

Photographic Ethics: Juxtaposing Susan Sontag and Judith Butler

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In this research paper I am going to compare the viewpoints of Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) and *On Photography* (1977) with that of Judith Butler in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (2009) on the concept of photography. In Butler's book there is a chapter titled "Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag" in which she has presented a efficacious critique of media. While elucidating the phenomenon of embedded reporting, Butler reaches to a different idea of the photographic frame and its relation to interpretive practices. Her major point is how the suffering of others is perceived and responded to when a certain norm restricts our perception. Their respective standpoints on the representation of suffering through photographs and the latter's ability to shock will be the focus of my analysis.

In the same chapter, Butler also examines some of Sontag's writings, including books such as *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*, and considers Sontag's question whether photographs have an ability to mobilize people against war, about which Sontag is more or less pessimistic. Butler points out Sontag's tendency to compare photography and writing, and then decides which one is better. In this piece I would juxtapose their approaches towards these aspects of photography and highlight the legitimacy of Butler's arguments over Sontag's.

Judith Butler is undoubtedly a leading scholar among western philosophers. Although she is well known for her works on gender theory, *Frames of War* is an authoritative and compelling critique of war. The main argument that she raises throughout the book is that the frames or interpretations attached to a photograph by the media are not always arbitrary. In an age of fabricated images and embedded reporting, our perception of reality is carefully crafted by photographic frames that conform to the discriminatory and violent state policies. The phenomenon of embedded reporting, in her opinion, "is a way of interpreting in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception" (Butler 66), and thus even before the viewer is confronted with the image, interpretation is always already in action. Butler thus points out that restricting how one may see, regardless of whether the reception of photographic images

urges interpretive practices or not, has, in modern politics, become an intensely significant means of influencing mass interpretation.

Susan Sontag, one of the most conversational and influential contemporary American writer, is known for her significant role, as a social commentator, in the development of modern thought. Sontag declares in her book, *On Photography*, while speculating about restrictions of photographic medium, that "Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph" (Sontag 17) and in another book, *Regarding the Pain of Others* that "all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions" (Sontag 11). In Butler's opinion, as suggested by Manisha Basu in her review on *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag assumes "interpretation itself to be quintessentially narrative in nature, and since without accompanying analyses and captions, images cannot tell a story" (Basu), or even provide a complete idea of the scene they are showing, they are neither narratives, nor therefore, interpretations. Photographs, in fact, according to her, are just the fragmentary emanations of truth, renderings of reality which is punctual and discrete rather than a spontaneously unfolding tale. In short, they are found at fault for not being 'writing' as they relay and render diffuse assemblages of affect, without necessarily appealing to the coherent, narrative understanding of an interpretive, rational consciousness.

Where Butler accepts the need of captions and analysis, she disagrees with Sontag that the photograph by itself cannot provide the interpretation, and argues that:

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 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" (Butler 71).

Butler has rightly pointed out that photographs are always interpretations in themselves because how one chooses to regulate the perspective of the viewer, varies from photographer to photographer. It doesn't make any sense to him to entertain Sontag's claim but she in her another book, *On Photography*, actually confirms herself that photographs interpret. What problematic for

Sontag is, as Yasuo Akai suggests in his blog, "Thinking with Sontag, Butler, and Kurusowa", that photography seems to her rather disintegrating a situation as according to her photographs, including videos, shoots "only a certain moment through a certain angle, therefore it does not capture the whole event" (Akai). Moreover, this photographic way of looking at an event, deludes our way of seeing the reality. This sort of seeing is also associated with Orientalism, "how the first world people perceive the other world, which refers to an enthusiastic, but also detached, and voyeuristic way of seeing" (Akai).

Simultaneously, while explicitly defining embedded reporting, Butler asserts that

"Embedded" journalists traveled only on certain transports, looked only at certain scenes, and relayed home images and narratives of only certain kinds of action. Embedded reporting implies that reporters working under such conditions agree not to make the mandating of perspective itself into a topic to be reported and discussed; these reporters were offered access to the war only on the condition that their gaze remain restricted to the established parameters of designated action (Butler 64).

