



On Photography

Susan Sontag

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First published in 1973, this is a study of the force of photographic images which are continually inserted between experience and reality. Sontag develops further the concept of 'transparency'. When anything can be photographed and photography has destroyed the boundaries and definitions of art, a viewer can approach a photograph freely with no expectations of discovering what it means. This collection of six lucid and invigorating essays, the most famous being "In Plato's Cave", make up a deep exploration of how the image has affected society.

On Photography Details

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Trevor says

This was terribly interesting, but I think you needed to know a little more than Sontag explained to understand where she is coming from in all this. The important thing to remember is that Plato wanted to banish the artists and he wanted to do this for a very good reason. To Plato the world we live in isn't really the real world – the real world is a world we cannot have access to, the real world is where things never die, things remain the same and don't change. Change and death, to Plato, are proof that the world we live in isn't the real world. So, Plato saw the world we live in as a world of shadows, that is, one step away from reality. Art was therefore two steps away from reality and was therefore a copy of a copy. For Plato what we needed to do was get closer to reality, not further away from it. Therefore, he needed to banish artists from his ideal society as they move us away from reality towards images - that is more shadows.

So, for as long as we have had idealist philosophy we have had a problem between images, reality and how we can go about understanding the differences between the one and the other. This might sound like quite a trivial problem, but it is actually incredibly important. As Margaret Wertheim shows in her *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*, how we have understood space has fundamentally changed how we have understood reality. Prior to the Renaissance space in artworks was depicted not to represent an 'accurate' picture of what people saw – but rather to show relative importance. So, God is huge and the angels are somewhat smaller and the king is smaller still, and the rest of us are tiny. The Renaissance developed perspective painting and with it helped to create the revolution in science that required a revolution in how we saw space, not as a frame for morality to be played out within, but as a plane for the unraveling of amoral and disinterested forces. As Sontag says in this work, "But the notions of image and reality are complementary. When the notion of reality changes, so does that of the image, and vice versa." Page 125

In many ways Sontag wants to turn Plato on his head. Plato would have had serious problems with photography. His main problem would have been the seeming accuracy of photographs. As Sontag says, "Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it." Page 3 Or perhaps more importantly, "Photography is the reality; the real object is often experienced as a letdown. Photographs make normative an experience of art that is mediated, second-hand, intense in a different way." Page 115

She plays with this idea of photographs being more real than reality throughout the book. Hard to put this point more pointedly than when she says, "Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form." Page 18 And breathtakingly, "It is common for people to insist about their experience of a violent event in which they were caught up—a plane crash, a shoot-out, a terrorist bombing—that 'it seemed like a movie.'" Page 126

Photography gets to be 'evidence' because, "In the fairy tale of photography the magic box insures varacity and banishes error, compensates for inexperience and rewards innocence." Page 41 The problem is that not only can photographs lie – something we still struggle to believe – but they lie on every level. They lie because they are a selective choice of what reality we intent to show. They lie because most photographs are anything but what people think they are – an accurate representation of what is photographed. This point needs a bit of explaining. Think about what happens to you when someone holds a camera up towards you. It is nearly impossible not to pose. But that means that what you get a photograph of isn't really 'you', but instead an image of you posing in front of a camera. As she points out, "That photographs are often praised for their candour, their honesty, indicates that most photographs, of course, are not candid." Page 66

We like to think that photographs explain the world to us and help us to understand it, but again she is savage in debunking this idea. "Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks." Page 17 To really understand the world involves seeing the world as a process, in action, in time. But a camera – a still camera at least – cannot capture the process of life. The problem is that to understand a thing means, "understanding ... how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand." Page 18 However, the veracity of images gives them an authenticity that confuses and bewilders us. And this is where the caption comes in. We look at the image and we see time frozen. We see a captured instant in what, to be understood, needs to be a continuum. The 'context' to understand this instant is added often by words, by language, by a caption. The relationship is a difficult one, but one that needs to be acknowledged: "'This photograph, like any photograph,' Godard and Gorin point out, 'is physically mute. It talks through the mouth of the text written beneath it.' In fact, words do speak louder than pictures. Captions do tend to override the evidence of our eyes; but no caption can permanently restrict or secure a picture's meaning." Page 84

