Regarding the Pain of Others Study Guide

Regarding the Pain of Others by Susan Sontag

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag examines the manner in which war is perceived, taking into account such factors as sex, culture and status. She contends that war imagery is open to both interpretation and manipulation. Sontag rejects the notion that war imagery will necessarily compel a repudiation of war, instead arguing that war is itself perennial.

Sontag claims that a photo's meaning is based on interpretation, perhaps formed of ignorance. Images make events seem "real" to viewers, even as they seem "unreal" in their similarity to art. Images, however, have impeccable veracity to the human mind, representing as they do the basis of empirical truth. Sontag reminds the reader, however, that images are first filtered through image-takers.

Sontag explains that a picture's meaning is derived through a synthesis of artifice, context and experience. The viewer's prior experience and the context of the viewing, all play a part in how meaning is derived. There is also the matter of why the viewer is looking at the image. Sontag claims that people are drawn to images of suffering with an almost sexual interest.

Sontag considers the many ways that war is articulated through images, noting that artifice did not end with the advent of photography. Shots are often staged and events reenacted for the camera. Governments use photojournalists to put a positive face to unpopular wars. In some cases the camera's presence can influence what is captured.

Sontag addresses the issue of censorship with the idea that war photography is, usually, anti-war in nature. Governments clamp down on photojournalism to silence anti-war sentiment. Journalists, meanwhile, participate in a type of self-censorship based on unspoken ideals of "good taste."

Since the majority of people demand objectivity from photography, Sontag considers the subject of authenticity, examining the ways in which photography might be influenced by "art" to incite sentiment in the viewer. Sontag decides that a history based only upon images is a fiction, explaining that a general understanding of history is more important than images pertaining to one historical event.

Sontag revisits humankind's fascination with images of suffering, considering several theories as to why it exists. She notes, however, that interest is not necessarily accompanied with compassion. Viewers are more inclined to feel compassion toward subjects of their own race and nationality. Even so, the role of spectator makes many such viewers feel helpless to act upon what they are seeing.

Sontag recognizes that atrocious images can leave one with a sense of powerlessness, but nevertheless concludes that it is important for people to be aware of what humankind is capable. While each image is a mere token of a larger issue, they collectively represent a broad strokes understanding of mankind's problems. While most

people cannot, will not, ever know what it means to suffer such horror, it is important that everyone understand that such nightmares are real.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag examines the manner in which war is perceived, taking into account such factors as sex, culture and status. She contends that war imagery is open to both interpretation and manipulation. Sontag rejects the notion that war imagery will necessarily compel a repudiation of war, instead arguing that war is itself perennial.

Sontag begins her analysis by looking at how perceptions of war differ between sexes. She agrees with Virginia Woolf's assessment that warring is largely a male occupation. Where Sontag disagrees, however, is on Woolf's assumption of consensus with regard to how photographs are assigned meaning. Just because two people can profess horror and disgust at seeing the same brutal images, Sontag asserts, does not suggest a shared perspective.

The horror of seeing such an image, explains Sontag, can be manifested in different forms. The experience differs by viewer and by historical context. It is not a stretch to think that even militant minds might be disgusted by the slaughter of innocents—and yet such horror is far from a repudiation of war. Sontag criticizes Woolf's consideration of atrocious imagery as generic, devoid of political context.

Sontag contends that images cannot and will not speak for themselves. A horrific image will not necessarily inspire disgust or sympathy in the viewer, because images themselves are subject to use. The right caption, observes Sontag, can alter the meaning of an image. What was merely tragic can instead become patriotic, or even serve as a call to arms. Photographs can be staged. Real photographs can be discredited. The emotion stemming from charged images can be managed, even used to promote further bloodshed.

Horrific images, explains Sontag, only compel a repudiation of war when based on the assumption that violence is never justified. The notion that war might be averted if only people can be made aware of its horrors is one that Sontag must reluctantly dismiss. Generations of artists have attempted to instill in mankind a repudiation of war, without success. War, it would seem, is perennial.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Seeing images of far away atrocities, Sontag asserts, is a quintessentially modern experience. Mass media brings such sights into the home, but without also communicating the depth and complexity of the event pictured. Public awareness of suffering is something constructed by the collective experience of discrete images. More so than the written word, the meaning of a photograph is tied to how the work is interpreted by the viewer.

Sontag considers the role of technological advancement in photojournalism. As cameras improve, it is possible to capture war in progress. This, in turn, enhances the public's understanding of war. Sontag argues, however, that while photographic evidence makes something "real" to far away eyes, it can also have the opposite effect. This is particularly true of westernized cultures, which have learned to associate spectacular or shocking images with the artifice of Hollywood.

