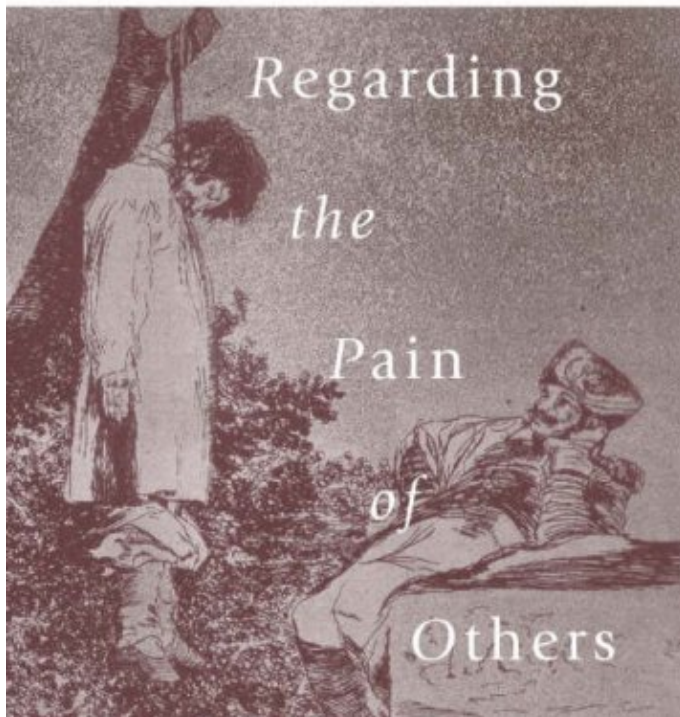

Susan Sontag

Regarding the Pain of Others

SUSAN
SONTAG



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Description

Twenty-five years after her classic *On Photography*, Susan Sontag returns to the subject of visual representations of war and violence in our culture today.

How does the spectacle of the sufferings of others (via television or newsprint) affect us? Are viewers inured - or incited - to violence by the depiction of cruelty? In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag takes a fresh look at the representation of atrocity - from Goya's *The Disasters of War* to photographs of the American Civil War, lynchings of blacks in the South, and the Nazi death camps, to contemporary horrific images of Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, and New York City on September 11, 2001.

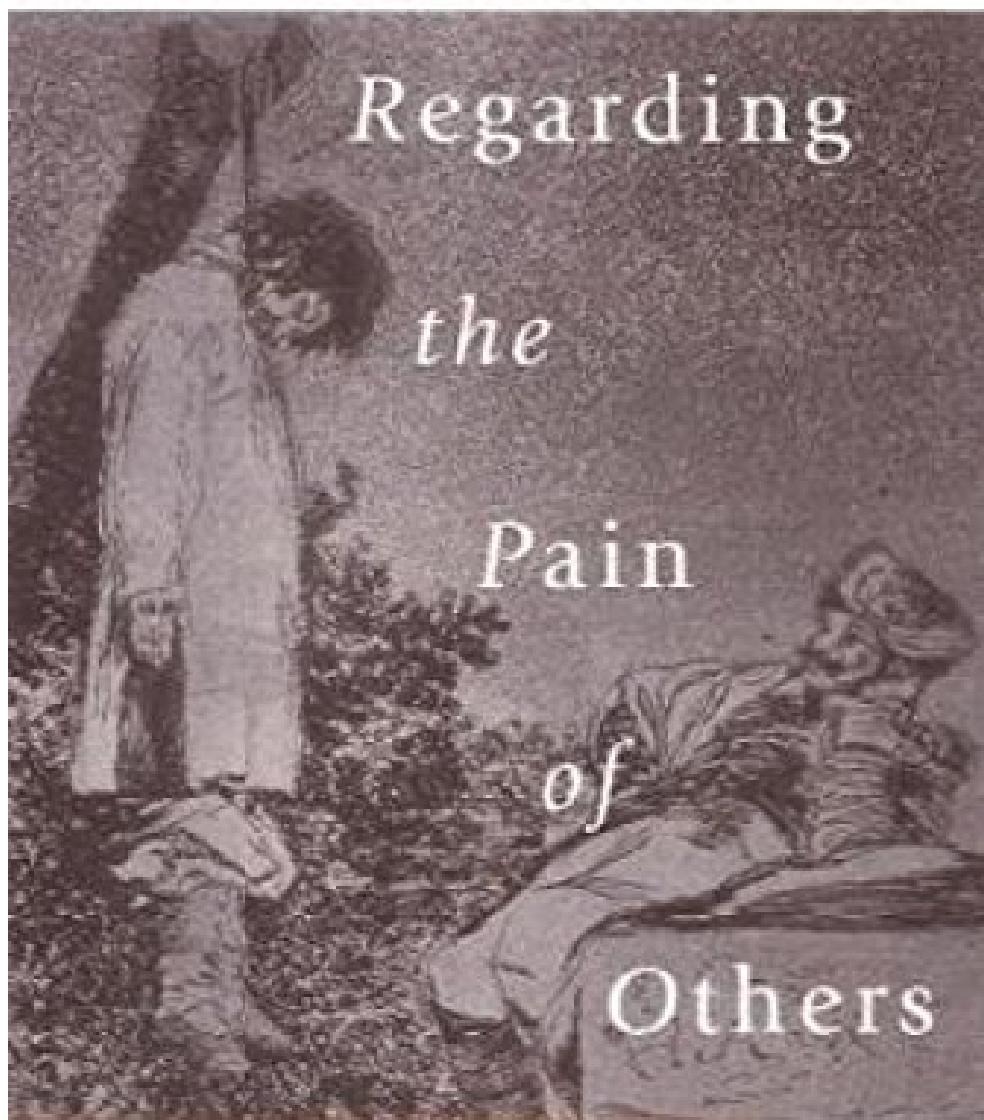
In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag once again changes the way we think about the uses and meanings of images in our world, and offers an important reflection about how war itself is waged (and understood) in our time.

