

## Representing Pain in Visual Art: Western Aesthetic Discourses in “Othering” Suffering Bodies

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### Abstract:

What might be the aim for contemporary artists to represent pain and its traumatic effects in their work? Artists may wish to evoke empathy or compassion; resist adversity via their work; or employ it in community building strategies. The inherent assumption within any of these, critically, is that the act of *witnessing* the pain of others has the capacity, if not as an automatic response, to evoke empathy from viewers. However, there is evidence that representing pain can transpose it from a description of experience to a *de facto* descriptor. This poses serious consequences for those that experience disproportionate forms of violence and suffer the consequent trauma, such as women, Black or brown folks, or those living with disabilities. Pain, or the predisposition to suffering, becomes understood as an *inherent quality* of inhabiting such a body, rather than a consequence of oppressive circumstances. Through the exploration of works such as *Laocoön and His Sons*, early Christian artwork, and Renaissance works, the representation of pain and the interpretation of such in the Western tradition will be traced.

Keywords: visual art, pain, trauma, pain scripts, empathy, aesthetics of pain, “othering” of suffering, feminization of pain, productive suffering

### Introduction

What might be the aim for contemporary artists in representing pain and its traumatic effects in their work? One might venture to guess that the objective is to elicit, within the viewers, emotional responses, followed by deliberate thoughts and/or actions toward the amelioration

or eradication of the source of that suffering. Artists may wish to evoke empathy or compassion; resist adversity via their work; or employ it in community building strategies. The inherent assumption within any of these, critically, is that the act of *witnessing* the pain of others has the capacity, if not as an automatic response, to evoke empathy from viewers. But we must ask if this is actually the case or does it, instead, cause yet more violence? Something else to consider: does the representation of suffering cause viewers to develop concern for others, or rather does the suffering become linked to the body of the sufferer? This poses serious consequences for those that experience disproportionate forms of violence and suffer the consequent trauma, such as women, Black or brown folks, or those living with disabilities. Pain, or the predisposition to suffering, becomes understood as an *inherent quality* of inhabiting such a body, rather than a consequence of oppressive circumstances. Contemporary Western artists must contend with an aesthetic tradition that “others” suffering bodies and a punitive cultural system in which “bad bodies” (non-normative) are made to suffer. Successfully evoking empathy must be negotiated carefully, through the work, itself, *and* the context in which it is made and distributed.

### Framework of Analysis

In the following I will trace a brief history of the representation of pain in the Western tradition of visual art to draw out how “we” (a strategic essentialism: “we” are visual art viewers familiar with Western aesthetic historical precedents) may be indoctrinated to view and interpret the representations of others’ pain. This will elucidate some of the ways in which we have been habituated to interpret suffering as a moral punishment. In this context, the desire to sequester

oneself from pain is logical. However, this distancing and cordoning off oneself leads, in part, to othering. I will discuss the Western relationship between pain and imagination with reference to Elaine Scarry's (American, 1946) book *The Body in Pain*. Next, I will describe Saidiya Hartman's (American, 1961) thoughts in her work *Innocent Amusements* on the spectacle of Black suffering and the possibilities and dangers of empathy. I will then turn to the conceptions on the use of vulnerability, with an emphasis on bodily susceptibility, for creating empathy and connections in the works of Susan Sontag (American, 1933-2004), Judith Butler (American, 1956), and Sara Ahmed (British-Australian, 1969).

#### Historical Account of Western Aesthetics of Pain

In philosopher Umberto Eco's book *On Ugliness*, he identifies the representation of pain as a category of ugliness. In this we recognize a link between suffering and aesthetic judgement. Contemporary Western aesthetic classifications are, of course, traceable to predominantly Greek and Roman antiquity. These ancient cultures produced a great deal of literature forming an analogy between physical ugliness and moral evil.<sup>1</sup> Bodies were believed to reveal the secrets of the soul, therefore making people legible in the ways their bodies were formed and marked. Inferior bodies, and therefore immoral souls, were feminine/feminized, disabled/pathologized, and foreign/othered. Male bodies were considered hot, strong, dry, compact, and impervious to penetration while female bodies were the opposite: cold, weak, moist, and porous.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, any body that became sick or vulnerable to penetration was