Sontag argues that the image itself, more than the facts relevant to that image, remain in the mind. The experience of seeing an image, particularly those images which are shocking or beautiful, "dents" the mind. This, the author explains, is why merchants flood the mass media with provocative images, ever striving to make an impact in a mental space already crowded with similar sights.

Since the camera captures whatever is brought before its lens, explains Sontag, it represents an impeccable authority. Photographs from Nazi concentration camps, for example, were irrefutable. Sontag agrees with Walter Lippmann's assessment that, as of 1922, photography has supplanted both painting and the spoken word as the preferred means of establishing truth.

Sontag considers the objectivity of the camera, suggesting that the bias of the image-taker may influence the end product. She points out that many images which record suffering are now suspected of "artistic" influence. As artifice is seen as inauthentic, the most credible photographs of suffering are those taken by amateurs.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Sontag explains that a picture's meaning is derived through a synthesis of artifice, context and experience. Unless the viewer has a strong grasp of the subject's original context, viewer response can be managed with captions. In the absence of any context, viewers will read into an image, imprinting it with their own perspective. Once more, Sontag refutes Woolf's idea of camera as the objective eye. She notes, however, that it is in the late 1930s, at the time Woolf expresses this idea, that photojournalism is on the rise, appearing in magazines expressly dedicated to photographic images.

Sontag considers the way that photographs are presented in popular media, methods which further distance the subject matter from its original context. In newsprint, photos are surrounded by words. In magazines, full-paged photos must compete for the viewer's attention with equally large ads, a contrast which, to the modern reader, seems as bizarre as it does outdated.

Even war critics recognize the glamor and celebrity of war journalists, particularly if the war seems necessary to wage. With the advent of the popular World War II, photojournalism comes into its own. Photojournalists organize and gain power. Inspired by a new-found spirit of objectivity, photojournalists of every race, creed and color resolve to record the moments of their lives.

Despite this push to photojournalism, Sontag observes, most wars continue to be local affairs, failing to stir worldwide attention. Only wide-reaching conflicts, of the kind that could destabilize regions, earn the attention of the world community. Similarly, the world is less interested in photographs that record atrocities unrelated to actual fighting, such as deadly pollution or famine among war-displaced peoples.

Photojournalism was instrumental in raising the outcry against the Vietnam War. Ironically, observes Sontag, the same manner of images which seemed subversive in the Vietnam era, would now, post September 11th, serve to galvanize pro-military sentiment. Photographs of hollow eyed soldiers, once seen as an argument against waging war, are now seen as symbols of patriotic duty.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Sontag considers what it means to protest suffering as opposed to merely acknowledging it. She notes that the public has little interest in suffering caused by nature or accident, instead preferring images of human violence against humans. Sontag compares the yearning to see such horrific images to feelings of sexual desire, describing the urge as voyeuristic in nature. She reasons that only those capable of alleviating suffering, such as doctors, have a right to look upon it. Anyone else would be reduced to either a spectator or a coward.

The practice of depicting war as something deplorable, Sontag explains, is a largely secular affair, beginning in the 17th century with Jacques Callot's Les Miseres et les Malheurs, or the Misfortunes of War. The series of etchings depicts soldiers as both victims and victimizers, bound for squalor and destitution. Ultimately Goya would take up the cause with Los Desastres de la Guerra, the Disasters of War, a series of eighty-three etchings depicting soldiers run amok.

Sontag is shocked by Goya's Disaster of War. She characterizes the images as an attack upon the viewer's sensibilities. They provoke the viewer to feel, to act. Each etching includes a short, written phrase intended to convey disgust, horror and outrage. Sontag contrasts these phrases to photo captions, which usually serve to convey information. Photographs, Sontag explains, have impeccable veracity; they do not need to include the phrase "This is the truth" as Goya does beneath one of his paintings. The photo speaks its own truth.

Sontag considers the problem of authenticity. Arists "make" drawings; photographers "take" photos. A painting is only considered fake if it is attributed to the wrong artist. A photograph, however, is fake when it deceives the viewer. Art is based on synthesis. Photography, however, is thought to be an exact reproduction. This, explains Sontag, is why photographs are admissible as evidence in a court of law. Nevertheless, concedes the author, there is some debate concerning photography's objectivity.

