

A G A I N S T P H O T O G R A P H Y

SUSAN SONTAG AND THE VIOLENT IMAGE

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In a December 2002 New Yorker essay entitled "Looking at War," recently published in revised form as the book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, American social critic Susan Sontag begins by recalling Virginia Woolf's 1938 anti-war polemic *Three Guineas*. *Three Guineas* is a bitterly angry and conflicted essay. Woolf spends 250 pages problematizing all aspects of women's participation in pacifist protest. But ultimately Woolf never abandons her plaintive refrain: "How are we to prevent war?" Sontag immediately distances herself from Woolf's pacifism. She writes instead: "Who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists" (82).

At the heart of *Three Guineas* is Woolf's confidence that photographs of the Spanish Civil War will convince decent people to agree with her that "War is an abomination; a barbarity; war must be stopped" (21). The photographs of corpses and ruined landscapes that Spanish Republicans have sent abroad are statements of brutal "fact," says Woolf several times, and that fact is simply "evil" (21, 260), she says. It is surprising to see this leading figure of modern fiction, who famously celebrated life as "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope" ("Modern Fiction" 150), putting aside her suggestive experimental style when it comes to war. There is no ambivalence, no metaphor, no stream of consciousness here. A photograph is a fact. War is evil.

Susan Sontag has written often about the power of photography, particularly in her 1977 book *On Photography*, a book that W. J. T. Mitchell thinks should have been titled *Against Photography*. Photography, said Sontag then, is forceful, but she saw no certain way of harnessing that power for moral purpose. She warned of the dangers of the photograph: "Images transfix. Images anesthetize" (20). The most devastating visual experience of her life was seeing photographs of concentration camps at the age of 12. Her conclusion about the experience was mixed: "something went dead; something is still crying." Sontag wrote:

To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. (20)

In her recent essay "Looking at War" Sontag states that she has a quarrel with some of her conclusions in *On Photography*. Her attitude is now certainly sadder, her descriptions more concrete, her approach less that of the aesthete. Yet her current conclusions are not clear. Her highest praise in "Looking at War" is for Jeff Wall's 1992 photograph, "Dead Troops Talk," a staged work that presents a visionary, imagined experience of war. At another point she tells us that several famous actual photographs of war — Robert Capa's of the Spanish Civil War, Matthew Brady's of the American Civil War — may have been staged (91-92). These points divert the viewer's consideration of violence, transforming it into musing about artifice. Although Sontag derides postmodern views, popularly accessible through movies like *The Matrix*, that "the vast maw of modernity has chewed up reality and spat the whole mess out as images" (97), she eventually retreats into a sort of quietism that is not that different from the ideas of *On Photography*, ideas that Walter Kendrick once criticized for their "esthetic impressionism" (405). While she is disturbed by a display of photographs of black victims of lynching that she views in a New York gallery in 2000, her response is limited to a barrage of questions:

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)? ("Looking at War" 95)

She does not attempt firm answers. She tells us instead that in the years since she wrote *On Photography*, in which she criticized the aggressive power of still photography, calling it "mental pollution" and labeling us as

"image-junkies" (24), she has realized that television, the moving image, is a far worse offender.

In *On Photography* she suggested, very briefly, that there might be an "ethics of seeing" (3) and an "ecology of images" ("Looking at War" 97). In 2002, she ridicules her former stance.

[W]hat is really being asked for here? That images of carnage be cut back to, say, once a week?... [T]here isn't going to be an ecology of images. 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. (97)

Of course they aren't, as long as people like Sontag, those rare people with the leisure and the insight to investigate the meaning of the image, refuse to take a clear ethical stance.

Why can't we cut back images of carnage to "say, once a week"? We have, in my household. Indeed we do not watch television at all. Whenever I make the decision to watch a video that has excessive violence in it, I consider whether there is a justifiable reason to watch it. It took me several years, for example, to decide to watch Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. I have created my own five point "ethics of viewing violence" which is, no doubt, naïve. But here it is.

