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Abstract

With the example of *On Suffocation*, this article problematizes how violence on film is represented and received. Ethical questions linked to the role and function of the viewer, medium, and originator are at the centre of the analysis, and the writings of Susan Sontag function as conceptual backdrop.

Keywords

On Suffocation, violence, “tele-intimacy”, soft power, proxy-witness, Susan Sontag

To many, Susan Sontag (1933–2004) is one of the most influential and insightful cultural critics during the last fifty years. Throughout her career, Sontag revealed and explored the complex nature of important concepts and events with an unchallenged combination of stylistic artistry and analytic precision. In her last monograph, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag discusses how various acts of violence have been represented and received from the ancient Greeks to the present. And she does so in ways that prove rewarding as conceptual backdrop to a brief analysis of Jenifer Malmqvist’s short film *On Suffocation*.

The significance of Sontag’s observations becomes apparent when she compares images in the new millennium with older photographic practices. When discussing “tele-intimacy”, for instance, she stresses that the frustration we feel when confronted with images portraying violent acts often is linked to the fact that we are unable to do anything about them (Sontag, 2003: 21). And if we indeed were able to do something, she provocatively suggests that we would not care as much. Accordingly, the moral and ethical indignation viewers feel when confronted with distant yet intimate images of violence is closely linked to their conviction of being spatially distant enough. As expected, Sontag generally takes visual representations of violence in defence, concluding that “[i]mages have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance as if there were some other way of watching. But watching up close – without the mediation of an image – is still just watching” (Sontag, 2003: 117).

As usual, Sontag's claims are important and worth contemplating. To a certain degree they are actually also problematized, challenged, and developed in Malmqvist's film. For example, it is very difficult to "just watch" *On Suffocation*. Although many spectators know that they are unable to do anything about the depicted violence, the emotional impact of this internationally prize-winning film has resulted in something significantly more than a globally scattered group of passive onlookers "just watching". A more cynical view of the film's success might suggest that the widespread appraisal is precisely what one would come to expect from politically correct arenas such as film festivals and cultural prize ceremonies. And sure enough, artistic success of films in the West only rarely results in concrete actions to help others elsewhere. So, if Sontag is right, films of this kind are partly praised because they temporarily appease the conscience of everyone involved in the acclaim.

In general, few people want to get morally and ethically challenged, and only rarely do they admit the personal relevance of the violence they encounter via the media. In the same way as the young man responsible for pushing the button heaving up the temporary gallows in the film shamefully avoids direct eye contact with the struggling victims in front of him, most people thus tries to avoid getting too emotionally implicated in something that confronts them conceptually. And herein lays the narrative smartness of Malmqvist's film. Entirely stripped of dialogue, its subtle yet highly graphic soft power portrayal of an anonymous execution in an unknown location has a profound and hard impact wherever you watch it (Nye, 2004). Its stylistic and narrative structure invites every single viewer to confront and reassess his or her reactions and actions in a contemplative atmosphere of highly focused tranquillity.

Here, the choice to represent these executions anonymously is of crucial importance. For in order to maximize the overall relevance of her film, Malmqvist has refrained from overtly revealing national or religious markers that point towards potential perpetrators and guilty parties. However, this does not imply that *On Suffocation* is entirely void of visual clues. Apart from choosing actors with Middle Eastern and North African resemblance or origin, the film also includes a small and strange marker. It briefly occurs in a close-up of the first victim's slipper, just after he has been elevated and begun to shake spasmodically in deadly pain. On the front of his left slipper one can barely read the words "Navy Line" in small white scripted English letters. To many viewers, this name has obvious American connotations, opening up for a number of interpretations and questions: Is the US Navy in any way connected to the

events portrayed? Does the film imply American connections to these violations? Why else have the originators chosen not only to use a slipper with these specific words, but also to show it in a close-up?

The answers to these questions lead back to Sontag's earlier reflections. For just as in many of Sontag's texts on visual representation, issues of perception, reception, and ethics lay at the centre of Malmqvist's film. Here, the ways in which the camera is used as an invisible and passively registering proxy-witness are particularly significant. Positioned in the middle of the events, while seemingly recording what happens when it happens without making anything too aesthetically compelling, the camera seems to register everything live on location. Indeed, it almost turns into an objective partaker, through which spectators gets first-hand experiences of an ostensibly on-going event. But even though viewers are placed in the midst of a violent act, they still fully realize that they are too distant to do anything about it. Put differently, Malmqvist's cinematic "tele-intimacy" makes viewers feel it as if they were present in a distant present without them risking anything at home now or in the future.

Following Sontag, viewers' combinations of spontaneous appal, passive identification, conceptual distancing, and inactive appease of conscience might explain some of the success of this film. And these reactions are achieved in spite of the fact that the camera rarely becomes a stand-in for any of the characters. Apart from one sequence when viewers share perspective with the young man responsible for the hanging machine in order to enhance their emotional investment, Malmqvist constantly minimizes the camera work by making it as anonymous and invisible as possible. And she mainly does so by adopting a seamless form of editing normally attributed to classical Hollywood cinema. The end result is that few viewers reflect upon stylistic, rhetorical, and ideological choices behind the final representation. Instead, they concentrate on the violent acts going on in front of their eyes – at a distance.

The only time when spectators might want to get closer to the events in order to better understand the characters and story occurs in the poetic opening scene, showing the hairy legs and naked feet of two unidentifiable individuals lying on a beach flirting with each other by rubbing their feet calmly to the sound of a tranquil sea. The far-reaching violent consequences of this "tele-intimate" encounter of love constitute the sole and naked topic of the remainder of the film. For on an explicit level, *On Suffocation* graphically exemplifies the terrifying deadly force that individuals in certain parts of the world still are innocent victims to solely because of their homosexuality. On an implicit level, however, the film's subtle and

non-dialogical narrative also challenges standard and omnipresent forms of violent media. What we encounter is a soft power story with a solid core that addresses crucial contemporary issues concerning spectators' role and responsibility as witnesses to violent acts. The basic message is: No violence is too far to react against and do something about. No destiny is too distant to engage in actively. No one should ever regard the pain of others without being offended, strongly oppose it, and try to prevent something similar to happen in the future.

That being said, Sontag might still very well be correct in her interpretations. Perhaps we will continue to be offended by representations of violence such as Malmqvist's because we know that we never will be able to do anything about them. A more positive reading is that digital techniques have paved the way for new representations of violence, where globally relevant films such as *On Suffocation* replace the ancient "tele-intimacy" of older media. If so, we will perhaps soon begin to be inserted into a mutually rewarding "tele-activity" that makes us realize that we actually can do something about the events we witness. No matter who we are, where we are, and what we do or believe, impressions of distance will always be in the mind and eyes of the beholder. Regarding the pain of others, we still have much to learn and much to do.

References

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