Historically, Sontag claims, photographers have generally offered positive images of the warrior's trade. Photojournalism began in the Crimean War, she explains, when Roger Fenton was sent to Crimea to take staged photos with the intent of putting a positive face on a tragic, hugely unpopular war. Photojournalism evolved steadily until the American Civil War, whereupon the private sector slowly overtook the trade. Dead bodies begin to appear in photos, justified by posterity.

Posterity or no, many of the earliest war photos were staged, their subjects tampered with. Human remains were moved or posed. Elements were altered for dramatic composition. Sontag marvels at how viewers are surprised, even disappointed, to learn

that a photo is staged—even when the photographer makes no claim of objectivity. This disappointment is evidence of how strongly viewers regard the veracity of photographs.

Sontag argues that determining photographic authenticity is complicated. Many beloved photos, such as the planting of the flag at Iwo Jima, were reenacted for the camera. Like paintings, such images are representational rather than true reproductions. It is only since the Vietnam War that photojournalism has produced images of impeccable veracity. Sontag attributes this, in part, to the prevalence of televised media. The witnessing of war is no longer a solitary venture. While photo manipulation is an ever increasing factor of modern photography, staged photos are now a thing of the past.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Sontag considers the relationship between the camera and its subjects, noting that the camera can affect subject behavior. The photo op provided by Eddie Adams compelled Brigadier General Nguyen Ngoc Loan to orchestrate the execution that would become Adams' Pulitzer Prize winning photo. In most instances, however, the camera can only serve as passive spectator. Sontag ponders a succession of anonymous mug shots. Each face belongs to a person about to be executed, wearing an expression of certain doom. Like the photographer, Sontag feels, the co-spectator is culpable in his or her passivity.

Sontag notes that horrific images repel and attract, yet seldom stir viewers from their daily routine. She cites an article from the New York Times which, while it does acknowledge the horror of such images, also instills them with unnecessary melodrama. In effort to stir the complacent viewer, some photographers decide to dramatize reality by recording staged reenactments rather than true events. Conversely, efforts are also made to suppress the uncovered dead; such sights were thought improper and unpatriotic.

Sontag considers the issue of censorship. While it always existed in some form, the first ban on press photography comes about during the First World War, when German and French commands only allow a select few photographers near the front. Fifty years later, during the Vietnam War, war photography becomes, normatively, a criticism of war. This inevitably puts the mainstream media in an awkward position.

After Vietnam, censorship finds itself with a large and influential number of apologists. The British government clamps down on coverage of the Falkland conflict. Later, the American military distracts the media during the Gulf War by offering endless demonstrations of war tech. As access to war becomes stricter, the battlefield itself is more elusive. Today's wars are fought remotely, on distant fields known only to the military. The media, meanwhile, adhering to a nebulous notion of "good taste," and with an eye toward pleasing advertisers, censors itself into relative silence.

Sontag sees this media self-censorship as a response to sociocultural anxieties, particularly with regard to the individual's need to mourn. Since privacy issues usually win out over the public's right to know, news is often suppressed. The public, left with too little information to make sense of tragic events, is permitted to demonize a faceless enemy. If the subject is familiar, Sontag explains, the photographer is expected to be discreet. Displays of death are only permitted when subjects are of darker complexion and in exotic countries.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Sontag posits that ideas of war and peace have changed; peace is now considered the norm rather than the exception. She sees the history of war as a male-dominated affair, recorded by pitiless artistry intent on capturing the savagery of battle. Sontag asserts that modern viewers would be hesitant to call war photography "beautiful," even though the act of representation can, in her opinion, create beauty from something horrible. Modern viewers, however, are not comfortable with the transformative power of artistry. They would prefer photographs to stand as an objective record.

Motion pictures base their aesthetics on photographs. This, in turn, undermines the veracity of the photo by making it seem like a still from a movie. Similarly, some critics decry beautiful photography as inauthentic, too artistic to be a true record of life. Sontag refers specifically to the works of Sabastiao Salgado, who seems to sensationalize suffering even as he renders anonymous his subjects. She argues that Salgado's focus on the oppression itself, rather than the oppressed, lends the atrocity an air of inevitability. Viewers are moved to sympathize, but not to intervene. The situation is hopeless.

Many photographers are vigilant against perceived attempts to exploit sentiment. Sontag, however, argues that some degree of spectacle may be helpful in the articulation of suffering. She argues that the modern understanding of suffering is largely based on religious narratives and, as such, it would not be a projection of sentiment if a viewer recognized such narrative in a photograph.

