

LOOKING AT WAR, FISHING FOR COMMITMENT

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On September 11, 2001, I was in math class, learning about polynomials. At approximately 9:30am, a student foreign to the class walked in and informed us that there was a national emergency and that a school meeting was to be held right at that moment. My teacher, an elderly man with large rectangular glasses, glared at the messenger and quickly announced that the rest of us were to stay in our seats until he finished his lecture. We were late for the meeting. Following the meeting and the infamous announcement, we spent the rest of the day with our eyes glued to the television, soaking in the latest information, watching the towers fall, over and over again. I had never been to New York City, so the images were just that: images. It was no different than watching *Independence Day* or *Terminator II*. The next day, we returned to our normal lives, to classes and books and sports and all of the other elements of boarding school life. I did not even call my mother. Certainly, the images of 9/11 were and remain highly disturbing, and I felt, along with the rest of the country, a mix of shock, horror, sadness, and sympathy for the victims. Yet life continued, and 9/11 became little more than a bad dream, a separate reality that did not require my participation or my commitment. Reactions such as mine to 9/11 have occasioned much thought among American critics. Leading intellectual Susan Sontag appraises this all-too-common phenomenon while postmodernist theorist Stanley Fish proposes a discourse within which we might analyze the effects of 9/11 and the war on terror.

In her essay, “Looking at War: Photography’s view of devastation and death,” Susan Sontag examines the effect of images of destruction upon non-combatants (in particular, the prosperous West), and argues against the use of images to interpret war. Images, she states, are too superficial and too easily altered: “Photographs of victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus” (Sontag 83). Though she criticizes the use of images, particularly in the media, Sontag also clearly discards the conservative view that horrible images desensitize, that “flooded with images of the sort that once used to shock and arouse indignation, we are losing our capacity to react” (97). If this is true, Sontag says, then the only solution is to limit the number of terrible images shown to the public, an answer that is both impractical and unethical. After all, she writes, “The horrors themselves are not going to abate” (97). However, while she criticizes the conservative view of media, Sontag also turns against the liberal left’s argument that “public attention is steered by the attentions of the media . . . when there are photographs, the war becomes ‘real’” (96). She pays special attention to the French: “This view is associated in particular with the writings of the late Guy Debord . . . and of Jean Baudrillard, who claims . . . that images, simulated realities, are all that exists

now; it seems to be something of a French specialty” (97). Carefully avoiding the word “postmodern,” Sontag vigorously condemns the “French day-trippers,” as well as the rest of the liberal intellectuals, for viewing horror without acting upon it. Having cast off the conservative and liberal views of the function of images of warfare, Sontag takes an alternate path. She believes that the “antidote to the perennial seductiveness of war” is “active mobilization,” and that “a narrative seems likely to be more effective than an image” (97-98). Ultimately, she implies that the sympathy we feel when we listen to narratives necessitates a commitment, to take action either for or against the conflict. In the case of *9/11*, surely this would mean an intervention, and the intervention the United States has committed to, the highly debated war on terror, is undoubtedly a decisive action.

While Sontag argues against the simplification of warfare into simple images, Stanley Fish argues against the use of simple words as justification for war (particularly the war on terror) in his essays “Postmodern Warfare: the ignorance of our warrior intellectuals” and “Condemnation Without Absolutes.” One of the immediate effects of *9/11* was the serious questioning of the tenets of postmodernism; several commentators, including Edward Rothstein, Julia Keller, and Roger Rosenblatt, complained that by denying the existence of objective truth, postmodernists “have weakened the country’s resolve . . . [leaving] us with no firm basis for either condemning the terrorist attacks or fighting back” (Fish “Condemnation”). Fish’s answer to such criticism is simple: the critics have misinterpreted postmodernism, and indeed, “postmodernists say no such thing” (Fish “Postmodern”). According to Fish, postmodernism does not prohibit a decisive response to the events of *9/11*; rather, it merely demands that such a response cannot be based on “a sense of right and wrong that no one would dispute and everyone accepts . . . [because] there are not such universally accepted values” (Fish “Postmodern”). Having established his defense of postmodernism, the usually controversial Fish readily takes a less radical tone, stating, “At times like these, the nation rightly falls back on the record of aspiration and accomplishment that makes up our collective understanding of what we live for” (“Condemnation”). However, Fish maintains his argument against absolutes of language, what Edward Said calls “false universals.” According to Fish, “they stand in the way of useful thinking. . . . If we reduce the enemy to ‘evil,’ we conjure up . . . a wild-card moral anarchist beyond our comprehension and therefore beyond the reach of any counterstrategies” (“Condemnation”). Fish’s solution lies in the postmodernist theory of cultural relativism; we must put ourselves in our enemies’ shoes, “not in order to wear them as [our] own but . . . to have some understanding (far short of approval) of why someone else might want to wear them” (“Condemnation”).

