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Reader response revision

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Images of Suffering: Look Deeply and Think

We see human suffering images every day, not only on the news, but also on social media sites and in magazines. While we see these images all the time, how often do you stop to think about what you're seeing? Looking deeper at human suffering in photographs is the topic of two essays in the textbook *Convergences*, edited by Robert Atwan. "The Boston Photographs," by Nora Ephron, and "Watching Suffering from a Distance," by Susan Sontag, both conclude that it's important to witness suffering, but they provide different reasons why.

In "The Boston Photographs," Nora Ephron discusses how photographs can cause controversy, not only due to their content, but also how those images are displayed. Ephron refers to three photos taken in Boston by Stanley Forman, depicting a fireman, a woman, and a child who were standing on a fire escape. The first of the three photos has the fireman, the woman, and the child on the fire escape. They are in front of a building that is full of smoke and the fireman is holding on to the woman with one arm while trying to grab the approaching rescue ladder with the other. The child is standing between the woman's legs with the woman's arm across its chest. The next photo shows the fire escape breaking loose from the wall just as the fireman manages to grab the rescue ladder. The woman is holding on to the fireman's legs, trying

not to fall, while the child is sliding down the broken fire escape. The last photo is of the woman and child in midair falling toward the ground. Ephron reveals that the photo caption reads, “the woman, Diana Bryant, nineteen, died in the fall. The child landed on the woman’s body and lived” (244).

Ephron goes on to explain the reaction readers had to these photos, which were published in over 400 newspapers. Ephron notes that almost all the responses that the editors received were negative. One reader called it, “Assigning the agony of a human being in terror of imminent death to the status of a slide-show act” (Ephron 245). Although most were negative, some defended the photos. Thomas Keevil was one; he worked at the *Costa Mesa Daily Pilot*. Thomas printed a ballot so readers could decide what they would have done if they had the choice to print the photos (246). The reaction from the viewers was split, but was that due to the images in the photos or the way they were displayed when printed? Ephron brings up how the photos were displayed and the words used to describe them. Ephron says, “When I talked to the editors...they used words like ‘interesting’ and ‘riveting’ and ‘gripping’ to describe them” (247). Ephron suggests that the viewer’s reaction to the photos might stem more from how the editors have decided to display them as publicity for fire safety.

Ephron then shifts into a discussion of how papers won’t usually print photos of death. Only in unique situations does the media decide to show us something that, in fact, happens in everyone’s life. Ephron explains that the photos printed didn’t cause any dramatic changes, such as people running out to check their fire escapes, and cannot be seen as national-news worthy because they didn’t cause an emergency fire-safety program or any other kind of fire-safety awareness. Ephron concludes, “They deserved to be printed because they are great pictures, breathtaking pictures of something that happened” (249). The fact that the photos cover a unique

situation justify their being printed. Why not print death, though? It is a part of life—why hide it?

Susan Sontag's essay, "Watching Suffering from a Distance," was paired with before and after photos in My Lai when a group of U.S. troops massacred the entire village during the Vietnam War. The "before" photo has the entire village huddled together with a look of absolute fear on their faces. There are women, children, and men of all ages in the village. The "after" photo on the bottom is the whole village laid out on the road dead. Included are a photo of a child and man dead side-by-side, away from the rest of the group, as if they were trying to escape and didn't make it before they were gunned down by the U.S. troops like the rest of the villagers. These images that were matched up with Sontag's essay by the editor of the textbook they appear in support the points she makes about how images of human suffering are perceived by other humans.

Sontag starts by expressing how adults don't have the right to remain oblivious to human cruelties visited upon other humans. Sontag says, "No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia" (437). Sontag explains later how people still try to ignore the suffering of others. Sontag also brings up how there are many images today that show us what humans are capable of. She explains that with all the devices on which news and media can be seen, it's almost impossible to miss it.

Sontag leads into how some people are more interested in human suffering than others and how images of suffering can be an encouragement to pay attention. Sontag says, "Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by power" (438). Sontag explains how some say images are a way to watch suffering from a distance, but is it not the same as being there and

watching it for yourself from the side? The only difference between being there and seeing an image of the event is that, with a photo, you can close your eyes and block out the image, but if you're there where the action is, you can't block out the other senses being triggered around you. Sontag expresses this by saying, "We have lids on our eyes, we do not have doors on our ears" (439). With humans having the free will to look away from an image, is an image really as effective as being there?

Sontag wraps up the essay with the point that society tends to think it is morally wrong to watch suffering. Sontag points out how photography offers an abstract to reality, and many people believe it's not morally right to experience the suffering of others through it. Sontag's conclusion: "There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking" (439). Sontag wants people who look at photos to take in all that is there and to see what humans are capable of doing. On top of that, think about the image being seen and ask "how did this happen" or "what caused this" or even "is there any way to prevent it from happening again?"

When considering Ephron's and Sontag's writings, one must consider photos of suffering and death and how they are printed and then perceived by readers. The writers' views are very different, but they do share a couple similarities and some of the same concerns about ethical issues that come with printing photos of death or suffering.