And this brings us to what I think is the main point – and back to Plato again. For Plato 'the truth' is what we need to spend a lifetime seeking, even if we are sure of only one thing – that we will never find that truth. The Greek word for truth is *Aletheia*. It means to uncover, unconceal. While Plato is seeking to get us to turn away from reality to see the reality beyond the apparent, photography also gets us to turn away from the real world, but as a way to get us to see the real world that is hidden in plain sight. Sontag again, "All that photography's program of realism actually implies is the belief that reality is hidden. And, being hidden, is something to be unveiled." Page 94

A lot of this book concerns the relationship between painting and photography. Painting is clearly an art form – and not just for the snobbish reason that it has a history going back as far as people go back, but also because to paint is to interpret. To paint is to put something of yourself into a painting. But it is very hard for a photographer to be truly original in the way painters can be. And this makes sense of something she points out about paintings and photographs, "It makes sense that a painting is signed but a photograph is not (or seems bad taste if it is)." Page 104 But also that, "there is no internal evidence for identifying as the work of a single photographer..." Page 105

Painting is also a high-art form. She makes the point that art is hard work, "Classical modernist painting presupposes highly developed skills of looking, and a familiarity with other art and with certain notions about art history." Page 102 But photography presents itself as realism – realism in the sense that all you need are a pair of eyes to understand what is being shown to you. Of course, this is anything but the case, but we will get to that in a second.

Photography isn't so much interested in the beautiful, she says at one point, "In photography's early decades, photographs were expected to be idealised images. This is still the aim of most amateur photographers, for whom a beautiful photograph is a photograph of something beautiful, like a woman, a sunset." Page 22 Rather photography makes the mundane and even the ugly 'beautiful' – beautiful in the sense that the very act of photographing it gives it an interest and fascination. Worse than this, not only have photographs turned everything into the potentially beautiful, but by presenting so many objects before us as objects of erotic or voyeuristic pleasure (I mean this in the broadest possible sense) photography is guilty of dulling our senses to the truly horrible. "Much of modern art is devoted to lowering the threshold of what is terrible." Page 32

But even this is only partly true. Sometimes the opposite is also the case. At one point she describes going to see an operation performed in a Chinese hospital – she observed this and although it sounds gruesome in all the ways we expect operations to be, she was able to watch the whole thing with more fascination than revulsion. But, amusingly enough, she wasn't able to watch a film made of nearly exactly the same thing. She explains this by saying, "One is vulnerable to disturbing events in the form of photographic images in a way that one is not to the real thing. That vulnerability is part of the distinctive passivity of someone who is a

spectator twice over, spectator of events already shaped, first by the participants and second by the image maker.” Page 132

The ideological role photography plays in a particular society depends on the nature of the guiding ideology of that society. She makes wonderful use of a few stories from China about what makes a good photograph. She discusses a series of photographs taken by a Western photographer that the Chinese protested against. These showed rather candid photographs of the Chinese going about their daily lives. The Chinese critic found that idea repulsive about the photographs. The people photographed had been violated because they had not been given the opportunity to present themselves to the camera. Also, the images focused on parts of objects and of people. This too was seen by the Chinese as disrespectful. The images the Chinese government approved of were more likely to be of the ‘Unknown Citizen Lei Feng – someone too good to be true and therefore worthy of emulation. As Sontag says, “In China, what makes an image true is that it is good for people to see it.” Page 137 That is, not the images literal truth – which everyone probably knows is almost certainly staged - but rather the truth as it ‘ought’ to be. Yet again, another hidden truth.

But if she is savage about Communist propaganda photography, she is hardly soft on Capitalist propaganda photography either. “A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera’s twin capacities, to subjectivize reality and to objectify it, ideally serve these needs and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumptions requires the unlimited production and consumption of images.” Page 140

I am going to end with something – as someone who was born in Belfast – I found utterly fascinating. It is a quote she has at the end of the book – the last chapter is actually just a series of interesting quotes from famous people and ads about the nature of photography. The best of these is a quote from Kafka. But this quote from the *New York Times* literally stopped me: “The people of Belfast are buying picture postcards of their city’s torment by the hundreds. The most popular shows a boy throwing a stone at a British armored car.” Page 156 (from *New York Times* 29 Oct 1974)

I said before that Sontag doesn’t believe we can use photographs to understand – that photographs show the apparent, and to understand means to go beyond the appearance. But I think this quote on Belfast shows that photographs can help us to reach some kind of understanding. The people of Belfast in 1974 (with nearly 30 years of the Troubles ahead of them) were confronted by something that must have seemed completely alien to them – civil war in the streets of their home town. That is, they would have been confronted daily with the bizarre, surreal, unreality of what was a new reality forever ready to assert its own all-too-real-ness. How does one come to terms with this new ‘reality’? Photographs helped them to make sense of such a surreal world.

