

REGARDING
THE PAIN
OF OTHERS

Susan Sontag

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for David

Make the conquered and bearen pale, with brows raised and knit, and the skin above their brows furrowed with pain . . . and the teeth apart as with crying out in lamentation . . . Make the dead partly or entirely covered with dust . . . and let the blood be seen by its color flowing in a sinuous stream from the corpse to the dust. Others in the death agony grinding their teeth, rolling their eyes, with their fists clenched against their bodies, and the legs distorted.

The concern is that the images to be devised won't be sufficiently upsetting: not concrete, not detailed enough. Pity can entail a moral judgment if, as Aristotle maintains, pity is considered to be the emotion that we owe only to those enduring undeserved misfortune. But pity, far from being the natural twin of fear in the dramas of catastrophic misfortune, seems diluted—distracted—by fear, while fear (dread, terror) usually manages to swamp pity. Leonardo is suggesting that the artist's gaze be, literally, pitiless. The image should appall, and in that *terribilità* lies a challenging kind of beauty.

That a gory battlescape could be beautiful—in the sublime or awesome or tragic register of the beautiful—is a commonplace about images of war made by artists. The idea does not sit well when applied to images taken by cameras: to find beauty in war photographs seems

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Central to modern expectations, and modern ethical feeling, is the conviction that war is an aberration, if an unstoppable one. That peace is the norm, if an unattainable one. This, of course, is not the way war has been regarded throughout history. War has been the norm and peace the exception.

The description of the exact fashion in which bodies are injured and killed in combat is a recurring climax in the stories told in the *Iliad*. War is seen as something men do inveterately, undeterred by the accumulation of the suffering it inflicts; and to represent war in words or in pictures requires a keen, unflinching detachment. When Leonardo da Vinci gives instructions for a battle painting, he insists that artists have the courage and the imagination to show war in all its ghastliness:

heartless. But the landscape of devastation is still a landscape. There is beauty in ruins. To acknowledge the beauty of photographs of the World Trade Center ruins in the months following the attack seemed frivolous, sacrilegious. The most people dared say was that the photographs were “surreal,” a hectic euphemism behind which the disgraced notion of beauty cowered. But they *were* beautiful, many of them—by veteran photographers such as Gilles Peress, Susan Meiselas, and Joel Meyerowitz, among others. The site itself, the mass graveyard that had received the name “Ground Zero,” was of course anything but beautiful. Photographs tend to transform, whatever their subject; and as an image something may be beautiful—or terrifying, or unbearable, or quite bearable—as it is not in real life.

Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems “aesthetic”; that is, too much like art. The dual powers of photography—to generate documents and to create works of visual art—have produced some remarkable exaggerations about what photographers ought or ought not to do. Lately, the most common exaggeration is one that regards these powers as opposites. Photographs that depict suffering shouldn’t be beautiful, as captions shouldn’t moralize. In this view, a

beautiful photograph drains attention from the sobering subject and turns it toward the medium itself, thereby compromising the picture’s status as a document. The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!*

Take one of the most poignant images from the First World War: a line of English soldiers blinded by poison gas—each rests his hand on the left shoulder of the man ahead of him—shuffling toward a dressing station. It could be an image from one of the searing movies made about the war—King Vidor’s *The Big Parade* (1925) or G. W. Pabst’s *Westfront 1918*, Lewis Milestone’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or Howard Hawks’s *The Dawn Patrol* (all from 1930). That war photography seems, retroactively, to be echoing as much as inspiring the reconstruction of battle scenes in important war movies has begun to backfire on the photographer’s enterprise. What assured the authenticity of Steven Spielberg’s acclaimed re-creation

*The photographs of Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, and Dachau taken in April and May 1945 by anonymous witnesses and military photographers seem more valid than the “better” professional images taken by two celebrated professionals, Margaret Bourke-White and Lee Miller. But the criticism of the professional look in war photography is not a recent view. Walker Evans, for example, detested the work of Bourke-White. But then Evans, who photographed poor American peasants for a book with the heavily ironic title *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, would never take a picture of anybody famous.

of the Omaha Beach landing on D-Day in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) was that it was based, among other sources, on the photographs taken with immense bravery by Robert Capa during the landing. But a war photograph seems inauthentic, even though there is nothing staged about it, when it looks like a still from a movie. A photographer who specializes in world misery (including but not restricted to the effects of war), Sebastião Salgado, has been the principal target of the new campaign against the inauthenticity of the beautiful. Particularly with the seven-year project he calls "Migrations: Humanity in Transition," Salgado has come under steady attack for producing spectacular, beautifully composed big pictures that are said to be "cinematic."