While it is usually the camera's task to beautify the subject, Sontag explains, to incite the viewer requires a shock element. She cites Canada's successful use of shock photography to dissuade people from smoking. Sontag posits, however, that—unless the viewer creates an emotional relationship with an image—the shock wears off as people grow accustomed to the sight. She does concede, however, that some images are too shocking to build tolerance against.

Photographic evidence, Sontag explains, is necessary to corroborate the fact of atrocity, even if they fail to convey context. Such photographs provide hard truths even as they provoke emotional reactions which have little interest in fact. Some atrocities go unrecorded, and as such, are never made "real" to the world. Sontag concludes that while photographs help society to crystallize its understanding of the distant past, such an understanding is a fiction.

Sontag considers the way that photographs serve as shorthand memory, the visual version of a sound bite. She examines the cultural role of "memory museums," photo archives that provide a glimpse at past atrocities. Such places create new memories based upon old photographic iconography now deprived of their original context. Sontag

argues that images are no substitute for actual memory and knowledge. Images of contemporary events justify themselves in that they can compel intervention, but Sontag questions the value of revisiting events long past.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Sontag reminds the reader to be aware of what it means to look at pictures of cruelties and crimes. The human attraction to things morbid and gruesome is long established. Sontag offers an example story from Plato, where young Leontius is compelled, despite his disgust, to look upon the corpses of executed criminals. She also offers examples from Edmund Burke and William Shakespeare which also attest to man's attraction to pain and cruelty.

Erotic theorist Georges Bataille, Sontag reveals, for many years kept a horrific picture on his desk. The picture, taken in China in the year 1910, shows a prisoner undergoing "the death of a hundred cuts." Already deprived of arms, the subject is in the process of being flayed alive by the knives of several men. Bataille admits to being obsessed with the image, which he considers both ecstatic and intolerable.

Sontag theorizes that atrocious images might answer several needs: perhaps to steel oneself, to become numb, or maybe to simply acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible. She interprets Bataille's perspective as quasi-religious. She contends that a religious notion of suffering traditionally ties pain to sacrifice, sacrifice to exultation. This contradicts modern ideas of pain as caused by a mistake, accident or crime.

Though drawn to images of suffering, viewers are not necessarily inclined to empathize with the subject, even assuming that the subject is familiar. When people feel safe they are less inclined to react to the pain of others. This is further exacerbated by feelings of helplessness, the idea being that nothing can be done to right the witnessed injustices. Sontag argues that compassion must be allowed to translate into action, else it withers. Similarly, mere sympathy proves inadequate. In the face of suffering, sympathy affirms the viewer's innocence and impotence.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Sontag looks at the way that the media steers public discourse, focusing public attention through its choice of coverage. The media, intentionally or not, mobilizes the protest against the Vietnam War. Similarly, the media creates the idea that something has to be done about the war in Bosnia. Despite such examples, Sontag sees that media saturation might contribute to public apathy. While images might raise awareness of events, repeated use of those images produces a deadening effect.

The argument that modern life perpetuates a jaded, apathetic outlook is not a new one. Sontag offers several examples of this critique dating back to as early as 1800. Before newspapers offered photos, she claims, the bourgeois consumed a host of horrors along with breakfast. Today, she argues, the public can theoretically be treated to as many tragedies and atrocities as it has time look at. Perpetual horror soon loses its power to shock the viewer. Regardless, such horrific images continue unabated.

Sontag characterizes the theory of media induced apathy as a "conservative" viewpoint, arguing that it refers to an erosion of one's perception rather than an erosion of objective reality. The most radical version of this argument proposes that mankind has no direct interaction with reality, requiring everything to be first filtered through the media. Everything, insofar as people are concerned, is representation. Sontag sees this viewpoint as narrow, rejecting the notions that everyone is a spectator and that true suffering is illusory. She also argues that representations of suffering cannot be equated to suffering itself. It is one thing to see it on television. It is quite another thing to see it firsthand.

Even today, Sontag explains, there is considerable suspicion surrounding the interest in war imagery, both from the cynics who have never seen a war first hand, and from the war-weary who are sick of the attention. The former group, Sontag suggests, would prefer to be cynical rather than allow themselves to be moved by the existence of horror. As for the latter group, Sontag concedes there is some truth to journalists being "war tourists," but adds that journalists do risk their lives to cover wars, and in doing so they help raise awareness of suffering. Victims of war would rather have their story told than not; what they are most opposed to, however, is having their suffering compared to the suffering of others. To do so, they feel, undermines the gravity of their experience.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Sontag concedes that merely displaying images of suffering does little, in and of itself, to mediate that suffering. She insists, however, that it is beneficial to increase the public's awareness as to the extent of man's ability to cause suffering. Such awareness, she argues, is necessary to achieve moral and psychological maturity. There can therefore be no societal benefit to avoiding such truths.

