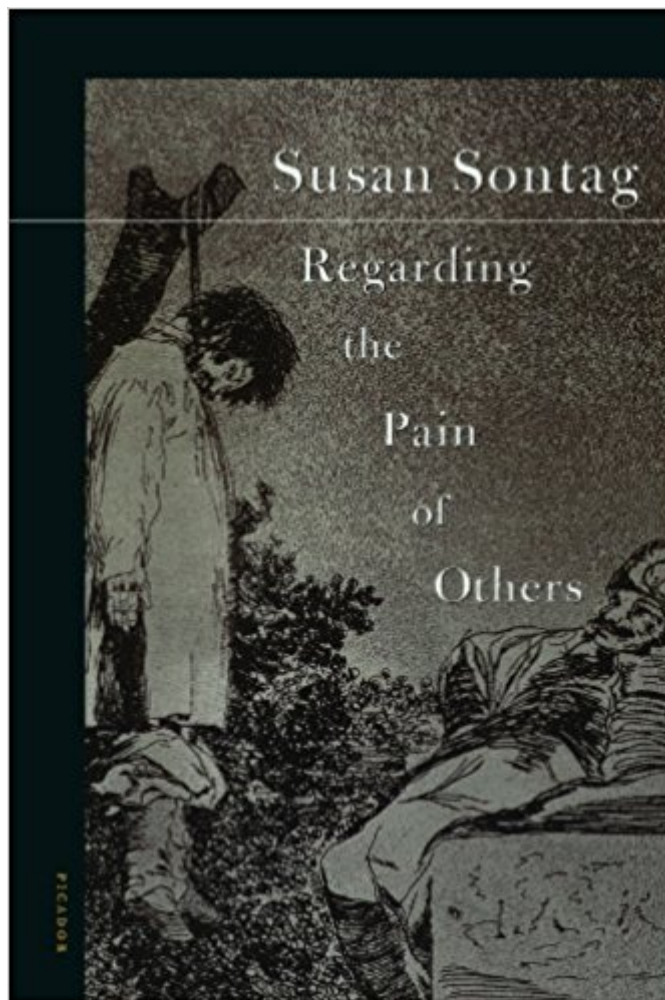


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# Regarding The Pain Of Others



## Synopsis

Twenty-five years after her classic *On Photography*, Susan Sontag returns to the subject of visual representations of war and violence in our culture today. How does the spectacle of the sufferings of others (via television or newsprint) affect us? Are viewers inured--or incited--to violence by the depiction of cruelty? In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag takes a fresh look at the representation of atrocity--from Goya's *The Disasters of War* to photographs of the American Civil War, lynchings of blacks in the South, and the Nazi death camps, to contemporary horrific images of Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Israel and Palestine, and New York City on September 11, 2001. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* Susan Sontag once again changes the way we think about the uses and meanings of images in our world, and offers an important reflection about how war itself is waged (and understood) in our time.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Twenty-six years after the publication of her influential collection of essays *On Photography* (1977), Sontag (In America) reconsiders ideas that are "now fast approaching the status of platitudes," especially the view that our capacity to respond to images of war and atrocity is being dulled by "the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images" in our rapaciously media-driven culture. Sontag opens by describing Virginia Woolf's essay on the roots of war, "Three Guineas," in which Woolf described a set of gruesome photographs of mutilated bodies and buildings destroyed during the Spanish Civil War. Woolf wondered if there truly can be a "we" between man and woman in matters of war. Sontag sets out to reopen and enlarge the question. "No `we' should be taken for granted

when the subject is looking at other people's pain," she writes. The "we" that Sontag has come to be much more aware of in the decades since *On Photography* is the world of the rich. She has come to doubt her youthful contention that repeated exposure to images of suffering necessarily shrivels sympathy, and she doubts even more the radical yet influential spin that others put on this critique-that reality itself has become a spectacle. "To speak of reality becoming a spectacle... universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world...." Sontag reminds us that sincerity can turn a mere spectator into a witness, and that it is the heart rather than fancy rhetoric that can lead the mind to understanding. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The impact of violent images: Sontag's first full-length work on imagery since her acclaimed *On Photography* 25 years ago. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Compelling and eye opening. Highly recommend.

A fine book with many other very good reviews of its content. This book is very available to new readers in the subject and is written in such a way to be easily read from cover to cover in an engaging way.

I love it. Thanks to , otherwise it was not possible to buy the book.

Great, interesting, and easy read.

At first sight you would think this book is on politics and on political matters. If you read carefully, you recognize, S. Sontag developed deep theory of human symbolic activity - how we, humans, produce pictures, what are pictures for and about, how we use them. At the same moment, the book is not too "philosophical", i.e., not close enough to reality. It is deeply human enterprise, full of emotions and compassion. Sometimes you will not be sure what you should like more - Sontag's deep human feelings or her precise interpretations of images and of current society. I would fully recommend the book to anybody - but you will love it much more if you knew a lot on political history and on art before. In any case, the book could be of great use for novice in art theory too.