“Neil Shawcross, a Belfast man, bought two complete sets of the cards, explaining, ‘I think they’re interesting mementoes of the times and I want my children to have them when they grow up.’” Little did he know his children would have far more mementoes of those times in their own growing up.

This is a fascinating book and rightly a classic on photography.

Jamie says

The first 2-3 essays of the book are just astonishing. I've been perusing Sontag's journals for the past year or so, and her intellectual range leads you perilously near to pure jealousy, but then you concede her anomalous mind and simply admire it instead. This seemingly limitless curiosity and brute capacity for knowledge is best exhibited in those first 2-3 essays (particularly the first two, which is why I keep saying "2-3"), and also remains less cloyingly didactic there. For example, her consideration of Diane Arbus at length maintains a level of contemplation and engagement - a recognition of both the potentially nihilistic and exploitative registers of Arbus's "freak" work and its power of imagination and sideways cultural commentary - that falls by the wayside in the latter half of the book, where I felt lectured to in a more dogmatic mode. The later essays tend to sound polemical, in the negative sense of that word, rather than exploratory.

This, for me, is the key difference between someone like Sontag and someone like Didion, to whom comparisons - at least I've noticed this lately - are often drawn. Sontag centers her self in the essays; Didion seeks always to efface herself, though this effacement can be even more telling than Sontag's calling her own bluff. Point being, Sontag can sometimes irk me because her sexy essayistic writing begins to feel claustrophobic; I feel as if I've been seduced into agreeing necessarily with points that aren't as fully developed as they could be. I want to feel that a claim is arguable, and that the writer has enabled dialogue. In the later essays of this book, Sontag writes her readers into a corner. Either way, certainly the most exciting writing on photography I've read.

Maciek says

I've never read anything by Susan Sontag, but encountered mentions of her book *On Photography* numerous times in various contexts. It's hailed as "one of the most highly regarded books of its kind". I like taking photographs myself, and thought I would find it interesting.

Those seeking a well-constructed history of photography, its development and an introduction to various schools and movements of photography - as I did - are likely to be disappointed. *On Photography* has no central thesis, and is a collection of essays "about the meaning and career of photographs" as described by Sontag herself. This isn't a book on photography - it's a book on Susan Sontag.

Although she writes about a wealth of photographers, Sontag doesn't explore any of them in depth - she moves from one to another very quickly, and often they are reduced to backgrounds for her own thoughts and opinions on photographs, which often include comparisons and references to other media. This can make for some very dense reading - I thought that the book suffered painfully from a lack of a central thesis.

My biggest gripe with the book is that while by nature it has to be a polemic - it contains no bibliography or citations - Sontag constantly makes sweeping generalizations about both photography and photographers without offering any explanation. She presents her opinions as if they were facts, entirely without nuance, leaving no room for disagreement. To give her credit she has a multitude of opinions, and to praise or dismiss them all completely out of hand would be unfair, but many of her claims are very dubious: such as stating that tourists who enjoy taking snapshots of what they see do it because they know no other response, and for some it's the only way to appease their anxiety about not working (citation needed, unless we're going to stereotype whole nations).

There are other claims that Sontag makes, which do real harm to all the otherwise good ideas she might have presented as they howl at us straight from loon territory. Although Sontag writes that *the camera doesn't rape, or even possess*, there is nonetheless *an aggression implicit in every use of the camera*, as it may

presume, intrude, trespass, distort, exploit, and, at the farthest reach of metaphor, assassinate - all from a distance. And are you thinking dirty thoughts when you see a long-focus lens? Apparently you're not alone, and you're not even aware that you're doing it:

The camera as phallus is, at most, a flimsy variant of the inescapable metaphor that everyone unselfconsciously employs. However hazy our awareness of this fantasy, it is named without subtlety whenever we talk about "loading" and "aiming" a camera, about "shooting" a film.

(We all know that phalluses shoot, but how does one load a phallus?)

