s status as the “trace” or “impression” of the original to which it is

causally linked, Sontag argues that the photograph shares in the being of the object it shows, and so lends itself to being treated as that object, thereby “usurping reality.” That the images that make up photographs should be so prone to elbowing aside the realities they represent is of deep concern to Sontag, for two reasons. First, the products of photographic media so pervade our cultural milieu that the whole of the world now has its photographic counterpart. At the same time, Sontag maintains that photographs are deficient as signifiers of reality. Sontag thinks photographs cannot give us objects to which concepts like empathy, understanding, or true knowledge have application. Photographs stand in for the world, but “leech out” and deplete its human significance.

If we momentarily consider one of the few places in which Sontag believes that photographs have an unproblematic status as sources of knowledge, we get a fuller sense of how important reference has been to her thinking on photography. In her 1977 study, she briefly considered the scientific use of photography to produce visualizations of otherwise invisible objects and events. Sontag seems to be thinking of projects such as Muybridge’s effort to picture phases of human and animal motion that happen too quickly to be seen,

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or scientific microphotography, or Worthington's images of the invisible architecture in liquid splashes that last for three-millionths of a second. Sontag allows that such photographs can play a valid role in the production of knowledge and the advance of science: "No one would dispute that photography gave a tremendous boost to the cognitive claims of sight, because... it so greatly enlarged the realm of the visible." At the same time, when considering the various aesthetics that have been available to photography in its history, Sontag discusses favorably "the beauty of forms in industrial and scientific photography that dazzled the Bauhaus designers." Lamenting that "the Bauhaus approach to photography has not prevailed," Sontag pointedly adds that "No one now considers the beauty revealed in photographs to be epitomized by scientific microphotography."

Although Sontag never makes the point explicitly, I take it that what makes the pictures acceptable to her is that in such cases there simply is no original for the photographs to supplant. As images of the imperceptible, these photographs have no antecedent in experience to which they could refer, and so there is nothing for them to usurp. In the absence of an original, it is perhaps not only inevitable that they become partly

identical with their objects, but also less dangerous.

Images such as Worthington's aside, however, Sontag does not see in the photograph the kind of document that can support claims to significant knowledge of the world, or deep emotional responses to the condition of others. Sontag believes that "photographs objectify: They turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed." They instill in us the conceit that the world exists as "an anthology of images" we can acquire, and encourage us to mistake the acquisition of the anthology for an understanding of the world. While gaining hold of the world in pictures "feels like knowledge," however, the activity actually operates against genuine insight or true knowledge. Because all that matters is capturing in images as many moments of the world as we can, we shirk the duty of real insight and understanding which necessarily involves the selection of particular moments as more significant than others.

If photography makes us powerless to attain worthwhile knowledge and claim meaningful experience, Sontag claims that it also robs us ethically, making us into mere "spectator[s] of calamities." Such a position seems clearly to inform the title of this last book. Courtesy of photography, "the

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pain of others” becomes something for us merely to gaze at or “regard.” On the one hand, because our world is so saturated with photographic images taken from war- and famine-zones, her reasoning goes, the photograph deadens our capacity to feel. It was partly from this position that Sontag famously argued in 1977 for an “ecology of images,” a kind of management program she intended to stem this flood of photographs. At the same time, Sontag takes it as axiomatic that, to be morally effective, a representation must engage with “feelings [that] are embedded in history, whose personae are concrete, whose situations are always specific.” Desire, in her account, conflicts with the ethical, in that it requires archetypal images of the generic. Photography’s shortcoming here is its tendency to provide, according to Sontag, images that are devoid of sufficient specificity. Photographs of civilian casualties after an air raid in the Spanish Civil War, for example, tell us nothing that we need to know in order to comprehend the scene, the roots of the conflict, or the respective merits of the grievances of the two sides. In these photographs, “war is generic,” and it only shows us “anonymous, generic victims.”

Sontag also insists that in contrast with forms of representation that

might usefully provide a narration of the world, “the photograph is like a quotation” of the world. As Sontag’s suggestion that dissociative photography is no more than an arbitrary “quotation” may suggest, what emerges as photography’s opposite are forms of literary representation that can do more than provide bare citations of material reality, but that can assemble that reality into significant and coherent forms. While earlier commentators and theorists of photography such as Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, have treated photography in opposition to the kinds of significance and coherence painting generates, Sontag treats photography’s “quotation” against the “narration” of literary forms. Of the possibility that a photograph might, by provoking an empathic reaction to the genuinely comprehended plight of another, lead to political activism, Sontag maintains that “a narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image.”