And this opinion seems much more logical even if one would locate the agency here more at the level of individual photographers (and their employers, advertisers and their patrons, editors etc.) as they respond to the restraints imposed on them by official government policies and those who enforce them. The "frame" which Butler thrashes out comes, I doubt, from those interactions. In an essay "War Photography" in *The British Medical Journal*, which came out on 5th April, 1924, it has been discussed that these photographers "were appointed to meet a need that the authorities recognized to exist-namely, the provision of pictures such as could be used for propaganda purposes by publication in the general press" (The British Medical Journal, 637).

While contemplating on the review of Ian Bernard, titled "How Free is the War Photography", on his book *Frames Of War*, Butler makes a statement that, "if we focus on interpretive freedoms of reporters under embedded reporting then we end up applauding photographers for their fugitive exercise of freedom rather than condemning without qualification the enormously increased censorship at war reporting in recent years" (Butler 302). These fugitive subversions definitely can not avail any legitimate evidence that lay it

bare in front of the public that these wars have done nothing other than fueling people's suffering beyond all limits.

Another point on which Butler stands against Sontag is when Sontag claims, as Butler himself paraphrases in *Frames of War*, that "photographs no longer have the power to excite and enrage us in such a way that we might change our political views and conduct" (Butler 72). In her book, *On Photography*, she concludes, "The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge" (Sontag 18). Sontag does not assign much value to photos which are, in her opinion, incapable of inspiring us to action or to impart us any moral intelligence. But it also cannot be denied that the knowledge of human suffering, most of the time, is solely dependent on visual images. And she herself cites a few examples where she talks about the impact of photographs. She once alluded to a 1972 news photograph, in *On Photography*, which displayed "a naked Vietnamese child just sprayed by American napalm, running down a high-way toward the camera, her arms open, screaming with pain" (Sontag 13) and admits that it played a significant role in marshalling anti-war sentiment. Sontag also reminisces about the agonizing effect of her first glimpse of some photographs from the concentration camps of Nazi. She says in *On Photography*, "it now seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was 12) and after" (Sontag 15). But she is seen lamenting repeatedly for the incapability of a photograph to impart any moral knowledge, a claim which drew many critical glances. In an essay entitled "What photographs can't do?", Stephanie Ross raises a question, "Sontag clearly acknowledges the power of photographs, their effect in and on the world. How does she qualify her view to deny the medium any specifically moral import?" (Rose 7)

Butler justifies his opposition to Sontag's argument, mentioned above, by citing an example of Donald Rumsfeld's response to the Abu Ghraib photos, even if it has been claimed that they were actually staged for the camera. She says if Sontag's claim is right then his response to these photos would not have made any sense as he assigns to the photographs the power to construct national identity itself. However, she agrees with her on the point that their impact is shrouded with time, while making a statement on Abu Ghraib photos,

I want to suggest that the Abu Ghraib photographers neither numb our senses nor determine a particular response. This has to do with the fact that they occupy no single time and no specific space. They are shown again and again, transposed from context to context, and this history of their successive framing and reception conditions, without determining, the kinds of public interpretations of torture we have (Butler 78).

Butler actually seems to be indicating that though the pictures are evident of Abu Ghraib tortures, they lack in evoking substantial public outrage which could turn inaction to sensible reaction as, according to her, they are devoid of any "magical moral agency" and cannot urge ethical responsiveness.

While Susan Sontag is of the opinion, as suggested by Butler in the chapter "Tortures and the Ethics of Photography", that "the image can only affect us, not provide us with an understanding of what we see," (qtd in Butler), Butler holds that photograph- i.e., any image that lies within the frame, intentionally or unintentionally, determines itself what can be interpreted. She opines that, "Thus it is not just that the photographer and/or the viewer actively and deliberately interpret, but that the photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation – and one that may unsettle both maker and view in its turn" (Butler 67). While Sontag and Butler both present a strong critic of media, who holds the responsibility of circulation of visual images, Butler does acknowledge that without the circulation of such images, whether it be through internet, television, or newswires, the knowledge of precarious life would not be able to draw attention of the masses, even if media has become an elemental part of the war effort by regulating the frame to readjust affect (rage, pleasure, fear, hope) and wash out the ethical responsiveness triggered when one encounters the face of the suffering of other.