I will look at violence only:

If there is some instructive value to be had, not entertainment.

Because I pledge never to use a weapon.

If children are not exposed to it.

If I get help if I start to feel fascinated.

If I stop watching when I cease to feel horrified.

I do not subscribe to the view that there is something innate in human beings that craves the thrill of violence. There are those who believe that violence must be subjected to intense study, but for me this leads to abstraction and distance. Then there are those who believe that atrocity must be kept on view so we can stand guard against it, to recognize it when it happens again. (And again.) But I think that standing witness to atrocity is overrated. It can be one part of an action plan against violence, but it must have other elements. On its own, witness does not seem to be working.

Looking at violence is like looking at the sun. To just look at the sun is destructive. You must protect yourself. To look at violence you must wrap yourself in something. You can look obliquely, briefly, for educational purposes. But just to look is wrong. The word "perversion," I realized recently, can slip into a new word — "per-vision" — very easily.

Susan Sontag's writing is full of melancholy. In a book about her called *The Elegiac Modernist*, Sohnya Sayres uses the phrase "moral readiness" (83) in relation to Sontag. Why just "moral readiness"? Why not morality in action? Sontag is not incapable of this. She served as president of PEN in the 1980s. In the 1990s she made dangerous trips to Sarajevo to stage plays in the underground world of the Bosnian theatre, a genuine act of courage. But for the most part, she raises questions and stands "morally ready." (Many believe she does even less. The conservative American critic Hilton Kramer has called Sontag "morally incoherent" [92].) But let us give her the benefit of the doubt and accept her as standing "morally ready."

It is very possible to do more. In the Sam Mendes film from 2002, *The Road to Perdition*, the connection between looking and killing is explicit — and Mendes attempts a solution to the problem. In the movie a child triggers a killing spree because he is curious about what his father, Michael Sullivan, a mobster, does. The child just wants to look. This is his crime, and he and those he loves are punished severely for it. Because he looks at a killing, another killing is necessary, and another — as the gangsters attempt to wipe out witnesses. Mendes in this film (generally) refuses to glamorize violence and often refuses even to show it — giving it to us obliquely or off screen. The villain of the film is Maguire, played by Jude

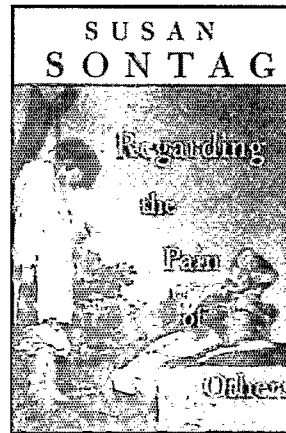
Law, who is both a murderer — and a photographer. He is a killer for hire who makes extra money by selling photographs of his murder victims to the tabloid press. And he delights in picturing death, telling the dying Michael Sullivan, played by Tom Hanks, to "smile" as the tripod is set up. That Mendes wants to destroy all possibility of seeing the photographer as neutral or aesthetically intriguing is clear when the audience is provided with a shot from the photographer's point of view. We are given a look at the dying man through the camera, and he is presented as upside down and reversed. This is perverted vision, "per-vision." A few moments later, with all the major characters dead at each others' hands, the boy who started it all by just looking swears never to hold a gun.

The recent film *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* provides another criticism of the supposed neutrality of "just looking." I remind you of the scenes with the powerful palantirs, the seeing stones that have fallen under the power of the evil Sauron and provide visions that are unbearable, indescribable. The hobbit Pippin longs to look into one, and of course when he does, he is almost destroyed by the vileness he sees there. One of the most memorable lines in that movie, for me, occurred when Pippin's friend Merry cried out to him in anguish: "Why did you look? Why do you always have to look?"