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness* (Rizzoli, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Henning, *Hell Hath No Fury: Gender, Disability, and the Invention of Damned Bodies in Early Christian Literature* (Yale University Press, 2021), 25.

feminized. Feminized bodies were considered unruly and difficult to keep in order, requiring discipline, regulation, and tending. While there was no single word for “disability” in antiquity, present day understanding of disabilities were thought of as deficiencies that would require a person to be removed from active social participation.<sup>3</sup> Vulnerable corporal existence was enmeshed with judgments of ethical behaviour and within that paradigm, bodily difference was considered punishment for moral failing. Beliefs about bodily difference provided the structure for a penal system that sorted the righteous and unrighteous.

Christianity was conceived under Roman imperial rule and colonial oppression. The Christian faith relied heavily on the Greek and Roman concept of Hades and on the Jewish legacy of the Apocalypse. Rather than critiquing ideologies of judgement, torture, and punishment, the Christian concept of *productive suffering* developed; both “instructive suffering” to repent from sin before eternal judgement and “juridical suffering,” such as torture, believed to reveal truth. Weeping, shaking and other involuntary movements during trial were considered signs of guilt, as was suffering during torture, especially because of the associations with perceived othered corporeality (weak, porous, susceptible). Representations of Jesus and his torment are some of the earliest Christian imagery, becoming the foundation for future art practices in the West. At first this presented a conundrum for early Christian artists; how to represent Jesus’ suffering without disfiguring him and, therefore, associating him with immorality? One strategy, borrowed from antiquity, was to depict the tormented body but leave the face untouched by pain. *Laocoön and His Sons* (Figure 1), from the Hellenic period, would be such a precedent: an

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<sup>3</sup> Henning, 35.

anguished body incongruently paired with a serene face. This practice spread widely: pairing Jesus' lacerated, bleeding body and beatific, placid face (Figure 2). Saints and other zealots developed a symbolic disdain for their bodies in the forms of self-flagellation, fasting, and torture. Their faces became the site of transcendence, looking beyond embodied suffering and its disfiguring power (Figure 3).

As Suzannah Biernoff notes in her essay *Picturing Pain*, pain is not designated an *emotion* and is not included in the facial expressions considered universal (Figure 4).<sup>4</sup> Without additional cues including vocalization, actions, and context an image can be, and often is, misread. We rely on context, but also on socialization to *understand* that context. In fact, the performance of pain is very much informed by culture. Pain, itself, is something we “do” rather than something we “experience.” It is an aggregate of body, mind, and culture that is negotiated socially.<sup>5</sup> Bodies, now as in antiquity, are aesthetically marked by class, ethnicity, sexuality, dis/ability, illness, injury, and age.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, ugliness is not simply an aesthetic category, but also a *social* one. In the Western art tradition two aesthetic categories of suffering have emerged: “ugly suffering” and “beautiful suffering.” The performance of suffering, or “pain script” we follow, has a direct relationship with the impact on the observer and the response we get. In the West we have become habituated to value serenity and stoicism while enduring suffering. To perform pain differently, considered “incorrectly,” is to signal that, in fact, we deserve our pain, and that

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<sup>4</sup> Suzannah Biernoff, *Picturing Pain*, (UCL Press, 2021), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Biernoff, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Biernoff, 6.

suffering is endemic to our “othered” bodies. Contemporary Western artists and viewers have inherited these legacies of aesthetics, tropes, and pain scripts both overt and unconscious.

