TEACHING PLAN for HANDOUT 2A

UNDERSTANDING SONTAG: Let the Atrocious Images Haunt Us

TIME REQUIRED: 1 class period (45-60 min)
RESOURCES: Photography Lesson 5: Handout 2A
OBJECTIVE: Compare Sontag’s arguments about looking at images of suffering in On Photography and Regarding the Pain of Others

Reading (10-15 min)*
Distribute Handout 2A and read excerpts from Sontag’s On Photography (1977) and Regarding the Pain of Others (2002), as a class or individually.

Opening Discussion (10 min)
Discuss students’ reactions to these texts. What is Sontag’s argument in this excerpt from On Photography? What is her argument in the Regarding the Pain of Others excerpt? How did Sontag’s position change, and where do students agree most with her views? Were there any parts of the reading they disagreed with or found confusing? What was their favorite idea or phrase?

Further Reflection (15-25 min)
Use a few of the following handout questions to prompt further discussion, or divide the class into small groups and assign a question to each group. Students may also reflect individually on a question of their choice.

• How do Sontag’s views on images of suffering differ between these texts? Compare her main points from On Photography and Regarding the Pain of Others, identifying where she changed her position, and why.
• Do you think looking at images of suffering strengthens or weakens our public conscience? How has a recent picture of violence or suffering affected you? How did the public respond to this image?
• Have you seen too many images of suffering? Do you agree with Sontag’s statement in On Photography that “images anesthetize”? Why, or why not?
• Think of a recent instance of violence or suffering that was not photographed. How do you know about it? Was it witnessed publicly? What might be different if it had been photographed? Consider both advantages and disadvantages.
• How are images of violence different than other images of pain or suffering, such as natural disasters? Do you react to these types of photographs differently?
• What are the risks, personally and for society, of viewing contemporary photographs of suffering? What are the benefits of seeing these images? Are these benefits worth the risks?

Share class reflections, inviting each group to present its ideas or individual students to share their responses.
Concluding Discussion (10 min)

Conclude with a class discussion that revisits Sontag’s arguments on images of suffering and considers their relevance in students’ daily lives.

- Should we “let the atrocious images haunt us”? Argue for or against Sontag’s statement in Regarding the Pain of Others.

*Note: Reading may also be assigned in advance.

EXTENDED LEARNING

- Assign “In Plato’s Cave” or the full text of Sontag’s On Photography and/or longer selections from Regarding the Pain of Others in advance, in place of handout excerpts.
- Reflection and concluding questions may also be assigned as short essays or response papers.