We do not have to. Before I return to Sontag, I have to say that I debated for a long time whether I would include photographs of violence in this essay about photographs of violence. Although I know it is difficult to imagine the impact, if you have not seen it, of Robert Capa's 1936 photo "The Falling Soldier" from the Spanish Civil War or the much more horrible war photos by Ron Raviv in Bosnia in 1992 and by Tyler Hicks in Afghanistan in 2001, I decided I could not contribute to the dissemination of such images. If you need to be reminded of what they are like, nearly everyone can remember the famous 1972 photo of nine-year-old Kim Phuc, running naked, aflame with napalm, down a road in Viet Nam. Bring that to mind if you must. For me that is a photograph I can bear, because Kim Phuc is today alive, living in Canada, and a fervent crusader for peace. Her message is the radical one of forgiveness. I can also bear it because the photographer, Nick Ut, put his camera down after snapping the photo, picked up Kim Phuc, took her to get medical attention, and saved her life.

One of the issues that troubled me most when I first read Susan Sontag's "Looking at War" is that I could not process what it meant to be a photographer shooting brutality in action. Mathew Brady visited the fields of carnage of the American Civil War when the battle was over. That is a nauseating enough arena in which to set up your camera. But Sontag directed my attention to photos by Tyler Hicks that *The New York Times* ran in 2001, showing a lone soldier in the act of being butchered on an Afghan road.

How was it possible to take those pictures? I know I am out of my depth as I ask this question, I who have never been to war, never studied military history, never cracked the cover of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. Who am I to say that Tyler Hicks should have put his camera down on that Afghan road? I know intervention in such a case would mean certain death. But not to intervene is acquiescence. Sontag does not delve into the complicity of war photographers in the events photographed. She writes that "the disgust and pity that pictures like Hicks's inspire should not distract from asking what pictures, whose cruelties, whose deaths you are not being shown" (86). In my opinion, it is this sort of tip-of-the-iceberg thesis that leads people to give into despair. "There are so many deaths," they say. "They become abstract. What can we do?" Let me change the emphasis. What can we do? Nick Ut's dual role as photographer and rescuer provides hope, a model. There are *Médecins Sans Frontières*, even *Lawyers Without Borders*. Why not *Photographers Without Borders*? (There is a *Reporters Without Borders*, but according to its website — <http://www.rsf.org> — it limits itself to



defending "imprisoned journalists and press freedom throughout the world.") When I read again Sontag's pessimistic words: "Who believes today that war can be abolished? No one, not even pacifists," I hear a quiet response: "Well, me. I do." It is my own voice, I realize, and it is very small. It is too small to talk back to warlords yet, so in the meantime I will talk back to Susan Sontag.

Susan Sontag, who is not only a critic, but also a filmmaker, a theatre director, and a fiction writer, is an unusual and difficult thinker to come to grips with. There are a number of aspects to this difficulty. She is rare in that she is an independent intellectual, unaffiliated with any university. She is stubbornly resistant to categorization, and her career is full of contradiction. For example, in her 1964 essay "Against Interpretation" she wrote in exasperation that interpretation "tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable" (17). But of course Sontag relentlessly interprets, as any critic must.

In her book *On Photography* she occasionally adopted a moral stance; she took on Diane Arbus, for example, for her insistent photography of squalor. For Arbus, Sontag wrote grimly, "the camera is a kind of passport that annihilates moral boundaries" (41). But Sontag also retreated behind the safety glass of dispassionate intellectual discourse. She wrote: "To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to reexperience the unreality and remoteness of the real" (164). In the matter of style, Sontag is also contradictory. In "Against Interpretation" Sontag proposed: "Transparency is the highest, most liberating value in art" (22). Yet one of her favoured modes of writing is the epigram, that celebration of inversion. Here is an example of this epigrammatical quality from *On Photography*:

The primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that images possess the qualities of real things, but our inclination is to attribute to real things the qualities of an image. (158)

As a final and significant example of her contradictory nature, consider Sontag's identification with modernism.