As one of postmodernism’s leading literary theorists, Stanley Fish would indubitably fall into Sontag’s category of the “French,” the liberal left who “see war as a spectacle” (Sontag 97). Certainly, Fish, a pioneer of post-structuralist literary theory, is preoccupied with words, not actions. In a typically postmodernist fashion, Fish

dissects the language of his critics, particularly Rothstein's use of the words "objective" and "reliable." Indeed, by arguing that it is useless to justify actions with abstract words because there are no universal absolutes, Fish turns words into phantoms, language into a shadowy, ungraspable structure. He effectively impels the reader to participate in a purely postmodern practice: talking about how to talk about war. Even after posing the question, "What to do?" Fish remains as far removed from action as possible:

You assert that your universal is the true one, even though your adversaries clearly do not accept it, and you do not attribute their recalcitrance to insanity or mere criminality . . . but to the fact . . . that they are in the grip of a set of beliefs that is false. And there you have to leave it, because the next step, the step of proving the falseness of their beliefs to everyone . . . is not a step available to us as finite situated human beings. ("Postmodern")

It is unclear how Fish's brand of theoretical practice can actually lead to any kind of real action (especially considering the global scope of war), and Sontag in particular would condemn Fish's passive discourse. For Sontag, pacifism is a moral failure.

However, Stanley Fish's analysis of words and insistence on avoiding simple and abstract concepts can easily be turned around to criticize Susan Sontag. When Sontag suggests that the sympathy one feels in reaction to war narrative is contingent upon ethical commitment, she uses surprisingly hedging language: "Could one be mobilized actively to oppose war by an image, as one might [by a narrative]? . . . Partly it is a question of the length of time one is obliged to look, and to feel" (98). By using the word "one," rather than "we" or "I," Sontag distances herself from her argument, making broad statements that do not require her involvement as she argues for personal engagement. Fish would likely urge Sontag to take her own advice and commit to her language. Sontag's final argument, that sympathy necessitates commitment, is surely a claim with which Fish would disagree; for him, there is no such thing as universal objectivity, and therefore, nothing is universally necessary or contingent upon something else. Ultimately, however, both writers urge their readers to see past simplistic statements, be they in language or photographs. Rather, they argue, when entering into a discourse on war, whether through images, narrative, events, or justifications, we need to maintain a rigorous engagement with ideas.

The question that remains, however, is whether or not sympathy necessitates commitment; why, in the aftermath of 9/11, can I so easily sit back and watch the spectacle, engaging with the war on terror only through passive, meandering discussion with the likes of Stanley Fish? Susan Sontag would argue that my exposure to photographs and television is the reason. She states, "Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image" (87), and though they may be shocking and disturbing, memories engender no commitment. Since most of us saw only images of the falling

towers on television screens, Sontag would argue, we do not truly appreciate how real the events of *9/11* were to the people who experienced them first-hand; “We don’t get it. We can’t truly imagine what it was like. . . . Can’t understand, can’t imagine” (98). As a solution, Sontag promotes narrative as a means through which we can feel the appropriate sympathy that will necessarily demand action.

My work-study job as an audit-editor for Columbia University’s Oral History Department’s *9/11 Project* exposes me, almost daily, to the types of narratives Sontag advocates, the types of narratives that she states should necessitate an ethical commitment on my part. This, however, has yet to occur. Conversely, I find that even among the survivors and witnesses of *9/11*, commitment to or against the war on terror (the decisive action taken in response to the undoubtedly horrible event) is relatively uncommon. Interviews for the *9/11 Project* were made up of two sessions: the first session occurred within the first few months of *9/11*; the second took place approximately a year later. Though I am not legally allowed to quote from any of these interviews, the database will be functional and searchable within the year. Unsurprisingly, the immediate response to *9/11*—that is, the response of the survivors when they began to comprehend what had happened—was confusion and indecision, the exact opposite of the decisive commitment that Sontag states is contingent upon perceiving horrible events. Of course, we can attribute this reaction to shock, but even during the second session, a year later, most survivors state that they have been able to continue with the rest of their lives, that *9/11*’s effect upon them has lessened through time. Opinions on the war on terror are incredibly diverse: while some support it, others are decisively against it; still more remain either confused or apathetic. No one is necessarily, unavoidably moved towards a commitment or action, not the survivors nor those who witnessed the event first-hand.