Sontag’s greater faith in the resources of language similarly informs her claim that when we consider such slender powers of understanding photographs possess, we confront powers that derive from captioning. One of the more frustrating features of Sontag’s reflections on photography, in fact, is the way in which her

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discussion puts “literature” into the position that “painting” has previously held in many discussions of technological reproduction in the arts. That is, traits of the medium that Kracauer or Benjamin treated as problematic relative to older visual arts become, in Sontag’s account, problematic in relation to literature, but she does not take the opportunity to reflect on photography’s status in light of this dramatic shift. Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong in raising questions about the relation of photographic representation to literary representation, it is disappointing that photography for Sontag should emerge as disruptive towards literature for largely the same reasons that previous commentators took it to be disruptive towards painting.

That Sontag should be content to let such a crucial matter pass without discussion points to the worst deficiency of her approach to photography: A comfort with sometimes clumsy binarisms she does not do enough to unpack. Why, for example, wouldn’t her critique of photography be applicable to any sort of image? Why are photographic images necessarily sealed off from narrative? Why are narratives expressed in linguistic activity somehow more stable?

Given the difficulties photography presents for Sontag, it is not immediately clear how, in her more recent study, she is able to reconcile herself to the medium. She certainly never arrives at the final position of someone such as Kracauer, who treats photography’s destruction of traditional ways of lending meaning to experience as a clearing operation, one that will allow coherence to enter the world from new, and ultimately better, sources. Nonetheless, hints in *Regarding the Pain of Others* indicate that a transformed attitude is at work in the book. Sontag does not veer from the claim that, especially in comparison with the resources of language, photographs are comparatively mute, incapable of giving the understanding of a narrative. Sontag’s newer book, however, does consider the possibility that there is a virtue to such muteness.

Sontag’s understanding of the generic character of photography underscores this point. At the start of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she discusses, with noticeable sympathy, Virginia Woolf’s involvement in the anti-war movements of the 1930s, and Woolf’s evident hope that photographs of atrocities could contribute to her cause. Sontag turns to Woolf’s 1938 description of a parcel of photographs she had received from the

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Republican government of Spain, showing civilian casualties caused by the Nationalists. Sontag, of course, does not share Woolf's belief that the mere sight of these photographs would necessarily stir viewers to moral outrage. Sontag's discussion of the photographs, in fact, seems meant to show how they are simultaneously horrific, and yet incapable of the specification upon which her writing has placed a premium—the passage of Woolf to which she turns describes the photo of a corpse so mangled that it has become unspeakably generic, possibly a woman, possibly a pig. Yet, when Sontag later notes that the photograph can only “designate a hell,” as opposed to provide the information that would guarantee empathic responses to it, this humbler activity clearly appeals to her.

Sontag never explains why she now finds this bare designation, so much more modest than the narratives to which she opposes it, more satisfying, but it is not too difficult to guess. Her 1977 study, although it did not develop a coherent political position, at least evinced sympathy towards the possibility of political radicalism. The acid comments that Sontag occasionally directed at “Left-liberal Americans,” her implication that their relativism fit in well with a photographic ethos, and her lament

that “photographs undercut politics” by denying “genuine and historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts,” all point to Sontag's attraction to utopian radicalism. By 2003, however, Sontag, like the vast bulk of Western intellectuals, appears to have despaired of this possibility. There is a naïve confidence in her 1977 book regarding a particular kind of narrative and coherence that one can and should establish in events, a way of understanding meant to justify radical action. There is no such hope and faith in 2003, a fact that renders photography's lack of narrative resources less irksome to Sontag. Because she no longer believes in the immediate availability of politically effective meanings in events, the fact that photographs cannot make us engage with such meanings is no longer troubling to her.

Likewise, photography's deficiencies now appear in a different light, and are deemed by her in 2003 to be potential assets. Perhaps what partly accounts for this shift are Sontag's well-known travels to Bosnia during the early 1990s to chronicle the terrible events unfolding there. Sontag knows that it is to a militant, any militant, that photography's inability to provide fixed identities will be most infuriating. A photograph from a war zone can show a mutilated

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corpse, but it cannot itself comment on the dead person's historical identity, nor can it say anything coherent about the dead person's membership in a particular group, much less tell the story of that group's grievances. These traits are precisely the things that matter to the partisan of a particular conflict; in her words: "To the militant, identity is everything." Having spent time in a war zone, and witnessed the destructive capacities of certain narratives, Sontag appears to have become slightly more leery of narrative's power. Because she no longer has faith in the immediate availability of the right sort of narrative in events, the destructive potential contained in the production of wrong ones seems overwhelming to her. In comparison to other kinds of stories,

silence begins to appear preferable. To the extent one allows Sontag the various assumptions that underlie her thinking on photography—her ascriptions of narrative and anarrative identities to art forms, her claims that such identities correspond to particular sorts of ethical possibility, her views regarding the generic and the indexical in photography—such a preference for silence may even be a compelling gesture. Yet to the extent that one takes seriously the problems inherent in these assumptions, and in her approach more generally, it is an empty gesture.

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