theories and methodologies

Photography, War, Outrage

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THE PHENOMENON OF "EMBEDDED REPORTING" SEEMED TO EMERGE WITH THE INVASION OF IRAQ IN MARCH 2003. IT IS DEFINED AS THE situation in which journalists agree to report only from the perspective established by military and governmental authorities. They traveled only on certain trucks, looked only at certain scenes, and relayed home only images and narratives of certain kinds of action. Embedded reporting implies that this mandated perspective would not itself become the topic of reporters who were offered access to the war on the condition that their gaze remained restricted to the established parameters of designated action. I want to suggest that embedded reporting has taken place in less explicit ways as well: one example is the agreement of the media not to show pictures of the war dead, our own or their own, on the grounds that that would be anti-American. Journalists and newspapers were denounced for showing coffins of the American war dead shrouded in flags. Such images should not be seen because they might arouse certain kinds of sentiments; the mandating of what could be seen—a concern with regulating content—was supplemented by control over *the perspective* from which the action and destruction of war could be seen. Another implicit occurrence of embedded reporting is in the Abu Ghraib photographs. The camera angle, the frame, the posed subjects all suggest that those who took the photographs were actively involved in the perspective of the war, elaborating that perspective and even giving it further validity.

In her final book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag remarks that this practice of embedded reporting begins earlier, with the coverage of the British campaign in the Falklands in 1982, where only two photojournalists were permitted to enter the region and no television broadcasts were allowed (65). Since that time, journalists have increasingly agreed to comply with the exigencies of embedded reporting to secure access to the action. But what is the action to which access is then secured? In the two Iraq wars, the visual perspective that the Department of Defense permitted to the

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media actively structured the cognitive apprehension of the war. And though restricting how any of us may see is not exactly the same as dictating a story line, it is a way of interpreting in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception.

In my view, it won't do to say, as Sontag repeatedly does throughout her writings on photography, that the photograph cannot by itself provide an interpretation, that we need captions and written analysis to supplement the discrete and punctual image, which can only affect us and never offer a full understanding of what we see. Although she is right that we need such captions and analyses, she nevertheless leads us into another bind if we agree that the photograph is not an interpretation. She writes that whereas both prose and painting can be interpretive, photography is merely "selective" (6), suggesting that it gives us a partial imprint of reality. Later in the same text, she elaborates: "while a painting, even one that achieves photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than an emanation (light waves reflected by objects)—a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be" (154).

Sontag argued that photographs can move us momentarily but that they do not have the power to build an interpretation. If a photograph becomes effective in informing or moving us politically, it is only because the photograph is received within the context of a relevant political consciousness. For Sontag, photographs render truths in a dissociated moment and so offer us only fragmented or dissociated truths. As a result, they are always atomic, punctual, and discrete. Photographs lack narrative coherence, in her view, and such coherence can alone supply the needs of the understanding. Narrative coherence might be a standard for some sorts of interpretation, but surely not for all. Indeed, if the notion of a "visual interpretation" is not to become an oxymoron, it seems important to consider that the photograph, in framing reality, is already interpreting what will count within the frame; this act of delimitation is surely interpretive, as are the effects of angle, focus, and light.

For our purposes, it makes sense to consider that the mandated visual image produced by embedded reporting, the one that complies with state and defense department requirements, builds an interpretation. We can even say that the political consciousness that moves the photographer to accept those restrictions and yield the compliant photograph is embedded in the frame itself. We do not have to have a caption or a narrative at work to understand that a political background is being explicitly formulated and renewed through the frame. In this sense, the frame takes part in the interpretation of the war compelled by the state; it is not just a visual image awaiting its interpretation; it is itself interpreting, actively, even forcibly.

The question that concerned Sontag in *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* was whether photographs still had the power—or ever did have the power—to communicate the suffering of others in such a way that viewers might be prompted to alter their political assessment of the current war. For photographs to communicate effectively, they must have a transitive function: they must act on viewers in ways that bear directly on the judgments that viewers formulate about the world. Sontag concedes that photographs are transitive. They do not merely portray or represent—they relay affect. In fact, in times of war, this transitive affectivity of the photograph may overwhelm and numb its readers; she is less sure whether a photograph can incite and motivate its viewers to change a point of view or to assume a new course of action.