Like guns and cars, cameras are fantasy-machines whose use is addictive. However, despite the extravagances of ordinary language and advertising, they are not lethal. In the hyperbole that markets cars like guns, there is at least this much truth: except in wartime, cars kill more people than guns do. The camera/gun does not kill, so the ominous metaphor seems to be all bluff—like a man's fantasy of having a gun, knife, or tool between his legs.

I don't know about others, but I never had a fantasy of having a gun or knife between my legs - I like what's there just fine the way it is! But it gets worse:

Still, there is something predatory in the act of taking a picture. To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder—a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.

Melodramatic writing like this strikes me as beyond silly; the idea that people might not only consent to be photographed but *want* to have their photograph taken and actively seek that opportunity is never considered. While it's a good paragraph from a literary perspective - cameras become guns, people are possessed by celluloid voodoo, and taking their photos is just a slightly better way of murdering them - it's the kind of writing that George Orwell famously described as being designed to "*give an appearance of solidity to pure wind*".

All these essays have been written in the 1970's, long before the advent of both the internet and digital photography - which has transformed the medium completely, as it's now surrounding us completely, included in everything that we do. What would Susan Sontag say about people chuckling at funny cat pictures? I'm afraid the thought didn't even cross her mind. The malicious motives that Susan Sontag gives to all photographers have been largely replaced with people sharing the joy of taking photographs with others: people take photographs of themselves and share them with each other, connecting in ways which were previously impossible. I've read that Susan Sontag later turned back from some of the views that she held while writing *On Photography* - it's a shame this self-dissent was not included.

Michael says

Written in cool and caustic prose, *On Photography* consists of seven meditations on the medium's ethics, social uses, and history. Sontag drops epigram after epigram, aphorism after aphorism, in these contentious essays, as she speeds through considering the subjects of photography's most famous practitioners, be it the rural towns of Roy Stryker or the "freaks" of Diane Arbus. Despite the essays' fast pace, the work as a whole lacks anything approaching a coherent direction or central thesis. It meanders, excessively. Far from wanting to develop a cogent argument, Sontag so often seems most concerned with provoking thought and daring her readers to challenge her assertions. Unsympathetic readers likely will find Sontag to be imperious, but those

willing to engage with her thought will find themselves rewarded.

Amari says

I found this book utterly maddening. I'm giving it four stars not for the content itself, but for the quality of thinking I did while reading.

I'm rather surprised not to have found any comments in other reviews regarding Sontag's horrific tactlessness in her discussions of "freaks" (in the context of Diane Arbus' work). Less shocking but also disappointing: her wholesale dismissal of the Surrealists, or as she calls them two or three times, the Surrealist "militants", which they decidedly were not.

Overall, I found the writing -- while at times illuminating -- overwhelmingly and groundlessly judgmental. Sontag's logic is often very, very dubious; she is as dangerous as Camus (I'm thinking of *Le mythe de Sisyphe*) when it comes to the seductiveness of fine, well-articulated prose which uses its own music to trick the reader into believing the message. Beware.

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Walter Underwood says

This is the worst book I've read about photography. It isn't even about photography, it is about Susan Sontag consistently misunderstanding photographs. It isn't intellectual, either. It is her emotional responses to the shallowest possible reading of photographs.

The defining moment is in the appendix of quotations, the only good part of the book. The first quote is from the notebooks of William Henry Fox Talbot, one of the earliest photographers. He wrote, "Make picture of kaleidoscope." This idea of photography as painting with light is utterly outside the simplistic readings of photography in Sontag's book.

Don't waste your time. Instead, find a copy of *READING PHOTOGRAPHS* or *Diana & Nikon: Essays on Photography* or read the essays on photographers in Janet Malcom's latest, *Forty-one False Starts: Essays on Artists and Writers*.

Katie says

On hold. While fascinating, 'every sentence contains a thought' is not as fun as it sounds.

Anna says

Żyjemy w epoce obrazów. Współczesny człowiek przyswaja je dużo szybciej niż tekst. I może choćby dlatego warto sobie przypomnieć, co o fotografiach pisała Susan Sontag w swoich esejach, które rok temu wydało w nowym, odwołanym tłumaczeniu wydawnictwo Karakter. „O fotografii” jest w tej chwili pozycją już niemal kultową. Choć zbiór ukazał się po raz pierwszy w 1977 roku, to nie stracił tak bardzo na aktualności.

