On Photography Study Guide

On Photography by Susan Sontag

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Susan Sontag's 1977 monograph On Photography is composed of six named chapters, or essays, which form a weakly related progression from conceptualization through history and implementation, to the then-current understanding of photography as a process and an art form. Sontag suggests that the central tension in all of photography is one of self-identification—is it merely a mimetic program of using a machine to manufacture representative images, or is it a high art equivalent to painting?

The six named chapters form a general progression through philosophical considerations to an examination of the historical processes that have led photography to the station it occupied in then-current society and culture. The first chapter, or essay, "In Plato's Cave", considers the nature of images and their relation to reality; it presents a catalogue of cultural and social beliefs about photography as well as a catalogue about photography's typical uses throughout history. The second chapter, or essay, "America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly", considers the social milieu obtained in the United States of America during the time of photography's initial penetration into commercial markets and artistic endeavors. The old-time school of euphoric humanism, as championed by Whitman, gave way to anti-humanism, realism, and Surrealism largely due to the camera's ability to produce images quickly and cheaply. The history of this change is documented with supporting evidence derived from the works of named photographers.

The third chapter, or essay, "Melancholy Objects", focuses on the Surrealist implementation of photography in the United States of America. The Surreal is only vaguely defined in the text, but numerous American photographers' work is considered and a relentless comparison of modern photography to Surrealist goals is presented. Additionally, the nature of reality and the interplay between images and reality is briefly considered. The fourth chapter or essay, "The Heroism of Vision", considers the effects of photographs upon perception. Like painting, yet essentially different, photography is now considered a high art, capable of illuminating the human experience. The methods used by photographers to create art are presented and considered.

The fifth chapter, or essay, "Photographic Evangels", briefly presents a history of photography's development, and then delves into the essential theme of the monograph—the very nature of photography. In a question that is not answered, Sontag explores the tension between two great photographic camps. On the one hand, many consider photography as nothing but a mechanical process whereby dependable representative images may be quickly and cheaply produced. On the other hand, many consider photography to be a high art, deserving of praise and inspection. The text presents evidence for both points of view and then concludes that the argument likely will persist as long as photography itself. The sixth chapter, or essay, "The Image-World", ends the monograph by presenting the fragile theory that images—of which most are photographs—are equivalent to reality. The text develops the theme without offering convincing support, and then briefly considers the early reaction of the literary arts to the advent of photography. The monograph concludes with an examination of the

differences of opinions about photography between American and Chinese culture and politics.

In Plato's Cave

In Plato's Cave Summary and Analysis

Sontag's 1977 monograph On Photography is composed of six named chapters, or essays, which form a weakly related progression from conceptualization through history and implementation, to the then-current understanding of photography as a process and an art form. Sontag suggests that the central tension in all of photography is one of self-identification—is it a merely a mimetic program of using a machine to manufacture representative images, or is it a high art equivalent to painting?

The chapter title is an allusion to an aspect of the philosophy of Plato, which is not discussed in the text. Briefly, in The Republic of Plato used an allegory of a cave in which prisoners are chained facing a wall whereupon shadows of real objects are cast. The prisoners see only the shadows and believe them to be the totality of reality. Sontag playfully suggests that photography has made humanity unable to perceive the real world beyond the photograph. Sontag asserts that since the invention of photography in 1839, a mounting global corpus of photographs has been accumulated. Photography establishes the standard of what is worth looking at and what is allowable as an object of inspection. In large measure, photography has replaced experiential interaction with the world. Photographs appropriate place and identity by the act of mimetic reproduction. Photographs also warp our sense of scale; they are nearly always minute compared to the photographic subject.

The chapter enumerates many concise assertions which are offered without notable supporting argument or data, including the following. Photographs are usually held to be definitive evidence—a photograph is taken to guarantee the photographed event actually transpired. Thus, photographs yield veracity in ways that no other art form can. Photographs impose standards on art, culture, and identity. Photography idealizes subjects, and makes objects of people. Photography is a democratizing experience because cameras are cheap, readily available, and easy to use.

Most people have access to or own cameras—people with children are much more likely to own a camera than people without children. Photography has become a rite of family life; photography is widely practiced. Tourists often use cameras and practice photography as a method of certifying their travel experience—camera use is especially pronounced among anxious tourists from cultures that stress activity and accomplishment; the camera is a method of intruding a form of work into leisure. Photography makes us all voyeurs of others. Photography makes the photographer incapable of intervention—one can either document or intervene. Thus, photographers often take photographs of horrific things instead of trying to prevent those things from happening. In fact, Sontag asserts that the act of taking documentary photographs instead of intervening is a tacit encouragement that whatever is going on should keep on happening.