I think this book would be more aptly called "Regarding War Photography" or "War Photography as Metaphor" (keeping Sontag-style titles intact). Unfortunately misnamed, this is a book about the effect of war photography on the viewer. It's about representation and what the image means to us, what the absence of an image does or doesn't mean to us. Not a book about the pain of others, it demonstrates how images of others' pain shape our views of their pain. Sontag writes a brief history of war imagery, beginning with the advent of photography (the result of the amount of time required to take a picture) to faster and lighter cameras (likely to capture, rather than to re-recreate or to show only war's aftermath), to television, to the present (the internet, constant access and the expectation of constant access to images). She goes back, pre-photography, to discuss a few specific paintings that depict war or other suffering. She describes the methodology of the photographs--often naming specific images and photographers--analyzes their impact, how the images are viewed during the war and, because of the images, the war thought of by future generations. Her interpretations are largely familiar and unchanged since "On Photography," but "Regarding the Pain of Others" discusses only war photography. That her analyses are expected doesn't detract from them; Sontag's input about this topic is valuable -- some early war photographs are staged; specific atrocities have become more urgent or real after being viewed; photojournalism is given a special veracity unlike other art forms; images shape our memories of wars that took place in prior generations. Sontag is clear about disbelieving in "collective memory" and states that it is the artifacts, photographs, we are left with that determine our feelings. Worth seeking out is a shorter piece Sontag wrote called "Regarding the Torture of Others" (quite true to its title) after the Abu Ghirab prison photographs were released. In a way, it's a finer example of what this book achieves, though far more condensed. Toward the end, she revisits "On Photography." She's recently re-read it and isn't sure if she agrees with certain elements. She debates herself in a way, though in my opinion, only in the smaller scheme of her general argument about representation and its relationship to fact and result. On a personal level, I was glad to see her revisit "On Photography." It read as a celebration of her groundbreaking work and ways of thinking about photographic representation. The circular nature, yet different topics, discussed at the start and near end of her brilliant life and career rendered this, for me, satisfying and somewhat sad. I will miss her flow of opinions.

When Susan Sontag prepared and wrote her newest book REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS, she probably did not know that at the time of its release to the public the world would once again be at war. Sontag remains one of our more important American philosophers and commentators and this

book addresses the representation of pain, war, agony, and injustice as captured by painters from Velasquez, Goya, Callot and others to photographers Matthew Brady, Capa, Bourke-White et al. While she sees it as the responsibility for these people to capture the horrors of war in order that 'we' as observers will be informed and thus never allow such things to continue, she also now addresses how important it is for us to not have these images edited from public consumption - a very current feature that we are now seeing (or not seeing) in the TV and newspaper versions of the Iraqi war. Sontag gives evidence that some of the more sensational photographs from the Civil War and the Vietnam War were actually staged; corpses were added or altered or assassinations were set for the photojournalist much as the paintings of the 19th century were modified to gain impact. She shows that the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps were best captured by the untrained camera rather than the images made famous by Bourke-White et al, manipulating the light and position of vantage to play on the message instead of simply reporting it. She stimulates our anger when she reports such incidences during the Gulf War as "American television viewers weren't allowed to see footage acquired by NBC (which the network then declined to run) of what superiority could wreak: the fate of thousands of Iraqi conscripts who, having fled Kuwait City at the end of the war, on February 27, were carpet bombed with explosives, napalm, radioactive DU (depleted uranium) rounds, and cluster bombs as they headed north, in convoys and on foot, on the road to Basra, Iraq - a slaughter notoriously described by one American officer as a 'turkey shoot'". She shows that atrocities in foreign places are 'more acceptable' to view than cloistered photographic documents of our own history of the abuse of slaves, the poor, AIDS victims here in this country. We can construct Museums for the reminders of the German atrocities of genocide, crematoriums, starvation etc, but we do not have a single Museum to remind us of the American abuse of African American slaves (lynchings, beatings, prisons etc). There are many quotes to highlight; "It is because a war, any war, doesn't seem as if it can be stopped that people become less responsive to the horrors. Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do - but who is that 'we'? - and nothing 'they' can do either - and who are 'they'? - then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic." Sontag urges us to be more in tune, more involved, more sensitive to the visual images that report the pain of others. "We can't imagine how dreadful, how terrifying war is; and how normal it becomes. Can't understand, can't imagine. That's what every soldier, and every journalist and aid worker and independent observer who has put in time under fire, and had the luck to elude the death that struck down others nearby, stubbornly feels. And they are right." This is the powerful last

paragraph in this intensely moving book. It is a shame that some of the photographs and paintings to which she refers could not have been inserted in this book, but even without the visuals, this is a book that reveals myriad secrets and truths. Highly recommended reading.

I hope I can finish reading it soon. It is like a long essay and the book is very light to carry.

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