First, both Ephron and Sontag explain how reactions to photos vary depending on how the photos are displayed and what they depict. Both writers examine whether printing photos of death or suffering is morally wrong and an invasion of privacy. The points Ephron and Sontag make on these issues are strong and very much alike.

Both Ephron and Sontag show that photos of suffering or death cause a reaction in the viewers of the photos and how that reaction can change. Ephron shows how reader-reaction changes by saying, “It should be clear that the phone calls and letters and one editor’s own reaction were occasioned by one factor alone: the death of the woman. Obviously, had she survived the fall, no one would have protested; the picture would have had a completely different impact” (248). The narrative, in other words, would have changed from disaster to rescue, from death to life; this positive shift would increase reader acceptance. Sontag claims reader reaction changes from person to person, but also that “Some people’s suffering have a lot more intrinsic interest to an audience than the suffering of others” (438).

Sontag and Ephron also make valid points about how images of certain events can be seen as morally wrong. Sontag describes how photos of death or suffering can be negatively perceived: “It’s felt that there is something morally wrong with the abstract of reality offered by photography; that one has no right to experience the suffering of others at a distance, denuded of its raw power: that we pay too high a human price for those hitherto admired qualities of visions—the standing back from the aggressiveness of the world which frees us for observation and for elective attention” (439). Ephron goes a different route to express how photos of death or suffering can be seen as wrong or an invasion of privacy with quotes from the readers: “‘Invading the privacy of death.’ ‘Cheap sensationalism.’ ‘A tawdry way to sell newspapers.’” (245).

Is it wrong to show something that is part of life? Is death not something that is a part of every life? Or is it less painful to turn a blind eye or get upset with the ones who printed the photo?

Both Ephron and Sontag express important ethical issues. Sontag seeks to open the reader's eyes to a deeper insight of how photos of death and suffering affect viewers. As mentioned, Sontag says that adults can't be ignorant to the cruelty of humans against one another. "Let the atrocious images haunt us" (437). Sontag's essay is amazing, especially the way she goes over the perception of printed photos and how to think about and learn from the images as well as understand the views and opinions the photos might create after being printed and seen by the readers.

If readers were to examine printed photos of death and suffering with an open mind, to think about what the photo can teach and not just have a negative reaction, it may result in a deeper understanding and in turn will make death seem more real and close to home. Sontag explains how photos can show what humans are capable of and how to learn from them. Sontag says, "It is not a defect that we are not seared, that we do not suffer enough, when we see these images. Neither is the photograph supposed to repair our ignorance about the history and causes of suffering it picks out and frames. Such image cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by power. Who caused what the picture shows? Who is responsible? Is it excusable? Was it inevitable?" (438). Sontag wants the viewers of images to think more deeply about the story behind the image instead of just reacting to it.

On top of addressing how to learn from photos, Sontag also touches on how readers' opinions vary from image to image and how images give a choice. Sontag explains that with the enhancements in technology, news is now worldwide and images of suffering in places far from home are now more accessible, but they are not causing a significant effect on what's causing the suffering. Sontag says, "That news about war is now disseminated worldwide does not mean that

the capacity to think about the suffering of people far away is significantly larger” (438). The only thing images of suffering around the world produce is momentary compassion for what is happening in the photo as well as a relief that it is so far away from the reader.

Sontag does a remarkable job explaining the ethical issues that come with printing images of suffering or death. She also tries to change the way photos are viewed by the reader and tries to improve the way images of suffering and death are perceived. As viewers, we need to take the extra time to think that maybe photos can be used as a teaching method. Hopefully, one day Sontag’s hard work will pay off and photos of all kinds of events, good and bad, can be printed and viewed in a sophisticated manner.

There is no doubt that the photos of the massacre on the village of My Lai included with “Watching Suffering from a Distance” were disturbing, as well as the photos of the people on the fire escape from “the Boston photographs.” Both sets of images got me thinking, but I feel that the My Lai images showed human compassion better than the Boston photographs because the villagers were holding one another and comforting each other. In contrast, the fire escape images start with everyone helping each other, but progress into “everyone for themselves.” Compassion and concern for each other is what makes us human; without it, we would be primal.

On top of the compassion the villagers had for one another, the thought that the U.S. troops could just walk in there and gun down an entire village makes humanity look dead. I mean, even under orders, how do you look into the eyes of a crying child and kill her? When looking at the photos of this day, a viewer has not only compassion for the villagers who were brutally murdered, but also the wonder at how the troops could be so heartless, that a whole village of innocent people were gunned down without any consideration for human life. One of the photos shows how the dead bodies of the villagers looked: They are still in the same position

that they were gunned down in, not moved at all, just bodies on top of one another. The images paired with Sontag's essay really show how blindly orders can be followed, even if those orders are to do something morally or ethically wrong. Both Ephron and Sontag's images demonstrate the lack of compassion humans can have for one another and how images can be a learning device and not just an awful image of suffering. Next time you see an image of suffering will you think more deeply? I know I will.

Works Cited

Ephron, Nora. "The Boston Photographs." *Convergences*. Ed. Robert Atwan. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 244-249. Print.

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