Photography has of course often focused on images of sexuality. The very act of photographing infers a perverse naughtiness. Photographing a sexual partner by necessity prevents sex but enhances sexuality. The camera's drive toward enabling untrained use promotes the use of photography as a means of pornography. Sontag rather simply defines pornography, during the opening chapter, as an aid to masturbation. Photographs incite us to reverie. Images of pornography and images of war are shockingly akin in their thematic exploitation of photography. Photographs do not create morals but they reinforce existing morality—they can cause moral outrage. It is noteworthy that latter sections of the text contradict this early statement about photographs being unable to create morals. The photographic sensibility is absorbed into larger society—photographs are held to be a de fact realistic view of the world because they are presumably mimetic—though subtle control is possible through editing and modification of photographs. A photograph conveys the sense of something but no real information about it. Instead of being a realistic representation, they capture only a moment in time. They convey a semblance of knowledge and wisdom but not substantive knowledge and wisdom. In one of the most heavily contested sentences of the text, Sontag asserts that taking a photograph is a semblance of rape. This statement is not supported by Sontag's various examples of subjects willingly photographed. Eventually, the chapter concludes, everything will be photographed.

America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly

America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly Summary and Analysis

This chapter of the monograph focuses nearly exclusively on American cultural development throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. It is unusual in focusing early attention on Walt Whitman—not a photographer—as the focus of American culture from about 1855 to the turn of the century. Whitman's cultural and social influence is termed "Whitmanesque" in the text and can be summarized as a desire to see beyond beauty and ugliness into the essential value of a person or object. To Whitman, the trivial was important and it was critical to accept the real. Whitman wanted to see all of humanity as a homogeneous whole, welded together by commonality instead of separated by superficial distinctions. Whitman's view was challenged and, the text argues, entirely defeated, mostly by accident, by photography.

Early photography attempted to validate Whitman's views. From 1903 to 1917, Alfred Stieglitz published work of essentially Whitmanesque judgments, termed "euphoric humanism". This was the last great hurrah of Whitman's ideas. From 1915 onward, Edward Steichen photographed vapid objects to demonstrate technique and insight. He thereby gave irrelevant material importance. Since 1945, nearly all American photographs have followed suite, pursuing the trivial and vulgar. Photography came to be seen as a type of copulation with the material world, and photographers sought to illustrate concord in discord, or a polity, among trivial or banal subjects. In 1955, Steichen exhibited the memorable "Family of Man", composed of portraiture, which showed the universal in the individual; the reverse of Whitman's evaluation that the individual was part of the universal.

The chapter then moves to an exhaustive and nearly exclusive focus on the work of Diane Arbus. Beginning in 1972, Arbus photographed portraiture of what the text refers to as "freaks"—dissociated victims of society, prostitutes, the insane, and the deformed. Her lacerating subject matter was framed and presented as normal; her technique was impeccable; and, by her own admission, her work violated her own innocence. The text presents Arbus as the essential anti-Whitman photographer, validating Whitman's ideals by presenting the individual as the universal. Indeed, Arbus's few photographs of so-called normal people are contrived to make even those individuals appear bizarre. As the text says, "Hobbesian man roams the streets, quite visible, with glitter in his hair" (p. 45).

Like modern art, photography lowers sensitivities. It makes a compassionate response to presented images irrelevant. Photography yields viewers "permission" to look, to act as voyeur. Arbus's choice of the awkward, the naïve, the sincere over the slick, allows her to present freaks as the normal condition. Whitman sought identity between

differences—Arbus made everybody look exactly the same. Thus, modern photography moves into the Surreal. Note that the narrative in this chapter uses the work "fuck" in a few authorial comments. This unfortunate narrative choice makes the text unsuitable for some audiences.

Melancholy Objects

Melancholy Objects Summary and Analysis

Photography has inadvertently led to a Surrealist takeover of modern sensibility. With prose fiction and theater, photography has become a Surrealist art; not an official art, but close to it. The Surrealist movement courts accidents and incongruous juxtaposition; it is capricious and inadvertent. Photography allows all of these goals to conflate into a mimetic art. Surrealism, contrary to its internal philosophy, is not a universal art form—it is class-bound and dated, anecdotal and irrational, and demonstrates more than anything the bourgeois disaffection with the status quo. Like photography, Surrealism seeks to document and reconnoiter society, and examines "important" objects. Photography, like the other Surrealist arts, is itself frozen in time and transitory. Surrealist photography looks at nature, people, and social abjection. Like Surrealism, photography is often about extreme poverty or extreme wealth. In the United States of America, photographers are divided into two broad camps. Some are scientists, seeking to document and visually examine the world. Others are moralists, seeking to clarify or identify a world vision. These two competing arenas are often in conflict, one or the other in the public ascendancy at any given time.