Sontag admits that images of suffering are tokens, a mere representation of the crimes they record. Nevertheless, she asserts that such tokens are necessary to remind viewers as to the character of mankind; a character which can willingly, even enthusiastically, bring suffering upon its fellow man. This, she contends, is different from remembering a single transgression. Rather, it involves remembering mankind's propensity for transgression.

Sontag argues that too much emphasis is placed on memory, not enough on thinking. She sympathizes with the importance that people place on memory, realizing that memory is man's only link to the past and to loved ones who have passed on. Sontag argues, however, that there is too much injustice in the world to remember all of it. To find peace mankind must remember the general and forget the specific.

The modern world inundates people with choices, so it is only natural, Sontag asserts, that people choose not view images which make them feel bad. She rejects the notion, however, that this indicates lack of response. Sontag also rejects the idea that viewers are obligated to experience a certain degree of suffering at seeing images of suffering. Rather, she suggests that such images serve only as a matter of consideration.

Sontag also claims that many of the frustrations regarding shocking images stem from the viewer's inability to address the events portrayed. There is a kind of guilt associated with bearing witness to horror while risking nothing of oneself. To see is effortless. It requires only that one look. Sontag argues, however, that there is much to be gained from contemplation of what one sees.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

Sontag argues that while images of suffering can be thought provoking, modern society is ill-suited to provide the quiet, meditative space necessary for their thoughtful consideration. She argues that viewing harrowing images in an art gallery seems exploitative, changing the context of what is viewed by virtue of how and where it is viewed. Sontag also reasons that, since media has become more sophisticated across the board, shocking imagery now competes for our attention.

Photographers of conscience are concerned that important photographs will not be regarded under the reverential conditions which they are due. In the modern era, the viewer can dictate the circumstances of viewing. Even in a gallery, where such works arguably become art, the experience of the images becomes part of a gallery stroll, punctuated by the interruptions common to a public space. Even a book of such images, reminds Sontag, can readily be closed. However the image is viewed, its effect will fade, the photographer's intent irrelevant to the larger process.

Sontag returns to the question, albeit somewhat rephrased, that began her analysis: Is there an antidote to the perennial seductiveness of war? She revisits the idea of inciting people to oppose war, either through images or through the written word. After reviewing several examples, Sontag decides that "we," those of us who lack firsthand experience of war, are incapable of understanding its horrors. Images alone cannot impart the understanding "we" seek.

Characters

Image Creators

Sontag separates image creators into two groups. The first group, the image makers, is unquestionably subjective. They do not reproduce reality so much as they represent it. Goya's Disasters of War, for example, does not offer objective proof of the war crimes the artist witnessed. Rather, Goya represents, through images, an experience similar to what he has seen. The made image is filtered entirely through the eyes of its creator.

The second type of image creator is the image taker, one who creates images through the use of film. The word "take" here refers to an image taken directly from life, suggesting that film serves as an objective reproduction of reality. The veracity of a photograph is widely regarded as above reproach, so much so that photographs are admissible as evidence in a court of law.

Despite the difference in objectivity between makers and takers, Sontag demonstrates that photographs are subject to bias and manipulation. Shots can be staged. Events can be reenacted. Photographs can be presented out of context or provided with inaccurate captions. Due to film's perceived objectivity, a photo taker can use his or her credibility to manipulate the viewer. This causes many photographers to become vigilant against photography intended to arouse sentiment.

Spectators

Of central concern to Sontag is the role of the spectator. Spectators are those people who either regard the suffering of others from the relative safety of their own developing nation, or else represent a faction unaffected by the suffering they now consider. They, in Sontag's mind, represent the privileged, often better educated, segment of the world's population, the segment most likely to effect change and yet, simultaneously, least likely to empathize with the need for it. Sontag is concerned with the way that spectators respond to images of suffering and whether or not they act upon what they see.

Sontag contends that humans have a natural, albeit morbid, fascination with images of suffering. This urge to see "trouble" complicates the role of spectator; it theoretically moves the viewer's focus away from the subject, away from those who actually suffer, to feelings of self-gratification. Spectating, in this light, seems selfish to the point of voyeurism, undermining the perceived quality of mankind's engagement with images of suffering.