### Elaine Scarry: Pain and Imagination

Elaine Scarry, in her book *The Body in Pain*, describes pain’s power to elude description; its relationship with imagination; its aesthetics formed by Christianity; and its mystifying presence in others. “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it,” she states, “bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.”<sup>7</sup> Despite its elusiveness to description, Scarry recognizes a very close relationship between physical pain and imagination. She explains that pain is an exceptional experience in the entire fabric of psychotic, somatic, and perceptual states.<sup>8</sup> It has no object, which makes it different from every other psychic or bodily event; it has no “of ” or “for.”<sup>9</sup> The only other state that comes close to pain is imagination, however, instead of having *no* object it is *wholly* its object.<sup>10</sup> She places imagination and pain as each other’s missing intentional counterpart.<sup>11</sup> According to Scarry, humans make *artefacts* with which to diminish pain. This process externalizes and objectifies imagination.<sup>12</sup> However, the more elaborate the artefact becomes, the greater the amount of work must be put into interpreting it by viewers. This is an important consideration for artists when creating artworks (a type of artefact) regarding the work of interpretation by the audience. Therefore, when

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<sup>7</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (Oxford University Press, 1985, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Scarry, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Scarry, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Scarry, 13

<sup>11</sup> Scarry, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Scarry, 16.

representing pain in artwork, artists must consider the accessibility of the message of the work to an audience.

Scarry describes Western civilization's characterization by two major attributes. The first is Judeo-Christian frameworks of belief and the second, a thrust toward material self-expression (artefacts).<sup>13</sup> She draws many themes and imagery from Christianity to explain the West's relationship to both pain and imagination. Christianity aspires to heavenly disembodiment and God's greatness, to a large extent, is due to his non corporeal form. On the other hand, God threatens and inflicts hurt to punish disobedience, immorality, cruelty, and doubt. In these scenes of wounding, moral righteousness lies with the most articulate.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, a strong cultural belief is formed in the bonding of **speech/free of pain/goodness** and **silence/pained/sinful**.

Scarry describes the difficulty in understanding the pain of others, as it often seems distant or invisible.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I suggest that there is the potential for the artist to take up the labour of imagination as gestures toward shared vulnerability. While very difficult, Scarry does hold hope for artistic works to evoke the imagination and critical reflection. Scarry explains, "the human being who creates on behalf of the pain in her own body may remake herself to be one who creates on behalf of the pain originating in another's body."<sup>16</sup> Scarry believes that only literature is up to that task. I suggest that since images arrived at about the same time as

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<sup>13</sup> Scarry, 14.

<sup>14</sup> Scarry, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Scarry, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Scarry, 324.

spoken language in human history, and well before the written word, they are paralinguistic. Images communicate in ways that can begin to circumvent annihilated speech and reach across the expanse of invisible pain. Scarry states, “the body in pain is the making and unmaking of the world”<sup>17</sup>, and I think it important to respond to the creative potential in the “making.” Like Scarry, I also believe that the audience must bring intention to the art encounter (artefact) and, for empathy to be translated into action, the willingness to work (interpretation).

### Saidiya Hartman: Spectator or Witness

In her chapter *Innocent Amusements* from *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the Nineteenth Century America*, Saidiya Hartman questions the efficacy of empathy. She describes the slipperiness of empathy; the relationships between White happiness and Black suffering; and the roles of witnessing and hypervisibility. Hartman addresses empathy, to a large extent, within the dichotomy of those who see and those who are seen; optical relationality. She describes historical staged scenes in “which crime becomes spectacle.”<sup>18</sup> Hartman acknowledges the wish to use pain as a point of commonality and thus extend humanity to the dispossessed. However, Hartman notes that frequently even the sincerest intermediaries become caught up in their own imagination, replacing the sufferer with themselves. She states that this is the difficulty and slipperiness of empathy.<sup>19</sup> The work of imagination in these cases makes use of the Black body as a ground for White identity, which is

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<sup>17</sup> Scarry, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 17.

<sup>19</sup> Hartman, 18.



yet another exploitation of the vulnerable captive. The White body replaces the Black to make it visible and intelligible.<sup>20</sup> Pain is only as “real” to the degree it can be imagined. The denial of Black sentience also returns the Black body to the realm of object and property. Hartman calls this solipsism the repressive effects of empathy.<sup>21</sup>