The most-ambitious collective photographic project ever undertaken in the United States of America was the Farm Security Administration's 1935 photographic project, led by Roy Emerson Stryker. The FSA project took images of low-income groups living in rural areas and experiencing rural problems. The project was enormously influential in depicting to America the "common" face of the "common" man and his "common" struggles. The program resulted in political and social attention being place upon the rural poor. In this way, the program demonstrated conclusively that photographing an object can change it. Photography can inform morality—note that this assertion conflicts somewhat with other locations in the text. Whereas the American photographer is concerned with summarization or awakening consciousness, European photographers seek the picturesque. American photographs feel the country is simply too big to be understood—instead, it must be simply catalogued.

Photography presupposes that reality can be a comprehensible totality. Photography changes the historical past into a consumable commodity of images. Photographs are artifacts; they record the injuries time does to objects. Photographs of the same person or object over a span of years demonstrate the abrasions of time, the decay of age, and the aging process itself. Wisconsin Death Trip, a 1973 non-fiction book by Michael Lesy, featured a collection of late nineteenth century photographs by Charles Van Shaick. The book emphasized the harsh aspects of Midwestern rural life, focusing on disease, mental illness, crime, and rural decay. The text reconstructed this past from the vantage of years. Thus, Surrealism is like a "death trip" because it can't make anything new—it can only judge the past.

Photographs do not speak and convey no verbal information—unless they are captioned. Photographs can thus be made to speak, but the caption is obviously artifice. The caption need not even be true or related to the photograph, yet the caption will always be interpreted as definitive. Photographs show everything, but show that everything is perishable. Surrealism doesn't seek to understand processes, only to collect them.

The Heroism of Vision

The Heroism of Vision Summary and Analysis

Photographs discover beauty; even banal or vapid objects are made beautiful by being photographed because in the conventional wisdom only beautiful things are photographed. Thus, photography manufactures beauty. However, photography also makes truly beautiful things seem cliché through over-exposure. It is therefore imperative to constantly be discovering new sources of original beauty. This, fortunately, is simple because the very act of photographing something new casts it as something new and beautiful. Cameras often reveal beauty that is not normally seen; the photograph manufactures the beauty.

Photography enjoyed an enormous boost in popularity when it became public knowledge that photographs could be retouched, altered, or tampered with. The photographic portrait need not capture and immortalize transient defects—photographs can mingle documentation with artistic rendering. Another method of falsifying photographs is to falsely caption them. False photography illuminates the essential division in photography—the never-ending discussion of whether photography is a scientific process of documentation via machine, or a high art using an incidentally mimetic process.

Much of the chapter is given to a comparison between painting and photography, though the comparison is spread through the chapter in various sections. The central tension of the comparison is that painting has always been considered a high art, whereas photograph has had to struggle into that distinction. Photography freed painting from the reproductive arts and allowed it to focus on the purely abstract. Photographs cannot "not be" of something and are therefore obviously reproductive or mimetic. Painting allows artistic vision, photography requires photographic, or dissociative, seeing. Painting is usually done of pretty subjects; photography favors ugly subjects. Painting is difficult, tedious, and performed by skilled experts. Photography is easy, rapid, and can be performed by anyone. Both painting and photography share a devotion to traditional subjects—though the subjects are not the same between the two areas.

Photographic Evangels

Photographic Evangels Summary and Analysis

This chapter, the longest in the text, contains a fair amount of repetitive information presented in previous chapters. In addition, the chapter contains various quotations but refers little to concrete photographic examples. In 1839, photography was briefly attacked as something unnatural and disgraceful. By 1854, photography was an accepted part of modern life. Later, photography came to be viewed as an art, then as a high art, and today is esteemed as a modern high art. The chapter then presents several theories of art in brief detail, but concludes that none of them are particularly helpful and that most proved to be fads. In general, modern photography claims that the subject is irrelevant and that technique is the sum total of all the art in photography. Of course, others say this is not the case. The rigorous definition continues to elude—and likely always will. The central tension of photography is deciding whether it is a high art or simply documentary reproduction by a machine. Some theorize photography allows the artist to capture reality during an off-guard moment. Some theorize photography discloses hidden truth. Some theorize photography is purely objective and entirely devoid of subjective interpretation. Some champion total self-effacement for the photographer, while others claim a proficient photographer must metaphysically "become" the object. Most claim that photography is entirely innocent.

The chapter briefly recapitulates the history of photography from its inception in about 1839 to the then-present day of the mid 1970s. The brief entry is not particularly helpful and offers nothing which has not previously been considered in the text. The chapter then concludes with an investigation of the question plaguing most photographic theory of the 1970s—namely, is photography an art?