With regard to images of suffering, Sontag abandons the idea of moral obligation. Spectators are not obliged to feel for or act upon what they see. There is no specific response which is owed the image. An image is, she explains, merely an example of a larger dynamic. What is owed by the spectator is awareness and understanding. The

implication is that an informed, knowledgeable person will respond in a manner that is most healthy and beneficial to society.

Victims

Sontag often refers to depictions or photos of victims, suggesting that their identity, or lack thereof, provides historical (and perhaps even moral) context for the image.

Governments

Governments are those entities who wage war and, at least to some extent, control the way the war is perceived by the citizenry.

Military

Militaries provide government with the armies necessary to wage war. The military is comprised of citizens, either recruited or drafted.

The Intelligentsia

The intelligentsia is comprised of educated citizens who discuss matters in scholastic, largely theoretical terms.

The Dead

Atrocity images are often populated with photos or depictions of the dead. The impact of seeing such images is proportional to the viewer's sympathy. Viewers are most moved when seeing the dead of their own race and/or nationality.

Journalists

Journalists exist at a halfway point between soldier and common citizen. Like the soldier, they put themselves into harm's way for the sake of performing a service.

Conscientious Objectors

Conscientious objectors are individuals who have opted to take a stand against war and human suffering.

Soldiers

Soldiers are citizens who fight on behalf of their country. Sontag suggests that mere photojournalism cannot begin to express the horrors that a soldier might come to understand.

Tyrants

Though she seldom uses the term, Sontag often refers to tyrants, leaders who govern with cruelty and oppression.

The

Sontag argues that it is easier (socially and emotionally) for viewers to consider the pain of those who are different from themselves. These "others" are typically of darker complexion and from locations deemed "exotic" by the parent culture.

Historians

Historians are concerned with preserving "the truth." They are critical of photographs that they deem artistic or politically motivated. They strive for objectivity.

Objects/Places

Bataille's Photograph

Bataille's photograph is a horrifying picture of a man suffering the "death of a hundred cuts," as he is flayed and dismembered while still alive.

Krieg dem Krieg

Krieg dem kKrieg, or "War against War," is Ernst Friedrich's uncompromising photo album covering the destruction of World War I.

Newspapers

Newspapers are the standard of mass media, defining the baseline for taste and decorum. Due to politics and propriety, newspapers seldom print photographs of war casualties.

Tabloids

Tabloids, in accordance with the guideline "If it bleeds, it leads," are more likely to present scenes of death and destruction than their more credible counterparts.

Vietnam

Vietnam was the first nation, and war, to experience the continuous war coverage of modern journalism.

Concentration Camps

Sontag points out that the German concentration camps at the end of World War II were photographed and filmed outside the context of the camps' operation, thus failing to capture their heartless efficiency.

European Western Front, 1914

At the time of the Great War, Europe's mounting casualties were so severe that words alone failed to convey the horror. Only photography could communicate the sheer magnitude of human loss.

World Trade Center

As the target of the September 11th attacks, the site of the World Trade Center, now referred to as "ground zero," is the subject of much photography.

Bosnia

Bosnia was the target of ethnic cleansing during the mid-1990s, and as such is also the subject of much war photojournalism.

Life Magazine

Life magazine was an American publication dedicated to photojournalism. Sontag points out that Life's war images, presented as they are beside advertising, have lost some of their original context.

Israel

Israel's war against Palestine, beginning in 2000, attracted the attention of world media.

Minamata

The people of Minamata were poisoned when the Chisso Corporation knowingly dumped mercury in its bay. The public paid little attention to journalistic coverage of the crime.

Los Desastres de la Guerra

Goya's "Los Desastres de la Guerra," or "Disasters of War" is a series of etchings depicting Napoleon's atrocities against Spain.

The Falling Soldier

The Falling Soldier, aka Death of a Republican Soldier is a photo which purports to show the exact moment of a soldier's death. Its veracity has since come into question.

Themes

Consideration of Pain

As the title might suggest, the author is centrally focused on how people engage the pain and suffering of others. Of particular interest to Sontag, in part due to its particular interest to people in general, is the pain caused by war. Not herself being from a war-torn country, Sontag, like many Americans, draws upon secondary sources for her understanding, secondary sources such as art, photography and film. Sontag uses her once-removed experience as an opportunity to examine the manner in which she, and other like herself, understand the world. She realizes that, as an American, she is privileged. Most of the privileged world has little experience with war, and thus are ill equipped to understand the pain it brings. What little they know is gleaned from the newspaper or the nightly news: discrete, disembodied images that fail to convey the harrowing truth beyond.