Hartman also makes connections between White happiness and Black suffering. The Black body, especially in the US slavery context, is a vehicle for White happiness since it provides in various ways power, pleasure, and profit.<sup>22</sup> The relationship between possession and pleasure of slaves makes valuing Black life a complicated process. Hartman calls this the fungibility of the slave body.<sup>23</sup> The result is that the Black body becomes abstracted and empty, its value is in being a vessel to hold White happiness. It also becomes a symbol of wealth and domination in the form of chattel. White happiness becomes contingent on Black suffering since the rights of Whites are undergirded by the subjection of Blacks. These associations entangle questions of possible aesthetic enjoyment or happiness when looking at images of Black suffering. In the Black/slave and White/master relation, there is unidirectional looking. As Hartman states, witnessing is entangled with power. Slaves were subject to degrading hypervisibility, not having the right to obscurity. Because of this and the demand to please, they were forced to disavow their emotions and pain. Therefore, the history of ocular relations between Blacks and Whites is imbricated with control. This gaze relationship of domination complicates the act of looking at or witnessing suffering, especially when it is White observation upon Black bodies.

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<sup>20</sup> Hartman, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Hartman, 20

<sup>22</sup> Hartman, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Hartman, 21.

Hartman describes the precariousness of empathy and the thin line between witness and spectator.<sup>24</sup> She concludes that empathy is unstable and, in fact, has the propensity to obliterate the sufferer by the phantasmic image of the empathizer. Empathy is also dangerous because it provides a too easy sense of intimacy with the one in pain.<sup>25</sup> If the humanity of the slave is found at the site of pain, if that is the point at which connection is found, then pain becomes *conditional* for recognition.

#### The Uses of Vulnerability and Empathy: Susan Sontag, Judith Butler, and Sara Ahmed

Susan Sontag, in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, questions the morality of viewing others' suffering. She states, "as objects of contemplation, images of the atrocious can answer to several different needs. To steel oneself against weakness. To make oneself more numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible."<sup>26</sup> While Sontag draws a line between photographs and painting (or other art forms), it is still relevant to apply her theories when analyzing images that represent actual suffering of real people. Sontag points out that there is an important difference between an emotional and a moral response and attributes slow reaction rates to atrocities as being due to the difficulty in translating emotions into action. Therefore, she questions the ability for images of suffering to incite action against violence and oppression. Sontag notes that these images have the tendency to overwhelm and paralyze.

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<sup>24</sup> Hartman, 17.

<sup>25</sup> Hartman, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Sontag, S. *Regarding the Pain of Others*, (Picador, 2003), 98.

Additionally, she believes compassion is an unstable emotion.<sup>27</sup> Empathy gives the viewer emotional release, the feeling of having completed some emotional labour, and a false sense of innocence. Sontag insists that the conception of empathy must be replaced by a focus on political practices.

Judith Butler explores whose pain is representable in her text *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Butler avoids the word “empathy” given its fraught nature, since it often relies on recognition of the other through perceived *likeness*. Therefore, she describes an interdependency of humans, which defines the ethical and social domains of politics and performativity. Vulnerability is unequally distributed across various communities, as is grievability. Butler states that vulnerability must be extended to *all* human life, and because of that, an interdependency. She states that “part of what the body is... is its dependency on other bodies and networks of support.”<sup>28</sup> She says that when we are confronted with images of suffering, we are being confronted with ethical solicitations.<sup>29</sup> She also states that responsibility for ethical behaviour may well be elicited through non-consensual channels, but we must respond, nonetheless.<sup>30</sup> Butler advocates for a community that, at the very least, is based on shared time of embodied vulnerability and dependence.

Sara Ahmed also addresses questions of vulnerability and empathy. She, too, demarcates a difference in response and responsibility. She advocates not so much for sharing feelings of hurt as for noticing what *causes* hurt, which can mean unlearning what we have learned not to

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<sup>27</sup> Sontag, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, J. *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, (Harvard University Press, 2015), 130.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, 101.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, 103.

notice.<sup>31</sup> “We have to do work,” she states, “if we are to produce critical understandings of how violence, as a relation of force and harm, is directed toward some bodies and not others.”<sup>32</sup> She reminds us that racism and colonialism continue to exist in the present and the way we “bring those histories” into the room is significant.<sup>33</sup> However, the “killjoy here is asking for more, not less: asking for us to complicate the materials; to situate the materials; to consider how materials can create ripples in how they move us: matter as motion, as deviation.”<sup>34</sup> Ahmed explains that it is collective work to keep spaces open, for both hurt and reason, especially in relation to the painful.<sup>35</sup>

Sontag, Butler, and Ahmed all locate the role of empathy as part of relations between people.

