

MATX 690: Documentary
Fall, 2009
Laura Browder

Response Paper 1: *Regarding the Pain of Others*
Linda Ayscue Gupta

Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* delivered three embedded gifts to me. First the piece provoked a reexamination of my thinking, and ultimately affirmed my conclusions, about witnessing the suffering of others. Second, her discussion stimulated the development of a series of questions for me to answer in preparation for the production of narratives and hypermedia. The piece also spawned specific ideas around processes and methodology. Finally, in several places her statements invited me to pause and to reflect on the originality, descriptiveness, and beauty of her language. In this brief response, I will address the first two gifts.

Ethical Dilemmas in Witnessing the Suffering of Others

Sontag notes that watching the news evokes in us “compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view” (18). Images are “surely intended to move and excite, and to instruct and exemplify” (40). In my own work, I have used visuals to deepen affect and to provide a model as a precursor to behavioral rehearsal. I have often been troubled by images used for shock value only, feeling that this does little except to hook and titillate the viewer - a cheap shot at engagement. Sometimes there is the unintended consequence of actually desensitizing the viewer to negative, traumatizing behaviors. Two notable examples of this are the scenes of physical altercations that routinely break out on such shows as *The Jerry Springer Show* or the entrapment of would-be sexual offenders on *Dateline*. Sontag labels this “voyeurism” and suggests that only those who have the right to alleviate suffering be allowed to view certain images (42). I don't know that it is realistic to go that far, but we can certainly raise the consciousness of viewers to recognize if and when they are being misled.

Sontag uses the phrase “camera-mediated” (25) which affirms for me the ethical responsibilities inherent in the choice of composition and framing of images. She discusses the apparent objectivity of photos yet reminds us that they always have a point of view. Photos are “both an objective record and a personal testimony, . . . an interpretation of that reality” (26). But, I wonder, whose reality? The photographer operates under the illusion that he is communicating a reality at a certain point in time. Perhaps he seeks to share his own point of view. But “[p]hotographs objectify” they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed” (81). Perhaps he seeks to offset this by capturing the point of view of the subject. Truly exemplary documentaries, i.e. *Born Into Brothels*, may approximate this. But Sontag reminds us that authorial intention may not “determine the meaning of the photograph . . .” to the viewer (39). The viewer may insert his own reality. Psychotherapists know that the transference the client brings to the relationship with the therapist may in fact have very little to do with the

actual person of the therapist and everything to do with his previous experience. What is meant to be a loving portrayal by the photographer of an event or act may be experienced by the viewer as a PTSD trigger. What responsibility do we have in this as documentarians? What responsibility *can* we have?

The one area where this author may differ with Sontag is in that of her assertions about collective memory. Sontag does not believe in “collective memory,” only “collective instruction” (85) and states, “All memory is individual, unreproducible. It dies with each person” (86). This author is not sure that there is not collective memory. Jung’s clinical observations led him to his theory of the collective unconscious. Recent discoveries of the relationship between the environment and the actual development and structure of the brain and the use of techniques such as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) suggest to me the existence of genetic memory.

Sontag hints at the theme of resilience that runs like a strong undercurrent in the faces of survivors (83). In the end Sontag suggests that the primary function of photos/images is to remind us of what human beings are capable of doing (115). This is both a harrowing and liberating thought, an evil necessary to encounter. We struggle to cope with our traumas and to mine them for the wisdom they birth in us.

Checklist to Prepare for Production of Documentary

1. Whose reality will I seek to depict? Keep in mind authorial intention, the subject’s reality, and the viewer’s reality.
2. Who is my audience? The answer to this will inform the decision as to whether the medium is a written or visual account or both. Consider Sontag’s point about written accounts being “pitched at a larger or smaller readership” depending on “its complexity of thought, reference, and vocabulary” (20). “The photograph has only one language and is destined potentially for all” (Sontag, 20).
3. What media will best accomplish my objectives? Sontag notes that the visual imagery of television, video, movie is affectively impacting but moves too quickly to remember. For remembering, the photo “has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames . . .” (22). Later she notes, “The problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipses other forms of understanding and remembering” (89). Later she notes that photos “are not much help if the task is to understand. Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us” (89). Perhaps I will want both - to increase understanding and haunt my reader/viewer.
4. What is my purpose in sharing photos? How do I use images to move beyond shocking the viewer to evoke compassion and empathy and mobilize him/her for action? Sontag suggests that photos can facilitate mourning and teach (92). If so, what? How do I do this without overwhelming my viewer? If nothing can be done, then there is “helplessness and fear” (Sontag, 100). One good example of this balance is *Slumdog Millionaire*.
5. How do I ensure that the act of photographing or filming a subject adheres to the principle of “do no harm”? What will be the impact on the subject and his/her significant others of taking his picture? Am I stealing from him/her in that moment? Am I inducing shame? How do I mitigate any negative effects? Sontag’s discussion

of the use of photographs to objectify human beings cautions me to think of ways to mitigate the occurrence of this. How do I obtain permission when the subject does not really grasp the potential consequences of being photographed? As an ethical person, what is my obligation to him/her in this instance?

6. How much responsibility can I take for the photos' impact on the viewer given the fact that my authorial intention may have nothing to do with the meaning assigned to the photo by the viewer?
7. When do I want to introduce narrative vs. a series of independent images mounting a "cumulative effect" (Sontag, 44)? Note: These are different techniques with different effects.
8. When do I want to illustrate (provide a slice of an event) and when do I want to corroborate and when do I want to do both (Sontag, 84)?
9. When is reenactment preferable over recording an actual event, considering that the camera can be another potentially traumatizing experience? When does what Sontag refers to as the "duty to record" take precedence over potential trauma (52)? Can I make the photos less traumatizing by inserting earlier photos or visuals as sort of a photographic foreshadowing? Or will this just have a cumulative effect? One possible example is the crisis intervention film showing the therapist being attacked in the stairwell.
10. When do I use a visual to invoke pity and when do I use it to invoke fear or, as Sontag says Leonardo suggested, to "appall" (75)?
11. What am I doing to myself by witnessing this? Am I opening myself to a stealth desensitization? When am I overexposing so as to induce a certain callousness (105)? When is a thorough exploration preferable to repetitive short exposures to images of suffering? (106) How will I avoid vicariously traumatizing my viewers and/or inducing compassion fatigue? Can I avoid it? Should I?
12. Sontag's discussion of the aesthetic in photography (76) inspired me to consider the potential to use beauty to create relay with the suffering, perhaps to deepen the affective impact, perhaps to illustrate transformation? (Relay is a term used by Mitchell in *What Do Pictures Want?*)
13. Sontag's discussion of the importance of naming subjects (79) necessitates that whenever possible, I remember to do this (with their permission) as an act of tribute to them.
14. Ultimately then, whose needs are being met in my work? Is there any real indication that my work is serving the needs of the subjects of my photographs? Sontag notes, "the Sarajevans did want their plight to be recorded in photographs" (112).
15. When are my photos better presented in a book where the viewer can review them privately, taking as much time as needed (Sontag, 121).
16. When might I need a life-size installation with talking voices (see Sontag's description 124-125)?

I suspect that this is the beginning of a running list of questions that I must encounter each time I begin a new work. I am grateful to Sontag for helping me to discover this path.