Sontag's another argument Butler considers as problematic is when she claims in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that, "Narratives can make us understand: photographs do something else. They haunt us" (Sontag 83). Butler, who is critical of this statement, finally asks a straightforward question, "Is she right? Is she correct to suggest that narratives do not haunt, and that photographs fail to make us understand?" (Butler 69). Butler's question itself here seems sufficient to confute Sontag's statement. As an article in *British Medical Journal*, vol 1, also suggests, "Pages of skilled writing could not reveal as much of the war as do many of these photographs at a glance, nor volumes convey as much comprehension of the subject as would be obtained by

anyone who studied these pictures and their under lettering with intelligence" ("War photography" 637), So it cannot be denied that photographs do have a great significance in conveying the whole idea of the war.

Sontag also faults photographs for not being able to evoke ethical pathos in us and even if they do so, according to her, it is just momentarily. But pathos produced by narrative forms, she says in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, "does not wear out" (Sontag 53). She then out-rightly states that, "a narrative seems more likely to be effective than an image" (Sontag 83) to mobilize us against war. Butler, however, points out that even if an atrocious event has been depicted through writing, photographic evidence is still needed to establish the truth of the claim. In fact, "photographic evidence has become all but obligatory to demonstrate the fact of atrocity . . . there can be no truth without photography". (Butler 70) An attempt, to supply a complete knowledge of an event and to extract an ethical response from people, is incomplete if photographs are not used as medium. Moreover, photographs do attract attention faster than the narratives.

Beyond the comparison of Butler and Sontag, there are certain other things that must also be discussed. Sontag professes repeatedly that the impact of a photograph withers away with time if they are seen again and again but that goes with almost everything. The most extreme example here we can think of is that of the children, who, being brought up amid ISIS, are seen often shooting people as if that is just a play for them. Our daily experience of life plays a very decisive role in determining how we look at things around us. If certain things are seen frequently, we do grow inured to them. However, Sontag holds that, "It is passivity that dulls feeling." (Sontag 68) And this is definitely true about this age of smartphones, when we keep scrolling photograph after photograph on our timelines without consciously ruminating about the scathing reality behind such atrocious images. Another point is that Sontag seems to be looking for reprieve to all the television watchers for whom news has actually been converted into entertainment. She suggests, as paraphrased by ManishaBasu in "The Hamartia of Light and Shadow: Susan Sontag in the Digital Age"

for such people and others who do not have the luxury of patronizing reality,
photographs of atrocity at least provide an initial spark for humane thought, for

engaging with the sheer range of depravity and human wickedness, and for practicing what may be called the ethical act of remembrance. Indeed, benumbed and inured to tormented and twisted masses of flesh, we in the metropolitan center may be able to do absolutely nothing with the residual feelings of compassion that such images evoke. (Basu)

So our ability to look at the suffering of others and respond ethically has been deluded by mainly two factors, firstly by embedded reporting which prevents us from seeing the real as Sontag herself proclaims in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, “Reality has abdicated. There are only representations: media” (Sontag 73) and the other is over-crowding of images that immune us to the misery of others and subside our feelings of sympathy with time.

Through this analysis of the arguments of Susan Sontag and Judith Butler, we have reached to a conclusion that the factors that prevent us from reaching to the reality through photographs are mainly the barriers, in form of embedded reporting and photographs being fabricated, that mislead our gaze from reality to something sensational, which may have a political cause behind it. Other factors include the banality of images because of over circulation and the consistent passivity that makes us immune to the suffering of others. Whether it be through photographs or narratives, the effort must always be to transmit the reality. Both Sontag and Butler blame the media for most of the conspiracy and hindrances associated with visual culture and suggest to counter these norms or frames, that has rendered some people's lives asungrievable, by translating emotions into apprehension.

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