The sanctimonious Family of Man-style rhetoric that feathery Salgado's exhibitions and books has worked to the detriment of the pictures, however unfair this may be. (There is much humbug to be found, and ignored, in declarations made by some of the most admirable photographers of conscience.) Salgado's pictures have also been sourly treated in response to the commercialized situations in which, typically, his portraits of misery are seen. But the problem is in the pictures themselves, not how and where they are exhibited: in their focus on the powerless, reduced to their powerlessness. It is significant that

the powerless are not named in the captions. A portrait that declines to name its subject becomes complicit, if inadvertently, in the cult of celebrity that has fueled an insatiable appetite for the opposite sort of photograph: to grant only the famous their names denotes the rest to representative instances of their occupations, their ethnicities, their plights. Taken in thirty-nine countries, Salgado's migration pictures group together, under this single heading, a host of different causes and kinds of distress. Making suffering loom larger, by globalizing it, may spur people to feel they ought to "care" more. It also invites them to feel that the sufferings and misfortunes are too vast, too irrevocable, too epic to be much changed by any local political intervention. With a subject conceived on this scale, compassion can only flounder—and make abstract. But all politics, like all of history, is concrete. (To be sure, nobody who really thinks about history can take politics altogether seriously.)

It used to be thought, when the candid images were not common, that showing something that needed to be seen, bringing a painful reality closer, was bound to goad viewers to feel more. In a world in which photography is brilliantly at the service of consumerist manipulations, no effect of a photograph of a doleful scene can be taken for

granted. As a consequence, morally alert photographers and ideologues of photography have become increasingly concerned with the issues of exploitation of sentiment (pity, compassion, indignation) in war photography and of rote ways of provoking feeling.

Photographer-witnesses may think it more correct morally to make the spectacular not spectacular. But the spectacular is very much part of the religious narratives by which suffering, throughout most of Western history, has been understood. To feel the pulse of Christian iconography in certain wartime or disaster-time photographs is not a sentimental projection. It would be hard not to discern the lineaments of the Pietà in W. Eugene Smith's picture of a woman in Minamata cradling her deformed, blind, and deaf daughter, or the temple of the Descent from the Cross in several of Don McCullin's pictures of dying American soldiers in Vietnam. However, such perceptions—which add aura and beauty—may be on the wane. The German historian Barbara Duden has said that when she was teaching a course in the history of representations of the body at a large American state university some years ago, not one student in a class of twenty undergraduates could identify the subject of any of the canonical paintings of the Flagellation she showed as slides. ("I think it's a religious picture," one ventured.) The only canonical image of Jesus

she could count on most students being able to identify was the Crucifixion.

ФОТОГРАФЫ ОБЪЕКТИВ: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed. And photographs are a species of alchemy, for all that they are prized as a transparent account of reality.

Often something looks, or is felt to look, "better" in a photograph. Indeed, it is one of the functions of photography to improve the normal appearance of things. (Hence, one is always disappointed by a photograph that is not flattering.) Beautifying is one classic operation of the camera, and it tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown. Uglifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function: didactic, it invites an active response. For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.

An example: A few years ago, the public health authorities in Canada, where it had been estimated that smoking kills forty-five thousand people a year, decided to supplement the warning printed on every pack of cigarettes with a shock-photograph—of cancerous lungs, or a stroke-clotted brain, or a damaged heart, or a bloody mouth in acute periodontal distress. A pack with such a picture accompanying the warning about the deleterious

effects of smoking would be sixty times more likely to inspire smokers to quit, a research study had somehow calculated, than a pack with only the verbal warning.

Let's assume this is true. But one might wonder, for how long? Does shock have term limits? Right now the smokers of Canada are recoiling in disgust, if they do look at these pictures. Will those still smoking five years from now still be upset? Shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off. Even if it doesn't, one can *not* look. People have means to defend themselves against what is upsetting—in this instance, unpleasant information for those wishing to continue to smoke. This seems normal, that is, adaptive. As one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images.