Insightful reviews

Mike: I haven't read a whole lot of nonfictional essays of this length. In fact, I don't think I've read any. But I have read shorter essays, and I do know some about persuasive writing. And Sontag is very, very good at that. This is a very thoughtful and well-written exploration of the limitations of photography as a medium for communicating truth. She uses a plethora of historical examples to show us the futility of trying to fully understand the pain of others through photography, and the dangers of assuming that we completely know. To demonstrate this, I'm going to analyze this book's cover, which isn't a photograph, and isn't discussed in the book, but is still quite interesting.

SUSAN 
SONTAG

'A brilliant analysis of our numbed response to images
of horror' *Daily Telegraph*



What does this drawing (which I'm going to treat like a photo, as the book is about photography) look like to you? It looks to me like someone is being hanged while a guy in a military uniform is complacently watching. There's a hint of amusement in his expression. The person being hanged is wearing mere rags - the contrast between his/her clothing and the clothing of the person watching suggests a significant wealth gap. Based on the background, they appear to

be in the wilderness or at least outside.

Everything I just said may or may not be indicative of the truth. Really, I have no idea what the truth of this situation is, just by looking at the drawing. All I know is what *appears* to be going on. And I outlined that, above. But there's a lot that the drawing doesn't show me. I don't know if this is part of an organized genocide, or an isolated incident. I don't know if there's actually a wealth gap, or if the man is dressing up in a uniform he stole (or something). I don't know if the man in the uniform hung the person (who I know so little about that I can't even identify their sex), or if he's just observing. I don't even know if the photograph is real, or staged. But most importantly, I can't empathize with either of the people here. I can't know, from looking at this photo, what it feels like to be hung, or the rationale used to defend looking at someone being hung.

The point is, I gain no understanding of what's going on just by looking at the photo. There's a lot that could help to gain understanding (a context for the photo, a caption, prior understanding of the photo's circumstances), but even then, the medium of photography is inherently limited so that my understanding can only go so far. Of course, every medium is limited that way. But it's important that we're aware of that.

I could go a lot further with this analysis, but at that point, I'd just be repeating Sontag's arguments, and she puts them more eloquently than I can. I do have a few minor quips with this book. I wish she'd talked more about faked photos and the effects of film on photography's influence, both of which she only skims over. But this is still a very well-written exploration of the medium of photography.

Riku Sayuj:

Reducing The Pain of The Other

Susan Sontag takes a fresh look at the representation of atrocity--from Goya's The Disasters of War to photographs of the American Civil War, lynchings of blacks in the South, and the Nazi death camps, to contemporary horrific images of Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, and New York City on September 11, 2001.

Sontag attacks the modern obsession with photography, with documenting everything. She looks at all the arguments on why photography might help us understand better the suffering and trauma of war - of 'the pain of others' - but concludes that it is an ineffective medium because it reduces the observer to a single frame instead of taking him/her beyond to the true excesses of suffering that is trapped within the same frame, just out of reach.

In fact, she equates photography and war, saying that one cannot exist without the other:

There is no war without photography, that notable aesthete of war Ernst Jiinger observed in 1930, thereby refining the irrepressible identification of the camera and the gun, "shooting" a subject and shooting a human being. War-making and picture-taking are congruent activities: "It is the same intelligence, whose weapons of annihilation can

locate the enemy to the exact second and meter," wrote Jiinger, "that labors to preserve the great historical event in fine detail."

Instead of bringing home the reality of war and pain, photography transmutes horror into an aesthetic - into fiction - into the 'surreal'.

Instead she proposes that words should be the medium of conveying this pain, for photographs also enlist some baser 'spectatorship' appetite. Perhaps through works such as [Dexter Filkins' writings](#)? She even goes on to suggest that maybe a censoring of some sort should be involved so that we are not caught in an eternal ratchet - gory pictures make us more inured and we need gorier pictures, so the next war can ratchet up its violence till the new requirement/limit is satisfied? She admits that this sort of censure is not going to happen, so it is up to the reading public (perhaps?) to deliberately avoid such representations of 'the pain of others'.

We have to accept that:

These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses—and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? "We"—this "we" is everyone who has never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like. We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes.

Can't understand, can't imagine.

That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels.

And they are right.

Ben: The book is disappointingly diffuse and lacking in incisiveness. This probably reflects Sontag's ambivalence about how she is supposed to react to images of death and destruction. But such ambivalence doesn't make for compelling reading, especially since the themes which she explores (e.g., the suspicious claim to objectivity of photography, voyeurism/complicity masquerading as disinterestedness in the viewer) will be familiar to anybody who has reflected on the subject.

So perhaps its value lies in being a faithful articulation the ambivalence of a particular class of observers--ummm, us--toward the images of our times. This is suggested by her beginning the book by drawing our attention to Virginia Woolf's reflections on the Spanish Civil War, "Three Guineas", enjoining us to be especially suspicious of Woolf's remark that "we are seeing the same dead bodies, the same ruined houses."

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