They all agree that it isn’t enough, on its own, and perhaps immoral if not acted upon.

Therefore, the impetus to *act* is very important for all three. All three authors acknowledge that images of pain come into our purview incessantly, and often without our consent. Our reactions, emotions, or responses may affect us in a myriad of ways: horror, disgust, sadness, hurt, empathy etc. The most important step, as described by all three, is then to *act* upon the emotions you have assessed and analyzed.

## Conclusion

Western aesthetics of pain are counterintuitive to the assumed result of images of suffering.

Many artists hope to evoke empathy and elicit action by representing the pain of others.

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<sup>31</sup> Ahmed, S. *Feminist Hurt/Feminism Hurts*, (Manchester University Press, 2018), 61.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmed, 61.

<sup>33</sup> Ahmed, 63.

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, 64.

However, as we have seen, there is a long tradition in the West of linking suffering with othered bodies and silence. *Actual* expressions of pain contradict historic values of stoicism: contorted faces, unstable bodies, and loss of speech in moans. Scarry describes a fundamental relationship between pain and imagination but emphasizes both how language is annihilated by pain and how it is extremely difficult to recognize and represent the pain of others. Hartman, on the other hand, is extremely wary of the uses of empathy. She concludes that it is not the correct approach to Black suffering. Instead, she hopes for an oppositional culture, with glimmerings of insurgency and transformation. Sontag, Butler, and Ahmed share a view of contingency and interconnectedness as a mode of relationality towards social justice and ethical behaviour. Each acknowledges empathy, but none have faith in it, alone, to enact this change. For many reasons empathy is unstable and an unsuitable basis for coalitions or care. Action, with an eye on the structures that uphold White supremacy, oppression, and vulnerability are needed. The representation of pain in visual art has the potential to reify the suffering of that body: the suffering body is othered and the other is destined to suffer. Artists must work carefully and with intention if they wish to avoid further harming the vulnerable and may more successfully do so if they consider the uses of empathy and ways of stimulating action in viewers.

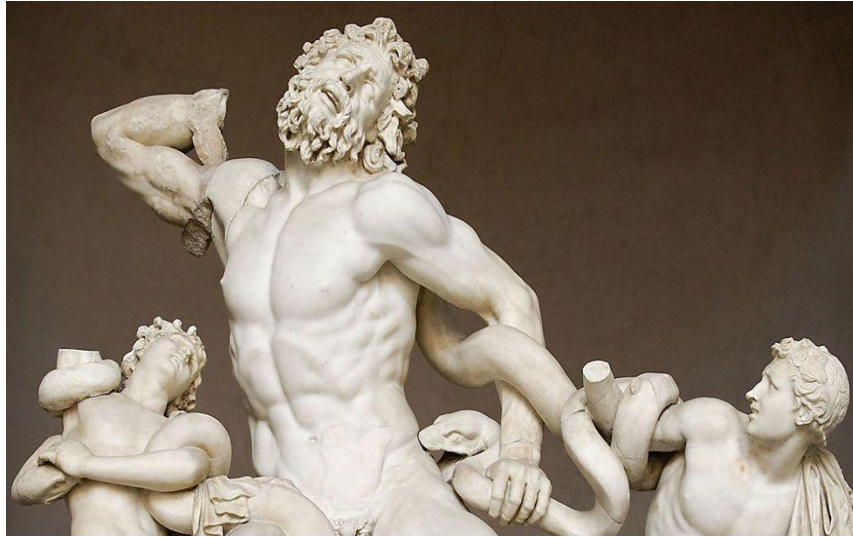


Figure 1 *Laocoön and His Sons*, marble sculpture from Hellenistic Period, 323 BCE-31 CE



Figure 2 Earliest known crucifixion in an illuminated manuscript, Syriac Rabbula Gospels, 586 CE



Figure 3, Peter Paul Rubens, *St Sebastian*, 1614



Figure 4, examples of universal facial expressions

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