Yet there are cases where repeated exposure to what shocks, saddens, appalls does not use up a full-hearted response. Habituation is not automatic, for images (portable, insertable) obey different rules than real life. Representations of the Crucifixion do not become banal to believers, if they really are believers. This is even more true of staged representations. Performances of *Chushingura*, probably the best-known narrative in all of Japanese culture, can be counted on to make a Japanese audience sob when Lord Asano admires the beauty of the cherry blossoms on his way to where he must commit seppuku—

sob each time, no matter how often they have followed the story (as a Kabuki or Bunraku play, as a film); the *kaiziyah* drama of the betrayal and murder of Imam Husayn does not cease to bring an Iranian audience to tears no matter how many times they have seen the martyrdom enacted. On the contrary. They weep, in part, because they have seen it many times. People want to weep. → Pathos, in the form of a narrative, does not wear out.

But do people want to be horrified? Probably not. Still, there are pictures whose power does not abate, in part because one cannot look at them often. Pictures of the ruin of faces that will always testify to a great iniquity survived, at that cost: the faces of horribly disfigured First World War veterans who survived the inferno of the trenches; the faces melted and thickened with scar tissue of survivors of the American atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the faces cleft by machete blows of Tutsi survivors of the genocidal rampage launched by the Hutus in Rwanda—is it correct to say that people get *used* to these?

Indeed, the very notion of atrocity, of war crime, is associated with the expectation of photographic evidence. Such evidence is, usually, of something posthumous; the remains, as it were—the mounds of skulls in Pol Pot's Cambodia, the mass graves in Guatemala and El Salvador, Bosnia and Kosovo. And this posthumous reality is

often the keenest of summations. As Hannah Arendt pointed out soon after the end of the Second World War, all the photographs and newsreels of the concentration camps are misleading because they show the camps at the moment the Allied troops marched in. What makes the images unbearable—the piles of corpses, the skeletal survivors—was not at all typical for the camps, which, when they were functioning, exterminated their inmates systematically (by gas, not starvation and illness), then immediately cremated them. And photographs echo photographs: it was inevitable that the photographs of emaciated Bosnian prisoners at Omarska, the Serb death camp created in northern Bosnia in 1992, would recall the photographs taken in the Nazi death camps in 1945.

Photographs of atrocity illustrate as well as corroborate. Bypassing disputes about exactly how many were killed (numbers are often inflated at first), the photograph gives the indelible sample. The illustrative function of photographs leaves opinions, prejudices, fantasies, misinformation untouched. The information that many fewer Palestinians died in the assault on Jenin than had been claimed by Palestinian officials (as the Israelis had said all along) made much less impact than the photographs of the razed center of the refugee camp. And, of course, atrocities that are not secured in our minds by well-known photographic images, or of which we simply have

had very few images—the total extermination of the Herero people in Namibia decreed by the German colonial administration in 1904; the Japanese onslaught in China, notably the massacre of nearly four hundred thousand, and the rape of eighty thousand, Chinese in December 1937, the so-called Rape of Nanking; the rape of some one hundred and thirty thousand women and girls (ten thousand of whom committed suicide) by victorious Soviet soldiers unleashed by their commanding officers in Berlin in 1945—seem more remote. These are memories that few have cared to claim.

The familiarity of certain photographs builds our sense of the present and immediate past. Photographs lay down routes of reference, and serve as totems of causes: sentiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan. And photographs help construct—and revise—our sense of a more distant past, with the posthumous shocks engineered by the circulation of hitherto unknown photographs. Photographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas “memories,” and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory—part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt. But there is collective instruction.

All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. Ideologies create substantiating archives of images, representative images, which encapsulate common ideas of significance and trigger predictable thoughts, feelings. Poster-ready photographs—the mushroom cloud of an A-bomb test, Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., the astronaut walking on the moon—are the visual equivalent of sound bites. They commemorate, in no less blunt fashion than postage stamps, Important Historical Moments; indeed, the triumphalist ones (the picture of the A-bomb excepted) become postage stamps. Fortunately, there is no one signature picture of the Nazi death camps.