Teksty ze zbioru „O fotografii” wolne są od technicznego żargonu. Nie ma tu mowy o naświetlaniu, przysłonie czy ekspozycji. Pojawiają się za to takie słowa jak kompozycja, perspektywa czy układ. Można więc powiedzieć, że Sontag podchodzi do analizy problemu zdjęć bardziej jak do malarstwa, choć wyraźnie wskazuje w jednym z esejów, że między tymi dwoma sztukami może być więcej różnic niż podobieństw, jeżeli się na nie spojrzy z odpowiedniej strony. W swoich rozważaniach nie poświęca technicznej stronie fotografowania zbyt wiele miejsca, gdyż to co najważniejsze kryje się na zdjęciach, a nie w sposobie ich robienia.

Sontag w mistrzowski sposób konstruuje w każdym eseju spójny wywód. Nierzadko korzysta z dygresji, niekiedy tak szerokich, że aż trudno uwierzyć, że uda jej się wrócić do początkowego tematu. A jednak wraca, choć z sobą wiele wątków poruszanych w refleksyjny sposób i zamyka całość klamrą kompozycyjną, która zachwyci czytelników zwracających uwagę nie tylko na treść, lecz również formę eseju.

W typowy dla siebie sposób autorka drży temat, wyciskając z niego wszystko, co się da. Zauważa dualizm fotografii i pisze o niej w sposób, który sugeruje, że tak wielkiego i skomplikowanego zjawiska nie da się jednoznacznie ocenić. Fotografia uwrażliwia, ale i znieczula. Pokazuje zarówno piękno świata jak i jego brzydotę. Wzbogaca i zubaża widzenie rzeczywistości. Sontag jest w swoich rozważaniach bezwzględna. Jej spostrzegawczemu oku, nic nie jest w stanie umknąć. Ocenia, analizuje i snuje refleksje, zmuszając odbiorcę jej pracy do ciągłego zastanawiania się nad podejmowanym problemem. Co ważne, z tymi tekstami można polemizować. Nie ma tu konkretnych tez czy teorii, za którymi należałoby podjąć się. Autorka zadaje raczej pytania, poddaje niektóre zjawiska w wątpliwość, sama szuka odpowiedzi, starając się patrzeć na fotografie i jej autorów z jak najszerzej perspektywy.

Niektórzy mogą twierdzić, że teksty Sontag są już nieaktualne. Ale czy rzeczywiście? Bez wątpienia wynalezienie aparatu fotograficznego, a następnie ułatwienie do niego dostępu zmieniło nasze postrzeganie świata. Inaczej patrzymy na otaczających nas ludzi, naturę, miasta, w których mieszkamy i wszystko inne, co nas otacza. Za pomocą zdjęć staramy się nie tylko utrwalić dany moment naszego życia, ale przede wszystkim go sobie przywołać, podkreślając zażądanie jak kruche i ulotne są chwile. Może nie nosimy już ze sobą aparatów, lustrzanek czy kompaktów, bo wszystko, co potrzebne do wykonywania zdjęć mamy w telefonach. To z kolei w pewnym sensie zubaża i wiele zabiera całemu rytuałowi fotografowania. Zdjęcie jest tyle, że otacza nas z każdej strony. O tym wszystkim Sontag pisze w swoich esejach i aż dziw bierze, jak wiele można z nich współcześnie wyciągnąć.

Spostrzeżenia Sontag może nie są z punktu widzenia dzisiejszego czytelnika rewolucyjne albo nieważne. Są jednak trafne, a przede wszystkim, mogą niektórym ułatwić wagę problemu, o którym podświadomie już kiedyś się myślało. Nie od dziś wiadomo, że człowiek potrafi zmienić perspektywę patrzenia na jakiś problem, gdy ktoś inny opowie mu o nim w odpowiedni sposób. A prace Sontag można nazwać w tym takim opowiadaniem. Widać, jak wiele zaangażowania i pasji autorka zostawiła na kartach tego zbioru. Wiadczą o tym przenikliwość, ogromna wiedza oraz staranność prowadzenia wywodu.

