

detection and the factual development of science, Frank's work comes closest to Thomas's analysis of the role of forensic science in the rise of detective fiction, with the crucial distinction that whereas Thomas concentrates on surveillance and technologies of identification, Frank argues that the fictional detectives he discusses are less concerned with establishing social hegemony than with both reaffirming Romantic conceptions of consciousness and promoting the new secular worldview. This a bold move, effectively removing what would seem to be the 'obvious' concerns of the genre with order, social purity, and law. Bold, but useful, and Frank's book is a welcome historicist approach to the study of a genre which has been dominated by structuralist and Marxist criticism. Detective fiction, in Frank's confident if sometimes tenuous analysis, is not about protecting society but affirming our origins. Dupin, Bucket, and Holmes may be walking in the gutters of the mean streets, but they are certainly looking at the stars.

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**Susan Sontag.** *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2004. Pp. 144. \$12.00.

The idea that art can lift us out of our traditional roles to consider the position of the 'other' goes back to Plato's *Republic*. There Socrates castigates the poets for encouraging the citizenry to consider mere shadows of the Truth and for disrupting the principle of specialization upon which his ideally just city is based. More recently, Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have revived—albeit it in radically different ways—the claim that there is something about literature that allows us to expand our moral capacities and to consider the position of those from whom we are estranged in a multitude of different ways, be it by issues of class, gender, ethnicity or

sexuality.<sup>1</sup> In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag considers the possibility that photography might serve a similar function. Although she is careful to distinguish the photographic image from the narrative text, and rightly so, there are enough parallels between the debates about the power of photography to engender empathy and/or identification with others and the similar debates about literature to produce the same effect, that Sontag's book is useful reading for anybody concerned about art and the power of 'othering'.

Originally part of Sontag's February 2001 Oxford Amnesty International Lecture, the book begins with a timely focus on war and war photography, specifically Virginia Woolf's claim in *Three Guineas* that the shock of war photographs cannot fail to unite people of good will against armed conflict (6). Woolf asserts that a failure to be moved by such pictures would make us moral monsters. Sontag disputes this claim, pointing out that the very different groups can use the same photographs to generate vastly different responses. She notes, for example, that in the recent conflict between Serbs and Croats, the same photographs of children being killed during the shelling of a village were distributed at both Serb and Croat propaganda briefings as evidence of the other side's brutality. 'Alter the caption', she writes, 'and the children's deaths could be used and reused' (10). The assumption of shared moral revulsion relies, notes Sontag, on often unfounded assumptions about the moral commitments of the viewing audience, something that is particularly implausible given the wide dispersion of photographic imagery as opposed to say literary texts. 'The destructiveness of war', notes Sontag, '... is not in itself an argument against waging war unless one thinks (as few people actually

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<sup>1</sup> See Martha Nussbaum *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Richard Rorty *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

do think) that violence is always unjustifiable, that force is always and in all circumstances wrong' (12). Sontag backs up this theoretical objection to Woolf's claim with empirical evidence from the history of photography and the moving image. She details two attempts to use graphic pictures to bring an end to war: Ernst Friedrich's 1924 *Krieg dem Kriege!* and the French film director Abel Gance's 1938 version of *J'accuse*. Both, she notes, lingered on the horrors of war—mutilated corpses, dying soldiers, shattered vehicles, devastated villages, and skeletal children—but with little effect. As Sontag says of Gance's 1938 effort: 'And the following year the war came' (16).

Such war photography, Sontag notes, may not only fail to generate the empathy and shared revulsion that its advocates would have us believe, it may have the effect of further distancing us from the events that the photographs depict. Noting the example of Leontius in Plato's *Republic*, the young man who took a decidedly sexual interest in the corpses he saw piled up outside the city walls, Sontag suggests that there may be a prurient aspect of our contemporary fixation with pictures of war and other atrocities. 'The more remote or exotic the place', she writes, 'the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying' (70). 'With subjects closer to home', she suggests, 'the photographer is expected to be more discreet' (62). Indeed, it might be that far from bringing home to us the horrors of war or famine: 'The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward—that is, poor—parts of the world' (71). War and horror becomes, in these circumstances, something that happens to other people. Far from arousing our sympathies it may be that such pictures inure us to tragedy, what Sontag refers to as 'the CNN effect' (104), a claim that she also made in her 1977 work *On Photography*.

Much of Sontag's essay is then concerned with challenging some of the pieties upon which the traditional claims about the relationship between art and othering are based. Photography is, perhaps, a particularly useful case history for this discussion, given that, as Sontag points out, there is an assumption that it is inherently authentic, and as such a more valuable means of generating empathy. Even though she spends a good deal of time detailing the ways in which some of the world's most famous images—such as the flag raising at Iwo Jima, or the photograph of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting a Vietcong suspect in the street—were in fact staged by or for photographers, Sontag notes that this feeling about the authenticity of photography persists. Furthermore, she suggests, this claim to authenticity might actually be truer now that technological advances have made photography the most democratic of art forms. 'Photography is' she writes, 'the only major art in which professional training and years of experience do not confer an insuperable advantage over the untrained and inexperienced' (28). Sontag's contention that much of the reaction to art depends in large part upon the demands of the interpreting community—upon the *context* in which the photograph is viewed—serves then as a useful rejoinder to some of the bolder claims of Nussbaum, Rorty, Spivak and others who, like Woolf, seem to believe, in varying degrees, that the text itself will be enough to engender morally useful empathetic reactions. Although as Sontag herself notes, literary texts differ from photographs in their power to engender reaction—'A narrative' she says, 'seems likely to more effective than an image. Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, to feel' (122)—her reflections on the role of the audience in reading the images reminds us that texts always have contexts, and that as such, any assumption about their power of 'othering' is almost always conditional. 'To an

Israeli Jew', she reminds us, 'a photograph of a child torn apart in the attack on the Sbarro pizzeria in downtown Jerusalem is first of all a photograph of a Jewish child killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber. To a Palestinian, a photograph of a child torn apart by a tank round in Gaza is first of all a photograph of a Palestinian child killed by an Israeli ordnance' (10).

Against this background it might be expected that Sontag is somewhat pessimistic about the power of art to generate moral empathy: that she has joined the ranks of cynics for whom such images of war photography and television news are evidence that reality has become merely 'spectacle'. It is a testament to the subtlety and sophistication of Sontag's thought that she has not. For although she calls into question many of the assumptions underpinning the current theories of art's relationship to othering, Sontag remains wedded to the notion that art can and does make a difference. 'To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is' she says, 'a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small educated population living in the rich part of the world where news has been converted into entertainment ... It assumes that everyone is a spectator. It suggests, perversely, unseriously, that there is no real suffering in the world' (110). Sontag ends her book with a passionate defence of the photojournalist whose job it is to bring home the pictures of war and other atrocities, to try to make those for whom such suffering is distant, feel even momentarily connected to events that their photographs depict. For even as she notes that 'compassion is an unstable emotion' that 'needs to be translated into action or it withers' (101), the possibility that a photograph or a piece of art might even for a moment generate critical reflection is enough reason to

endeavor with the attempt at 'othering'. For as Sontag notes, 'Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time' (118).

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