As art has been redefined during a century of modernism as whatever is destined to be enshrined in some kind of museum, so it is now the destiny of many photographic troves to be exhibited and preserved in museum-like institutions. Among such archives of horror, the photographs of genocide have undergone the greatest institutional development. The point of creating public repositories for these and other relics is to ensure that the crimes they depict will continue to figure in people's con-

sciousness. This is called remembering, but in fact it is a good deal more than that.

The memory museum in its current proliferation is a product of a way of thinking about, and mourning, the destruction of European Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s, which came to institutional fruition in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., and the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Photographs and other memorabilia of the Shoah have been committed to a perpetual recirculation, to ensure that what they show will be remembered. Photographs of the suffering and martyrdom of a people are more than reminders of death, of failure, of victimization. They invoke the miracle of survival. To aim at the perpetuation of memories means, inevitably, that one has undertaken the task of continually renewing, of creating, memories—aided, above all, by the impress of iconic photographs. People want to be able to visit—and refresh—their memories. Now many victim peoples want a memory museum, a temple that houses a comprehensive, chronologically organized, illustrated narrative of their sufferings. Armenians, for example, have long been clamoring for a museum in Washington to institutionalize the memory of the genocide of Armenian people by the Ottoman Turks. But why is there not already, in the nation's capital, which happens to be a city whose population is overwhelmingly African-American, a Museum of the History of Slav-

ery? Indeed, there is no Museum of the History of Slavery—the whole story, starting with the slave trade in Africa itself, not just selected parts, such as the Underground Railroad—anywhere in the United States. This, it seems, is a memory judged too dangerous to social stability to activate and to create. The Holocaust Memorial Museum and the future Armenian Genocide Museum and Memorial are about what didn't happen in America, so the memory-work doesn't risk arousing an embittered domestic population against authority. 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—a unique nation, one without any certifiably wicked leaders throughout its entire history—is exempt. That this country, like every other country, has its tragic past does not sit well with the founding, and still all-powerful, belief in American exceptionalism. The national consensus on American history as a history of progress is a new setting for distressing photographs—one that focuses our attention on wrongs, both here and elsewhere, for which America sees itself as the solution or cure.

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EVEN IN THE ERA of cybermodels, what the mind feels like is still, as the ancients imagined it, an inner space—

like a theatre—in which we picture, and it is these pictures that allow us to remember. The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding, and remembering. The concentration camps—that is, the photographs taken when the camps were liberated in 1945—are most of what people associate with Nazism and the miseries of the Second World War. Hideous deaths (by genocide, starvation, and epidemic) are most of what people retain of the whole clutch of iniquities and failures that have taken place in postcolonial Africa.

To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture. Even a writer as steeped in nineteenth-century and early modern literary solemnities as W. G. Sebald was moved to seed his lamentation-narratives of lost lives, lost nature, lost cityscapes with photographs. Sebald was not just an elegist, he was a militant elegist. Remembering, he wanted the reader to remember, too.

Harrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us. Consider one of the unforgettable images of the war in Bosnia, a photograph of which the *New York Times* foreign correspon-

dent John Kifner wrote: "The image is stark, one of the most enduring of the Balkan wars: a Serb militiaman casually kicking a dying Muslim woman in the head. It tells you everything you need to know." But of course it doesn't tell us everything we need to know.

From an identification given by the photographer, Ron Haviy, we learn the photograph was taken in the town of Bijeljina in April 1992, the first month of the Serb rampage through Bosnia. From behind, we see a uniformed Serb militiaman, a youthful figure with sunglasses perched on the top of his head, a cigarette between the second and third fingers of his raised left hand, rifle dangling in his right hand, right leg poised to kick a woman lying face down on the sidewalk between two other bodies. The photograph doesn't tell us that she is Muslim, though she is unlikely to have been labeled in any other way, for why would she and the two others be lying there, as if dead (why "dying"?), under the gaze of some Serb soldiers? In fact, the photograph tells us very little—except that war is hell, and that graceful young men with guns are capable of kicking overweight older women lying helpless, or already killed, in the head.