In the late 1970s, Sontag argued that the photographic image no longer had the power to enrage, to incite. She claimed then that the visual representation of suffering had become

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clichéd, that we had been bombarded by sensationalist photography and, as a result, our capacity for ethical responsiveness had diminished. In her reconsideration of that thesis twenty-six years later in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she is more ambivalent about the status of the photograph, which, she concedes, can and must represent human suffering, teach us how to feel across global distances, establish through the visual frame a proximity to suffering that keeps us alert to the human cost of war, famine, and destruction in places that may be far from us geographically and culturally. For photographs to invoke a moral response, they must not only maintain the capacity to shock but also appeal to our sense of moral obligation. She continues to fear that photography has lost its capacity to shock, that shock itself has become a kind of cliché, and that photography tends to aestheticize suffering to satisfy a consumer demand—this last function of contemporary photography makes it inimical to ethical responsiveness and political interpretation alike.

In her last book, Sontag still faults photography for not being writing; it lacks narrative continuity and remains fatally linked to the momentary. Photographs cannot produce ethical pathos in us, she remarks, or if they do, it is only for a moment: we see something atrocious and move on a moment later. The pathos conveyed by narrative forms, however, "does not wear out" (83). "Narratives can make us understand: photographs do something else. They haunt us" (89). Is she right? Is it correct to say that narratives do not haunt and that photographs fail to make us understand? To the extent that photographs convey affect, they seem to invoke a kind of responsiveness that threatens the only model of understanding that Sontag trusts. Indeed, despite the overwhelming power of the photographs of napalm burning on the skins of crying and running children during the Vietnam War (an image whose power Sontag countenances), Sontag resolves that "a narrative seems more likely to be effective than an image" to help mobilize us against a war (122).

Interestingly, although narratives might mobilize us, suggesting that they have the power to move us in a sustaining way and to alter our interpretation of the conditions of the war, photographs are needed as evidence of crimes of war. In fact, Sontag argues that the contemporary notion of atrocity requires photographic evidence: if there is no photographic evidence, there is no atrocity. The only way to support the claim that an atrocity has taken place is to supply photographic evidence. But if this is true, then not only is the photograph built into the notion of atrocity but the evidence works to establish a given interpretation and judgment as true. Sontag would doubtless rejoin that judgment is the kind of interpretation, a verbal and narrative one, that seeks recourse to the photograph to substantiate its claims. But even the most transparent of documentary images is framed, and framed for a purpose, carrying that purpose within its frame and implementing that purpose through the frame. If we take such a purpose to be *interpretive*, then it would appear that the photograph still interprets the reality that it registers, and this dual function is preserved even when it works as evidence for another interpretation that takes place in written or verbal form. After all, the photograph does not merely refer to the acts of atrocity but also builds and confirms these acts for those who might name them as such.

Something of a persistent split takes place for Sontag between being affected and being able to think and understand; this difference is represented in the differing effects of photography and prose. She writes, "[S]entiment is more likely to crystallize around a photograph than around a verbal slogan." Crystallizing our sentiment, however, is not the same as affecting our capacity to judge and understand events of the world or to act toward them. When sentiment crystallizes, it seems to forestall thinking. Moreover, senti-

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ment crystallizes not around the event that is photographed but around the photographic image. Sontag voices her concern that the photograph substitutes for the event to such an extent that the photograph structures memory more effectively than reflection or understanding (89). The problem is less with the "loss of reality" this entails (the photograph still registers the real, if obliquely) than with the triumph of a fixed sentiment over more clearly cognitive capacities.

It seems to me, though, that the various forms of embedded reporting suggest the opposite. If the photograph no longer has the power to excite and enrage us in such a way that we might change our political views and conducts, then Donald Rumsfeld's response to the photos depicting the torture in the Abu Ghraib prison does not make sense. When, for instance, Rumsfeld claimed that to show all the photos of torture and humiliation and rape would allow them "to define us" as Americans, he attributed to photography an enormous power to construct national identity. The photographs would not just communicate something atrocious but also make our capacity for atrocity into a defining concept of Americanness.

It seems clear by the final essay of *Regarding the Pain of Others* that Sontag has changed her mind about at least two points. The first is that photographs still maintain the power to shock us. We are not fully immune to their effects. The second is that the affective transitivity of the photograph has its political uses. Indeed, in the final chapter of the book, the narrative voice is shaken. In an emotional, nearly exasperated outcry, one distinctly different from her usual measured rationalism, Sontag remarks, "Let the atrocious images haunt us" (115). Whereas earlier she diminishes the power of the photograph by saying it only has the power to impress us with its haunting effects (in contrast, narrative makes us understand), now it seems that some understanding is to be wrought from this haunting. We see the photograph and cannot let go of the image that is transitively relayed to us. It brings us close to an understanding of the fragility and mortality of human life, the stakes of death in the scene of politics. She seemed to know this already in *On Photography* when she wrote, "Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading toward their own destruction, and this link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people" (70).