Eseje podejmujące problem fotografii wzbudzają podziw. Dla wielu może być to ożywcza lektura, napisana lekkim, lecz błyskotliwym stylem. Dla innych z kolei, eseje będą zachwycały przede wszystkim aktualnością

spojrzenia, może zmusz do zastanowienia się nad niektórymi aspektami fotografii, która po lekturze prac Sontag wydaje się zjawiskiem wręcz kontrowersyjnym. Nikt inny nie potrafi w taki sposób zadawać pytań i zachęcać do rozmyślań na temat znaczenia i wartości obrazów, jednocześnie przybliżyć kilka sylwetek mistrzów ich utrwalania. Wydaje się, że takich prac nie wystarczy przeczytać raz. Wracaj do nich, może na wkażdy eseju odkrywamy coś nowego. A wracanie do pióra Sontag to sama przyjemność.

Diana says

This is a classic book of essays about how photography reveals so much about society, politics, history, and our attitudes towards preserving the image and the potential "truth" inherent in a photograph.

I don't read much nonfiction, and this was originally for a class, but there isn't a single person I wouldn't recommend this to.

David says

To think this was published in 1973 - when photographs were just mementos and souvenirs. What have they become now, in the age of the selfie? Sontag, Barthes, Benjamin, etc - many people have written about the semiotics and significance of photography as an "art." Photography has been held up as a record of things "as they were" - "*photographs become exhibits in the trial that is history.*" says Walter Benjamin, comparing the subjects of photographs to crime scenes. But are photos still treated as such? In the age that we are in now, we seek in photographs not things "as they are" but rather ourselves as we could be - an angle or version of ourselves that exceeds our own appraisals and what we deem commensurate with reality. Whether the perfected art of the selfie, or the hundreds of photos taken to be riffled over, discarded, and retaken in search for the elusive one - our preference for modern photographs aligns more closely with creative art than with naturalistic reproduction or historical recording. But more than Benjamin or Barthes, who take at turns a mechanic and romantic view of the art of photography, Sontag's indictments of it seem particularly modern:

Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution.

It is true in our modern day, as it was apparent to Sontag 50 years ago, that people have become addicted to photographs, and indeed that this addiction is a mental pollution. It has given rise to the kind of vacuous celebrity as the Kardashian cadre, famous basically for their cumulative navel-gazing and insipid banter. Photography has not only made us obsessed with ourselves, but has also made us obsessed with the way we are viewed by others, and the way by which we view and judge others. We do not take pictures for ourselves, but for the vacant appeal to the unidentified masses - love me! But do not love me as I am, love me only as I aspire to be, as I can angle and contort myself to be, for the duration of a shutter-click.

I have thought considerably about this face-to-the-world society that we live in, for a few years now, and have found its parallel in art. Note the painting:

We see Venus, lying in bed, looking at herself in the mirror - or so we think. But if you examine the angles, you notice that it is not possible for her to be viewing her own face in the mirror, because the reflection facing the artist is head-on, it must be that what she sees is in fact the artist. Remove the artist and replace him with the figureless audience of society. It is a perversion of narcissism - not to look longingly at oneself, but to preen and present oneself, gazing into an abyss and hoping for the abyss to gaze back, approvingly.

To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.

For one, in a society so image-obsessed, the corrosion of beauty with age has made and supported the cosmetics industry to the gargantuan size that it has become. Photographs combat the effects of time. Like Dorian Gray's portrait, the series of photos we present to the world represent our best selves, which are impervious to age and destruction - the time and corrosion which we bear to preserve their beauty. Sontag is quite aware of the role photographs have in preserving a false sense of immortality. They preserve that which is endlessly fleeting. Barthes notes that the subjects of photos are "*anesthetized and fastened down, like butterflies*." They are images chained down and de-contextualized, they simply *are*, and are expected to speak for themselves, while simultaneously being gagged.

Yet we don't mind gagging ourselves, silencing ourselves, pinning ourselves down, chaining ourselves to a reality that is skewed and misrepresented - and for what? To appeal to strangers in the void of the internet. We have lost our ability to appreciate the attentions of individuals because we have become so fixated on appealing to the swarming masses. We do not seek love, but orgiastic attention.

Desire has no history - at least it is experienced in each instance as all foreground, immediacy. It is aroused by archetypes and is, in that sense, abstract. But moral feelings are embedded in history, whose personae are concrete, whose situations are always specific. Thus, almost opposite rules hold true for the use of the photograph to awaken desire and to awaken conscience.