The pictures of Bosnian atrocities were seen soon after the events took place. Like pictures from the Vietnam War, such as Ron Haberle's evidence of the massacre in March 1968 by a company of American soldiers of some

five hundred unarmed civilians in the village of My Lai, they became important in bolstering the opposition to a war which was far from inevitable, far from intractable, and could have been stopped much sooner. Therefore one could feel an obligation to look at these pictures, gruesome as they were, because there was something to be done, right now, about what they depicted. Other issues are raised when we are invited to respond to a dossier of hitherto unknown pictures of horrors long past.

An example: a trove of photographs of black victims of lynching in small towns in the United States between the 1890s and the 1930s, which provided a shattering, revelatory experience for the thousands who saw them in a gallery in New York in 2000. The lynching pictures tell us about human wickedness. About inhumanity. They force us to think about the extent of the evil unleashed specifically by racism. Intrinsic to the perpetration of this evil is the shamelessness of photographing it. The pictures were taken as souvenirs and made, some of them, into postcards; more than a few show grinning spectators, good churchgoing citizens as most of them had to be, posing for a camera with the backdrop of a naked, charred, mutilated body hanging from a tree. The display of these pictures makes us spectators, too.

What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To

awaken indignation? To make us feel “bad”, that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? Is looking at such pictures really necessary, given that these horrors lie in a past remote enough to be beyond punishment? Are we the better for seeing these images? Do they actually teach us anything? Don’t they rather just confirm what we already know (or want to know)?

All these questions were raised at the time of the exhibition and afterward when a book of the photographs, *Without Sanctuary*, was published. Some people, it was said, might dispute the need for this grisly photographic display, lest it cater to voyeuristic appetites and perpetuate images of black victimization—or simply numb the mind. Nevertheless, it was argued, there is an obligation to “examine”—the more clinical “examine” is substituted for “look at”—the pictures. It was further argued that submitting to the ordeal should help us understand such atrocities not as the acts of “barbarians” but as the reflection of a belief system, racism, that by defining one people as less human than another legitimates torture and murder. But maybe they *were* barbarians. Maybe *this* is what most barbarians look like. (They look like everybody else.)

That being said, one person’s “barbarian” is another person’s “just doing what everybody else is doing.” (How many can be expected to do better than that?) The ques-

tion is, Whom do we wish to blame? More precisely, Whom do we believe we have the right to blame? The children of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were no less innocent than the young African-American men (and a few women) who were butchered and hanged from trees in small-town America. More than one hundred thousand civilians, three-fourths of them women, were massacred in the RAF firebombing of Dresden on the night of February 13, 1945; seventy-two thousand civilians were incinerated in seconds by the American bomb dropped on Hiroshima. The roll call could be much longer. Again, Whom do we wish to blame? Which atrocities from the incurable past do we think we are obliged to revisit?

Probably, if we are Americans, we think that it would be morbid to go out of our way to look at pictures of burnt victims of atomic bombing or the napalmed flesh of the civilian victims of the American war on Vietnam, but that we have a duty to look at the lynching pictures—if we belong to the party of the right-thinking, which on this issue is now very large. A stepped-up recognition of the monstrousness of the slave system that once existed, unquestioned by most, in the United States is a national project of recent decades that many Euro-Americans feel some tug of obligation to join. This ongoing project is a great achievement, a benchmark of civic virtue. The acknowledgment of the American use of disproportionate

firepower in war (in violation of one of the cardinal laws of war) is very much not a national project. A museum devoted to the history of America's wars that included the vicious war the United States fought against guerrillas in the Philippines from 1899 to 1902 (expertly excoriated by Mark Twain), and that fairly presented the arguments for and against using the atomic bomb in 1945 on the Japanese cities, with photographic evidence that showed what those weapons did, would be regarded—now more than ever—as a most unpatrician endeavor.

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One can feel obliged to look at photographs that record great cruelties and crimes. One should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show. Not all reactions to these pictures are under the supervision of reason and conscience. Most depictions of tortured, mutilated bodies do arouse a prurient interest. (*The Disasters of War* is notably an exception: Goya's images cannot be looked at in a spirit of prurience. They don't dwell on the beauty of the human body; bodies are heavy, and thickly clothed.) All images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic. But images of the repulsive can also allure. Everyone knows that what slows down highway traffic going past a horrendous car crash is not only curiosity.