Sontag's Work Through the Lens of Others

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Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* leaves room for discussion amongst scholars to debate as it introduces the degree of vulgarity a published photograph contains based on the subject's complexion. Sontag additionally claims that photographs cannot be truly experienced by those who view it secondhand because of the viewer's disconnect created by emotional and physical distance. The positionality of these claims vary depending on the authors' ethical standpoint in regards to censorship and manipulation of images.

Abigail Soloman-Godeau agrees with Sontag's point about the plethora of reactions from different people. She argues that each person's moral compass will be different based on their upbringing, learned behavior, and surroundings. "How each of us responds to the images of the pain of others is never only a question of individual subjectivity, but is shaped by our political culture as well as our ideological formation."[1] To someone who has grown up with a sheltered life the idea of publishing a gory war photo is horrid, but to a war general the photo is a familiar everyday sight. Sontag acknowledges these ideas briefly as she discusses the concept of distance and the role it plays in publication. Similarly, Maria Baaz and Maria Stern discuss this topic with the aspect of composing images of non-white females in foreign countries after an instance of sexual assault. "The often intimate representations of injured bodies and suffering are composed in a way that would be quite unthinkable if those depicted were survivors of sexual violence in most countries in Europe and the USA."[2] This lack of censorship clearly demonstrates an issue in today's society where we have allowed ourselves to deem war photos of those who don't look like us acceptable to publish. Baaz and Stern would agree with Soloman-Godeau in saying that distance creates a racial construct for ethics and morality by perpetuating non-white subjects'

[1] Abigail Soloman-Godeau, *Dispatches from the Image Wars*, (Aperature Foundation Inc., 2004), 78.
[2] Maria Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon for War, (Zed Book Ltd., 2013), 168.*

subjugation in photographs. Sontag elaborates on this message and the ideals of the rich world that go unquestioned. "The more remote or exotic the place, the more we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying."[3]

The sources mentioned consist of a variety of topics ranging from reviews to rants, but by far the most original viewpoint belongs to Alex Danchev who wrote on a first-person account of war photography and the experiences that come along with it. More specifically, how people reacted to those that had this profession for a living. "And there were plenty of people who believed, finally, that we were nothing more than glorified war profiteers. And perhaps we were, those of us who didn't get killed or wounded or otherwise fucked up."[4] This claim of seeing the other side of the story allows the viewer to have a deeper understanding of what goes into the capturing of an image in a war zone. Danchev then illustrates this point of the other perspective further by discussing that cropped images or a sliver of the truth is better for the viewer than seeing the real thing. This, in itself, alludes to the concept of censorship from the very beginning, the battlefield where the photographers decide what to capture. They might manipulate the angle of the shot or rather find a specific subject to photograph as a means to change the meaning for the viewer. Though, Baaz and Stern could take offense to this statement and deem Danchev a sub-version of an oppressor by invading the land that does not belong to him for profit.

To further the discussion of photo manipulation, specifically related to that of the internet and modern day media, Stacy Alaimo describes photographs as a means to defend claims made by big name companies in court, and capture flaws in high power systems. "The internet has made it much easier to disseminate photographs and videos of evidence as wrongdoing."[5] With

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[3] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003), 129.
[4] Alex Danchev, *War Stories*, (*The Journal of Military History*, January 2005), 213.
[5] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, (Indiana University Press, 2010), 71.

the ability to manipulate and doctor photos now more than ever, Alaimo warns people on what

Sontag refers to as the "transparent account of reality."[6] She claims that we as a society have

have more power than ever with what we can do online and how gullible people may be.

Danchev would agree with this statement and argue that the transparent account of reality has its

limit, and that it must be broken to reveal acceptable images for use by the media. Sontag's idea

of transparency resides in how honest we are in sharing these photos and the editing we have

done to them prior to using them or distributing them altogether. In the same vein, Susan

Carrtuthers recognizes this idea and furthers the thinking by connecting it to journalism.

"Photojournalism and news broadcasts routinely surround images with verbal commentary,

disproving the popular adage that images speak for themselves."[7] In covering what the image

represents with possible falsified information or contextual biased information during a news

broadcast, the emotional meaning of the image or photograph is lessened significantly.

Soloman-Godeau might disagree with Carruthers and find the idea of fake news appalling

because it takes away from the cultural aspect of news and the sub-pockets of society that it

affects.

Sontag's main point of distance and emotion being connected is encapsulated by Cecile

Van de Voore who wholeheartedly agrees with Sontag's idea of viewing from afar. "Viewing

such photographs makes us indirect victims of the pain they depict or symbolize. We ought to be

physically and psychologically removed, yet not detached."[8] To continue on the subject of

morality, David Campbell touches on the sense of emotion but rather than through the lens of

distance, it covers the repercussions of overuse of photography. "This sense of the continuing

[6] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2003), 79.
[7] Susan Carruthers, *Media at War*, (Macmillan Education UK, n.d.), 328.
[8] Cécile Van de Voore, *Review: Regarding the Pain of Others*, (*Crime Media Culture* March, 2005), 122..

power of photographs to provoke runs counter to the common view that proliferating pictures of atrocity creates compassion fatigue."[9] Compassion fatigue refers to the shared trauma one has after overexposure to traumatic events. The overuse of horrid images does not in fact make the situation at hand more dire, but ruins the true meaning to the viewer and turns them away from the images as it creates a psychological burden for them. Alaimo would concur with Campbell and use compassion fatigue as a valid argument to be demonstrated in the courtroom and as an argument against the doctoring of images of war.

John Schilb, who recognizes the beauty of Sontag's work, urges her viewers to truly process her words. "It forces her readers to think about photographs rather than simply behold them. 'Regarding' comes to mean active contemplation instead of an awestruck gaze."[10]

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[9] David Campbell, *Horrific Blindness: Images of Death in Contemporary Media*, (Journal for Cultural Research, May 24, 2006), 67.
[10] John Schilb, *Review: Regarding the Pain of Others,* (*JAC*, 2004), 512.

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