As much as she disdained those who are always shocked anew by the atrocities of war (what does one think war is?), she is surely equally alarmed by coldness in the face of such images. She writes that the photograph can be an "invitation . . . to pay attention, reflect . . . examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers" (*Regarding the Pain* 117). In the increasing outrage and exasperation she expressed in her last book, in her articles on 9/11, and in her essay on Abu Ghraib, "Regarding the Torture of Others," one can sense the vacillation she undergoes—perhaps we all undergo—in the face of the photograph. At times her rage seems to be directed against the photograph not just for making her feel outrage but also for failing to show her how to transform that affect into effective political action. She allows that she has in the past turned against the photograph with moralistic denunciation because of its capacity to enrage without directing the rage. Her complaint is that it arouses our moral sentiments at the same time that it confirms our political paralysis.

In "Regarding the Torture of Others," though, she is aware that Rumsfeld turns against the photograph, as if the photograph were a weapon of war turned against America, and there she clearly exonerates the photograph from fault: "The administration's initial response was to say that the president was shocked and disgusted by the photographs—as if the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict."

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She rages against the photograph as she does for depicting an injustice that she does not know how best to oppose. Just as she rages against the photograph for making her feel a rage she does not know how to direct, so her frustration with the photograph frustrates her. To be, as it were, a white liberal who worries the question of what one can politically do is to be self-preoccupied, guilty, introspective, even narcissistic, and so once again to fail to find a way to respond effectively to the suffering of others. What she forgets is that she is writing about them and that her writings become one of the most honest and trenchant public criticisms of these wars. She forgets what she offers.

At the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a museum piece by Jeff Wall allows her to think through this issue. At this moment, we can see her turn both from the photograph and from the political exigencies of war to a museum exhibition that gives her time and space for the kind of thinking and writing she treasures. She confirms her position as an intellectual while showing us how Wall's piece might help us to reflect more carefully about war. In this context, Sontag asks whether the tortured can and do look back, and if they do, what do they see? She was faulted for saying that the photographs taken in Abu Ghraib were photographs of "us," and some critics suggested that this was again a kind of self-preoccupation that paradoxically and painfully took the place of a reflection on the suffering of others. But what she asked was "whether the nature of the policies prosecuted by this administration and the hierarchies deployed to carry them out makes such acts [of torture] likely. Considered in this light, the photographs are us" ("Regarding the Torture").

Perhaps she means that in seeing the photos, we see ourselves seeing, that we are the photographers to the extent that we live within the visual norms in which the prisoners are rendered destitute and abject, sometimes clearly beaten to death. If we see as the photographer sees, then we consecrate and consume the act. But Sontag asks us to notice that the dead are "supremely *uninterested* in the living" (125)—they do not seek our gaze. This rebuff to our visual consumerism, which comes from the shrouded head, the averted glance, the glazed eyes—this indifference to us performs an autocritique of the role of the photograph in media consumption. Although we might want to see, the photograph tells us clearly that the dead do not care whether we see. For Sontag, this is the ethical force of the photograph, to mirror and to call to a halt the final narcissism of our habits of visual consumption.

She may be right, but perhaps our *inability* to see what we see is also of critical concern. To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter. And if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war, it is to thematize the forcible frame agreeably and eagerly adopted by journalists and photographers who understand themselves aligned with the war effort. What we see in the Abu Ghraib photographs is that photographers and subjects can memorialize this kind of seeing, in which there is no moral outrage in the face of human suffering (in which there is no "human" there, suffering), the clear belief that the subjects deserve their torture and their death and that those who deliver this torture, along with those who commemorate the deed in the photograph, are doing justice the American way. It is not that some stray people in the military or security contractors failed to see, to feel, to maintain a moral perception of other persons as persons. This not seeing in the midst of seeing reiterates the visual norm that is itself a national norm. The Abu Ghraib photographs do not only represent us; they also build an interpretation of who we are—this Rumsfeld understood—which is why those efforts to interpret their frame, their purpose, the ethos they convey are criti-

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cal contributions to this political battle that is taking place in part through the medium of the visual image. Sontag may think that only written interpretations give meaning to photographs that enrage and haunt us, and hers surely do; but for us to respond to those images with outrage, to be haunted by the torture depicted there, we must also read the interpretation compelled and enacted by the visual frame, coercive and consensually established. There is no reason to be "against interpretation" in the name of visual experience any more than there is reason to be in favor of interpretation in the face of visual experience. Grief, rage, and outrage may be born precisely in what we see, since what we come to see is a frame, an interpretation of reality, that, with her, we refuse.

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