Sontag uses modernism and modernity as fully functional contemporary ideas. She often allies herself with European modernist thinkers and artists of the early twentieth century who were "committed to the idea that the power of art is located in its power to negate," as she says in *Styles of Radical Will* in 1969 (8). I am aware that dissent can be a powerful tool of the artist. But Sontag's notion of the significance of negation goes beyond that: "All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no," she writes in *On Photography* (23). A human rights organization such as Amnesty International — which Sontag has been sometimes associated with — does say "no" to torture, I admit, but what takes precedence is that Amnesty says "yes" to the value of human life.

So what do we do with Sontag's modernist skepticism and alienation, and her apparently polemical essays — or partial polemics — about photography? At a human rights conference in 1981, Sontag said, "it is always better to believe that we are living in the last stage of human history, if only because that attitude makes you scrutinize what's going on much harder" (qtd. in Sayres 2). Frankly, those who believe they are living in the last stage of human history generally give into extremism or despair. Sontag's introduction to Annie Leibovitz's recent photograph collection *Women* is entitled "A photograph is not an opinion. Or is it?"

It is time to make up our minds. Sontag tentatively says in "Looking at War" that "perhaps the only people with the right to look at images of suffering of this extreme order are those who could do something to alleviate it...or those who could learn from it. The rest of us are voyeurs" (89). Perhaps? Absolutely we have no right merely to look at suffering. We must distance ourselves from just looking. We have given in to ideas that violence is acceptable, something that can be lived with, even enjoyed. Although I think she may not have intended it, Sontag has done a good deal to aestheticize and academicize violence. Sontag's conclusion to "Looking at War" — or may I say, her non-conclusion, her refusal to conclude after pages of earnest analysis of what it means to regard

the pain of others — is that even if we want to act, we will fail because if we haven't been in war ourselves, "we don't get it. We truly can't imagine what it was like" (98). Perhaps. But in the meantime, I believe we can refuse to look, unless we promise also to act against violence. Just looking, we give a kind of assent.

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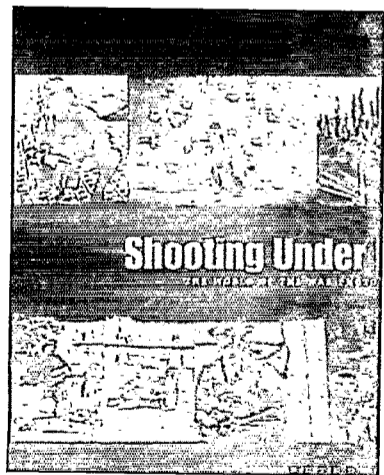
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S H O O T I N G U N D E R F I R E

THE WORLD OF THE WAR PHOTOGRAPHER, BY PETER HOWE NEW YORK. ARTISAN, 2002 224pp. \$3500

Shooting Under Fire is a series of ten monologues by ten different war photographers about what led them to become photographers and the changes they underwent while doing their jobs. The book is edited by Peter Howe, a former war photographer himself who then became a picture editor for the *New York Times Magazine*, the director of photography for *Life*, and finally vice president of photography at *Corbis*. Each double spread of the book is composed of one photograph that occupies 50 to 75% of the two pages, the rest being left for text.



Most of the images have been printed on the covers or in the pages of the most prestigious magazines and daily newspapers; their role is to provide a context for the information contained in a text that reads like the answers to a questionnaire

whose questions have been deleted, leaving only the answers the interviewee gave. Except for introductions of a few lines, sketching quick biographies, the texts are all from the photographers' mouths. They are remarkable for the way the selected war reporters express their thoughts, their goals, their experiences and what they learned from them. The selection consists of a wide range of individuals whose motives and thoughts about photographing wars cover many issues including the ways our cultures consume images of conflicts and their various consequences. From the book, two types of behaviors emerge: the combat photographers and the war photographers. The former group is apparently motivated by a thirst for action and adrenaline; a category whose members have a tendency to burn out rapidly, or to disappear on the front line (Robert Capa and Larry

Burrows being the obvious examples and role models). The latter category, one more favored by the editor and as such more represented, is comprised of men and women who sometimes followed their idealistic impulses, or their awareness of the tragedies of this world and thought that showing these tragedies to the general public would generate a better understanding and promote changes. Many cite the Vietnam War and the impact that images other photographers, from Eddie Adams to Nick Ut, and TV crews brought back as what triggered them to become war photographers.