Sontag notes that people, particularly those who are not themselves in danger, have a perfectly natural, but still quite morbid, attraction to the suffering of others. Brutal images, perhaps intended to inspire viewers to action, can instead become a means of viewer self-gratification. This quality, along with many other psychosocial factors, serves as a barrier to human empathy. People who are not in the circumstances of the victims are separated from the images of pain. The pain of others is not necessarily real to someone removed from the circumstances, and viewers may view the scene aesthetically instead of with human empathy. The degree to which a person can empathize is dependent on the person's similarities to the victims in the photo. Someone of a different race or nationality is viewed as an "other," instead of as a human being.

Objective Reality

Sontag argues that reality cannot be fully articulated via film. Even though photographs are widely considered objectively true,—true enough even for a court of law—Sontag contends that a photograph is nevertheless open to manipulation, misrepresentation and interpretation. The meaning of a photograph is not based upon objective truth, but rather on the viewer's engagement with the photo.

Objectively, explains Sontag, a photograph is a discrete unit of a larger unknowable whole. The viewer cannot see what lay outside the frame. Nor can the viewer tell what happened just before the image was taken. The subject, for all that the viewer knows, may have been tampered with. The photo's caption may claim that it shows something other than what it actually shows. Either the viewer accepts what the photo claims or seems to be, or the viewer assigns his or own subjective meaning to the image. In either case, the truth is far from certain.

Sontag rejects the idea that it is possible to impart a world's worth of information in the span of a nightly news broadcast. Modern people come away from the television believing themselves informed, when truthfully they have only seen a handful of discrete images that tell very little of the larger story. Sontag suggests that there are some truths, particularly those involving pain and suffering, which can only be understood firsthand.

Censorship

With regard to matters of pain and suffering, Sontag presents two forces which seem to work at cross purposes: the individual's right to mourn in private and the public's right to know. Images of pain bring up a wide range of emotional reactions and also political results. The loved ones of those photographed dying or dead during war suffer greatly from the images, and that leads to suppression of painful images for the loved ones' benefit. In turn, this suppression of images serves to hide the reality of what is happening in war. What is not known cannot be responded to. If we, as a society, choose to look on images of pain, it leads to suffering. If we choose not to look on pain, it leads to ignorance and perpetuates violence.

Western culture forbids the display of its dead countrymen, the fear being that the deceased's loved ones might see his image on the nightly news. This dignity, however, is not extended to the dead of other countries. Censorship is far more lax when presenting the dead of darker complexioned people from exotic lands. While some incidents of censorship are due to government influence, (usually because the government is trying to put a positive face on an otherwise unpopular war) the most common source of censorship is self-censorship. In the media there is an unspoken, unwritten rule of "good taste" guiding which images will or will not become news. In television, where stations must be ever mindful of pleasing advertisers, an image's newsworthiness is influenced by the bottom line.

Sontag concludes that, separate from any valuation of a specific image, the most important pursuit for a mature, socially responsible person is engagement. A citizen should strive for both awareness and understanding. The implication is that an informed, knowledgeable person will respond in a manner that is healthy and beneficial to society. Censorship is antithetical to this ideology.

Style

Perspective

On the topic of how humanity regards the pain of its fellow man, Sontag offers few conclusive arguments. Her perspective is introspective rather than didactic, analytical as opposed to rhetorical. While there is a sense that Sontag does have a moral stance on war and suffering, there is little evidence of the indignation that one might expect from so charged a topic. Sontag instead appreciates the complexity of the issue, asking far more questions than she herself is able to answer.

Sontag proceeds with a healthy quantity of skepticism. She is unwilling to believe, for instance, that the photograph is an unquestionable record of truth. Shots can be staged. Photos can be altered. Sontag is similarly suspicious of humanity's desire to see and/or avoid the suffering of others, seeing neither response as uncomplicated. In her quest for answers, Sontag is unwilling to accept matters at face value.

Sontag's writing is a process. The reader follows along as Sontag considers ideas and formulates her understanding. Along the way, Sontag refers to other authors and their opinions, either conceding or arguing points. The experience is something akin to a "think aloud," with Sontag modeling for her reader the process of thinking itself. It is this quality that she advocates above all else: engagement. The importance of learning lies not necessarily in what one gets out of it, but what one puts into it.