As the memory of *9/11* fades, no matter how many photographs of dead soldiers, televised accounts of battles, or narratives from Iraq we are exposed to, commitment to the war on terror wanes as well. In her article, “Real Battles and Empty Metaphors,” Susan Sontag confirms *9/11* as a past event, a memory that, if we follow her argument in “Looking at War,” engenders no commitment. Sontag observes government’s attempts to keep the memory of *9/11* (and therefore the support for the war on terror) fresh and alive:

Ceremonies . . . are viewed as part of the continuing affirmation of American solidarity against the enemy. The comparison between Sept. 11, 2001, and Dec. 7, 1941, has never been far from the mind. . . . However, I doubt that great commemorative ceremonies were felt to be needed to keep up morale and unite the country on Dec. 7, 1942. That was a real war, and one year later it was very much still going on. This is a phantom war and therefore in the need of an anniversary. (“Real Battles”)

While Sontag attempts to explain poor attendance at *9/11* memorial services in the context of her proposal that the war on terror is not a real war, I heartily disagree with her reasoning. Sontag argues that the war on terror is a false war, a metaphorical campaign akin to wars on cancer, poverty, and drugs. “Real wars,” states Sontag, “are not metaphors. And real wars have a beginning and an end. . . . This anti-terror war can never end” (“Real Battles”). While Sontag is accurate in her assessment of the war on terror, she admits, in her title, that the battles are real, and she can certainly not deny that real men and women, on both sides, are violently suffering and dying. As such, in accordance with her argument in “Looking At War,” proper exposure to the suffering inherent in the war on terror should still engender our sympathy and necessitate our commitment. Returning to Sontag’s example of poor attendance at *9/11* memorial ceremonies, I again disagree with Sontag’s interpretation. Unquestionably, the government uses these services to create the illusion of overwhelmingly popular support for the war on terror. While these services (as well as early interventions such as the war in Afghanistan) were popular immediately after *9/11*, as time passed, people became skeptical of the commitment these types of ceremonies imply. This of course, does not mean that people have become any less sympathetic to the events of *9/11*, are any less upset, angry, and saddened at the memory of the events. Rather, though still sympathetic, citizens have become less and less willing to commit to a war that is still killing hundreds, even thousands. Ultimately, in the face of reality, of the first-hand experience that she so strongly advocates, Sontag’s implication that sympathy absolutely necessitates commitment simply does not hold up.

Contrary to Susan Sontag’s argument, sympathy does not absolutely necessitate commitment; however, remaining a passive spectator like Fish does not seem particularly palatable either. Indeed, if the relationship between sympathy and ethical commitment is not necessity, then what is it? Fish, of course, would argue that there is no relationship that can be universally understood. However, even Fish states that we are bound to our ethics, even if our moral code is not universal. In fact, in “Postmodern Warfare,” he is careful to point out the legitimacy of ethics, arguing that it is possible to have ethical judgment and to assert moral truths, but we must also realize that these truths are impossible to prove and that our ethics are by no means universal. Fish writes, “Your belief or disbelief in postmodern tenets is independent of your beliefs and commitments in any other area of your life” (“Postmodern”). Certainly, this curious statement raises a significant question: Where, then, do these beliefs and commitments come from? Fish volunteers a simple answer that is unusually devoid of postmodernist theory: “The actor . . . begins in some context of practice, with its received authorities, sacred texts, exemplary achievements, and generally accepted benchmarks, and from within the perspective of that context judges something to be true or inaccurate” (“Postmodern”). Certainly, ethics come from increasingly varied sources; ultimately, however, as Fish sensibly argues, they should

always remain open to critical interpretation and collective debate among the community of action. However, once an ethical decision is reached, we must discard Fishian prevarication for Sontagian commitment. Though sympathy does not necessitate action, decisions are contingent upon commitment, and while it is all well and good to look sympathetically at war and fish passively for commitment, it is only by making decisions and following through with them that we can truly alter reality.

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