The editor was also careful to include three women out of a list of ten including Patrick Chauvel, Philip Jones Griffiths, Ron Haviv, Catherine Leroy, Don McCullin, Susan Meiselas, Christopher Morris, James Natchwey, Maggie Steber, and Laurent van der Stockt. Of course, *Magnum* and *VII* are duly represented but there are also a few free-lancers, or some, like Patrick Chauvel, who went from agency to agency, from *Sipa* to *Sygma* to finally end up making documentaries and recently publishing a book, *Rapporteur de guerre*, a pun (*rapporter* in French = to bring back). All of them have been wounded, including was Chauvel, who went to war with a Leica M3 given to him by Gilles Caron, a co-founder of *Gamma* who died in 1970 in Cambodia, and who is probably the only one of the Vietnam War photographers still doing this job. In *Shooting Under Fire* Chauvel stands at one extreme of the spectrum with a rather crude approach both to the job and the medium. In an interview given last fall to the French daily, *Le Monde*, Chauvel declared that some of the photographs he saw published were "aestheticized butchery, while war, it's ugly, it stinks. The frozen corpses of Grozny are not aesthetic. Before, we photographed combat. Now they photograph hospitals and refugees. It facilitates aesthetic pictures that bore me to death the way too beautiful a movie does. Caring too much for the light takes meaning away from one's photographs." On the other end McCullin advocates the approach that his references, Eugene Smith and Ansel Adams (though he later turned to landscape photography), defined: "All I care are the negatives correctly exposed. There's no point getting killed and not get your exposure right and the last rolls of film they find on you are slightly underexposed." His images, along with Natch-

wey's, or Haviv's, or Jones Griffiths's, and many others stand in our memories not just because of their content but because of their form as well. Capa's falling Spanish Republican soldier or D-Day images of GIs still in the cold water of Normandy, Eddie Adams's execution of a Vietcong prisoner, Nick Ut's little running napalmed girl, Rosenthal's Iwo Jima flag, are clearly implanted in our minds, easily recalled in their graphic details partly because of the strength of their compositions — simple, efficient, and easily identifiable. In order not to repeat the past and its errors, we have to know and remember it, and most of the photographers in this book are aware of this aspect of their missions — being the witness, the messenger, and sometimes, the conscience.

Once picked up, *Shooting Under Fire* is a book that is hard to put down. All of the interviewed have taken extreme risks to bring back images that are becoming harder and harder to take, either because most armies and governments want to control their images, do not want their PR to be compromised by the "wrong" picture, and sometimes go as far as to give orders to "shoot the messengers" (read what Catherine Leroy has to say about this, a passage that honors Peter Howe's integrity as an editor even when the newspaper he worked for is under attack) or "embed" them; or when, as illustrated in Lebanon (Beirut), Chechnya, Croatia, or Kosovo, the situation is so volatile and unpredictable that every second can reverberate and end with a sniper's indiscriminate shot. These extreme experiences trigger primitive instincts as well as deep reflections on the definition of war, photography, and human nature. No one came back intact. Still, pressing the shutter release is probably the last wall these men and women have built against helplessness and cynicism, their answer to the apathy that "modern" consumerism usually pours out of the TV screens of the "civilized" world. Some gave up in a self-protective move. All of them gave compelling testimonies whose depth and scope are enhanced by pertinent editing. *Shooting under Fire* is and will stand as one of the best books on the subject, combining first-hand experiences and eloquent discourses.

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