Tone

Sontag's tone is intellectual. She proceeds carefully and analytically. There are occasional cracks in Sontag's objectivity when addressing matters of human suffering and exploitation. It is readily apparent that she is opposed to war even as she accepts its inevitability. It is also apparent, by way of subtext, that Sontag is not a fan of the American president George W. Bush. To her credit, Sontag keeps her political opinions separate from her arguments.

Sontag recognizes that she, as an educated American, belongs to a privileged class. She understands the difference between reality as it is lived elsewhere in the world and reality as it is depicted on the American television news. As such, despite her status as a member of the intellectual elite, she approaches her work with a certain amount of humility. Sontag reminds the reader that a photo is not the whole picture and that engagement is of greater value than certainty.

Sontag seems to most appreciate those who struggle for, or with, the truth. Her attitude is of someone who wants to get below the surface, to the really real. She admires the efforts of her fellow intelligentsia, but is sometimes amused by the disconnected, bombastic or performed way in which they approach issues. There is a sense that Sontag is frustrated by the imperfections of knowledge. Wherever she looks, she is met

by limitation. She finds herself forced to admit that some things cannot be known, concluding that the quest for knowledge is, in and of itself, valuable.

Structure

The book is divided into ten untitled chapters. While each chapter centers on a general topic, there is a fair amount of digression. Sontag will occasionally touch upon points that she will develop later in the book or else elaborate on ideas previously introduced. There is never a sense that the book is building up to a unifying argument. Rather, the work reads more like an internal monologue addressing several interrelated ideas. The flow of the book is a flow of thought and an exploration of a concept, rather than a propounding of a theory.

Sontag begins by looking at how perspective colors a person's understanding of brutal imagery. She then delves into the topic of media and technology, exploring how individuals assign meaning to what they see. Beginning in chapter 3, Sontag looks at how human nature predisposes people to regard suffering, and from there explores the relationship between citizens, the media and censorship. She closes out the book by examining the societal worth of brutal imagery.

Regarding the Pain of Others has a strong historical component. The book is punctuated with block quotes from other authors, usually philosophers espousing ideas relevant to the discussion. These quotes, when provided, are carefully framed in their historical context. Sontag will herself often relate historical anecdotes pertaining to war, journalism and politics.

Quotes

"No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain." —Chapter 1, page 7.

"For a long time, some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war." —Chapter 1, page 14.

"Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering of more than a century and a half worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists." —Chapter 2, page 18.

"The photographer's intentions do not determine the meaning of a photograph, which will have its own career, blown by the whims and loyalties of the diverse communities that have use for it." —Chapter 2, page 39.

"It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked." —Chapter 3, page 41.

"In each instance, the gruesome invites us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look." —Chapter 3, page 42.

"To catch a death actually happening and embalm it for all time is something only cameras can do, and pictures taken by photographers out in the field of the moment of (or just before) death are among the most celebrated and often reproduced of war photographs." —Chapter 4, page 59.

"The exhibition in photographs of cruelties inflicted on those with darker complexions in exotic countries continues this offering, oblivious to the considerations that deter such displays of our own victims of violence; for the other, even when not an enemy, is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees." —Chapter 4, page 72.

"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." —Chapter 5, page 76.

"The photograph gives mixed signals. Stop this, it urges. But it also exclaims, What a spectacle!" —Chapter 5, page 77.

"Not all reactions to these pictures are under the supervision of reason and conscience." —Chapter 6, page 95.

"No Committee of Guardians is going to ration horror, to keep fresh its ability to shock. And the horrors themselves are not going to abate." —Chapter 7, page 108.

"Perhaps too much value is assigned to memory, not enough to thinking. Remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself." —Chapter 8, page 115.

"Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us? 'We'—this 'we' is everyone who never experienced anything like what they went through—don't understand. We don't get it." —Chapter 9, page 125.

Topics for Discussion

Based on her criticisms of the media, what sort of war coverage would Sontag prefer to see?

Sontag claims that, after Vietnam, war photography was regarded, normatively, as a repudiation of war. Why might this be the case?

Sontag claims that human beings are naturally drawn to images of suffering. Assuming that this is true, how does this complicate the decision of whether or not to display brutal imagery?

Sontag claims that it takes more than horrific imagery to turn people against war. What else might it require?

What is the fundamental difference between painting a picture and taking a picture? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method?

What sort of information can a photograph communicate? What can it not communicate?

Sontag says that modern America places too much emphasis on memory and not enough emphasis on thinking. What does she mean?

Sontag seems to believe that men are more likely to wage war than women. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

Sontag does not directly speak out against censorship, but does advocate knowledge and awareness. Is censorship ever okay? Why or why not?