The photos we take, and more importantly that we curate of ourselves, subvert the content and context of the photograph. We denature the image, we wash it clean of its history and re-contextualize it to suit ourselves best. We strip each photograph of all meaning so that we can window dress it in such and such a way that flatters our ego and the mannequin that we present to the discriminating masses. There are no morals to photographs - in fact they are tools of deceit, they are an immoral form of art, in that they masquerade as a form of representation and truth. Verisimilitude wearing the mask of veracity. Each photo I present of myself is only another piece of the fake-face I have constructed overtime. As online presence continues to take more and more precedence in our lives, the battle between who we are and who we present ourselves to be will come to a head. We cannot always be our best selfie. Our best photographs of ourselves eventually become photographs of someone who is dead, who is past - a previous version of ourselves that no longer exists and can never be reincarnated.

Luís C. says

A wonderful essay on the art of photography.

Vipassana says

I approached On Photography expecting a sense of warmth and intellect that Maria Popova paints Susan Sontag with. One essay in, I was slightly disappointed to feel no warmth. So, I read an interview of hers where the interviewer says the "yes and no" attitude is typical of her writing, something that I had experienced as well. She responds by saying that it is not yes and no, rather this but also that. She argues in defence of the premise of seriousness, an idea both close to my heart and valuable for the essays in this volume. Seriousness does not mean the heaviness equates it to, rather slow, deliberate rigour. A quality

present in all the essays as she entertains many aspects of photography for the benefit of the reader.

Sontag looks at photography from the perspective of the photo, the photographer and the viewer. She discusses how photography has changed the equation of an individual's association with the rest of the world in her essay, **In Plato's Cave**. Photographs fiddle with the scale that one is trained to see the world, and the notion of time that we have collectively accepted. An intriguing idea is that photography can only reinforce a moral position, not create one. This was one of the many ideas I hadn't thought about before, ideas that seemed to hold ground but I would have liked to discuss them. This is a really good book to read as a group.

I went through my notes and reread several parts of the collection after reading a review that chastised Sontag for her content, because it was very much unlike my reading. I'd noticed Sontag's euphemism free critique of Diane Arbus, yet I did not consider her derogatory. This is a contentious debate that will probably give rise to a lot of presentism sins, so I won't discuss that. On Diane Arbus' work, I'm not convinced she didn't approve of it. In **America, Seen through Photographs** she evokes Walt Whitman's notion that beauty and ugliness being immaterial in an inclusive embrace of the real. Arbus's wikipedia page suggests that *Sontag opposed the lack of beauty in Arbus' work and its failure to make the viewer feel compassionate about Arbus' subjects*. I checked the citations for it, a paper published after Sontag's death. I haven't read the paper but from my reading of this work, Sontag simply stated that Arbus' work wasn't meant to stir compassion.

Arbus's photographs - with their acceptance of the appalling - suggest a naivete which is both coy and sinister, for it is based on distance, on privilege, on a feeling that the viewer is asked to look at is really other. Bunuel, when asked once why he made movies, said it was "to show that this is not the best of all possible worlds." Arbus took photographs to show something simpler - that there is another world.

I agree with her and I love Arbus' work. For a person who hates taking pictures and having my picture taken, I really love Arbus for the same reason. Another piece from the New Yorker says she notes with bemusement of Arbus' subjects who are "pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive" look "cheerful, self-accepting, matter-of-fact." She wondered, "Do they know how grotesque they are? It seems as if they don't." They "appear not to know that they are ugly." Looking at how the author has cherry picked the statements. it looks like either a deliberate case of misconstruing what an author meant to say or not even trying to understand*. Sontag quotes Nietzsche, *To experience a thing as beautiful means: to experience it necessarily wrongly* and as I mentioned earlier, also Walt Whitman at the very beginning of the essay. These are the ideas she carries of beauty. Her statements on Arbus' photography and subjects are about how Arbus transcends the limited ideas of beauty, to produce a work that accepted another world.

Photography is not an art, it is a medium, like writing, than can be used to produce art, document events, entertain, lie and any other thing you want it too. The appeal of this idea is that in is accepting of the numerous claims of the "purpose of photography" that Sontag writes about.

As Wittgenstein argued for words, that the meaning is in the use - so for each photograph.

I've recently taken a fancy for the idea for vignettes and fragmented writing. Photographs are probably one of the most obvious forms of fragmentation and this essay makes a case against *the truths that can be rendered in a dissociated moment..* However significant a single event. it cannot embed a wholeness required to understanding. This idea reminds one of the role that the viewer plays in photography.

The last section, is a fascinating one. A homage to Walter Benjamin through **A Brief Anthology of Quotations**. Quotes from philosophers, photographers, and even ads of camera makers. There are quotes her that almost entirely oppose one and other. They all sit together in one chapter as if to mock the very ideas of true and false.

Taking photographs is an undeniable part of everyday life, and like all widely prevalent activities, it is not thought about by those who practice it. This makes Sontag's essay immensely valuable, especially because she doesn't really come to any conclusion. Of Photography, she says this, but also that.

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A guide to the photos mentioned in the essays - <http://darrananderson.com/2012/06/30/...>

*From this NYT piece, a much better condensation of what Sontag said of Arbus - The critic Susan Sontag divined that Arbus photographed "people who are pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive," from a vantage point "based on distance, on privilege, on a feeling that what the viewer is asked to look at is really other."

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May 21, 2015

Robert Isenberg says

Q: Why is this book called "On Photography"? Given that not one word of this book says sustains a single positive sentiment about cameras and their usage, why wouldn't it be called "Against Photography," or maybe "Photography is the Downfall of Human Kind."

This is not at all the book I thought it was. Given its most quoted statement, "To collect photographs is to collect the world," I expected a somewhat romantic vision of the photographic craft. Little did I know that Sontag credits photography with dehumanization, desensitization to violence and graphic imagery, and our alleged inability to experience reality in three dimensions. With every passing page, my jaw dropped further; how could a woman who was romantically involved with Annie Liebovitz abhor photography so much?

"On Photography" doesn't have any urgency at all, and though the essays are beautifully written, they strike me as the most misguided of her accomplishments -- melodrama posing as criticism.

Ally Armistead says

"On Photography" is the most brilliant book on photography I have ever read, or ever will read. Questioning the nature of photography--its purpose, meaning, future--Sontag forces us to consider revolutionary ideas about the simple act of "snapping" up the world.

Of her string of brilliant observations, my favorites include the notion that taking someone's picture is akin to participating in their mortality, the idea that as soon as a photograph is taken, we've witnessed a second of their life expiring.

Also equally powerful is the idea that photography--in the realm of war--is essentially encouraging whatever is happening "to keep happening," which is odd and cruel, Sontag claims, when your subject matter is suffering.

Sontag, too, explores the role of photography in the realm of the domestic American family, how those who take the most photographs were "robbed of their childhoods" and seek to create a world they can control and press into eternity. Similarly, photography becomes a creator of revised memory in families that, under the surface, experience great dysfunction, pain, and disconnectedness.

There are thousands of other gems in this genius book, and I can not recommend Sontag's meditation enough for photographers or anyone else disturbed by the prevalence of image in our society, what it means (when we really look at it), and the future of our psychology.

Jeremy Allan says

Like many people before me, I felt a certain dread the next time I tried to pick up my camera after reading this book. Susan Sontag's incredible, penetrating critique of photography doesn't just cast into doubt the value of the activity of taking a photograph, but it posits some of the irrevocable changes that the advent of this technology has had on our world and how we experience it. Anyone who reads this having previously nurtured an interest in photography at any level should experience a degree of nausea while reading. But at the same time, Sontag is genius enough to avoid condemning photography. She reveals the fissures, but doesn't try to fill them with some moral ballast. More than anything, she does what good critics do, she makes observations that open into still greater questions. I only wish she were still around to answer some of them now as we are fulling in the digital age of photography, where the concept of reproducibility has given way to something even more radical.

Mackenzie M-B says

Step one: buy this book.

Step two: find a writing utensil

Step three: go on the subway/metro/pvta and go!

you will want to underline just about every sentence because it is life changing. You will want to hug your camera and then throw it into a fire. You will never approach the world the same again.

Get ready.

Just do it.

And then go read Regarding the Pain of Others, because it will be like playing Candyland.

Hadrian says

A dense and theoretical book on a subject I know very little about. She refers to a vast collection of exhibits, and all I knew before is 'point a camera at a thing and press a button'.

Sontag is very forceful and eloquent in her opinions. I can see her turning Plato's idea of forms and representation right on its head, but the question of 'stealing' life or emotion by photography is a more puzzling one. Would it be possible to 'steal' others experiences and suffering in writing?

Sketchbook says

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