Photographs are certainly presented as art. They are published in books with "frames" of white space and precise layouts. They are displayed in galleries as are paintings. Photographs are presented as sophisticated renditions—and yet every photograph is made, essentially, with little more than a click of a button. Early in their history photographs entered museums where they were displayed in shows as were paintings. Photography has had "movements" and loosely organized "schools", though not as rigorously examined as corollary objects in painting. Yet, it is difficult or even impossible to distinguish one photographer's work from another photographer's work. Even so, public tastes in photography exist and change through time. For example, at times the subject is considered important whereas at other times it is not. Photography must always be innovative; as a new art, it undergoes constant revision. In any event, photography has undeniably and decisively transformed other arts. Sontag goes so far as to assert that some artists create their work for the express—and sole—purpose of being photographed; this is a surprising statement to be offered without support.

The Image-World

The Image-World Summary and Analysis

The concluding chapter of the text often relies heavily upon philosophical developments made in prior chapters. The central consideration of the chapter concerns the interplay between reality and images of reality. The text presupposes the rather flimsy paradigm that at some supernatural or metaphysical level images are, or become, or supersede reality. The only particularly supportive evidences offered for this supposition is that some primitive tribes view portrait photography as an aggressively invasive form of "soul-stealing" and that some philosophers—namely Balzac—writing shortly after the advent of photography considered photographs to be somehow permanently invasive of the process of reality. Setting aside this flaw of logic, the chapter develops the relationship between reality and images in interesting ways.

The text asserts that modern society prefers images to things—in fact, the text posits that this preference is the very definition of "modern" society. Most—nearly all—authoritative images are photographs. This is because paintings, however accurate or realistic, are not the object but a rendering of the object. A photograph is the object—or at least, an accurate representation of the object contrived through a mechanical, hence putatively reliable, process. Photographs present the real, but it is a "sham" real of acquisition via mechanical duplication. Yet, photographs "see" what we often see more. Photographs are clearly superior at recording information than writing, just as they are superior at presenting factual images than is painting. Indeed, some cultures feel that the image is in fact part of the real. Collecting photographs is easy—they are small, durable, and easily transportable. Although one can't possess all of reality, one can possess images. This is probably carried to the extreme in, for example, pornography, where sexualized images are horded. Photographs make reality safe and concrete. Many prefer photographic images to reality.

The chapter then presents a series of reactions to photography as presented in the literary world. Specific examples and commentary are offered, including Jean Genet's Our Lady of the Flowers, Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain, Marcel Proust's Swann's Way, and Herman Melville's Pierre. Each work is briefly presented and discussed—some are briefly quoted. They comment upon the notion of the interplay between images and reality. Though they generally support the chapter's argument, they are decidedly inadequate support from a critical, if not artistic, point of view.

The chapter—and text—conclude with a fairly lengthy consideration of China's reaction to Antonioni's documentary film Chung Kuo. This concrete example serves to illustrate a larger conceptual discussion about the essential differences between the American and the Chinese interpretation of photography. Antonioni, one of the most-influential filmmakers of his time, was invited by Chinese officials to produce a documentary film about China. The resultant Chung Kuo was rendered with Antonioni's typical flair and technique, featuring long shots, close-ups, jarring juxtaposition, and a focus on the often

banal but humanizing elements of Chinese life. The completed film—not shown in China until 2004—was strenuously denounced by the Chinese government as anti-Chinese and anti-Communist. Vituperative pamphlets were widely circulated condemning the film as a gross mischaracterization of China and the Chinese.

The text concludes by analyzing the reaction of China to the film as illustrative of an essential societal difference in the way photography is understood. In China, photography entirely is subsumed by the state propaganda apparatus; photographs are viewed as another extension of morality. Chinese tastes favor well-centered presentations of posed scenes, easy and logical transitions, and a focus on healthy topics and beautiful objects. Quite obviously, the Italian Antonioni was a poor choice for the documentary project. In any event, Sontag's estimation of stereotyped "inscrutable" Chinese values is poorly developed and smacks of the anti-Chinese political rhetoric of her time—the monologue thus unfortunately closes on its weakest argument and nearly any other country's photographic differences with the capitalist world would have been a more-suitable, if less jarring, choice.

Characters

Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag (1933-2004), born Susan Rosenblatt, was an American essaying, novelist, filmmaker, and the author of the monograph On Photography. Throughout the text she provides very little biographical information other than remembering a few topical anecdotes about interacting with photographs at various life stages. For example, one of her earliest defining moments was looking through a photographic book of Holocaust survivors as a young girl of twelve—Sontag states the event left her indelibly marked and no longer innocent. This contrasts with her later textual statements that no one has every discovered ugliness or morality through photographs. The rear cover of the text indicates Sontag wrote four novels and several collections of essays, and won the 2000 National Book Award for fiction. Sontag's books have been translated into twenty-eight languages. In 2001, she was awarded the Jerusalem Prize for the body of her work.

Sontag's monograph On Photography is perhaps her most enduring work. Critically well received upon publication in 1977, the text has received continuous examination. Although Sontag later reversed her position on several seminal arguments in the text, it remains a fundamental body of thought about photography and the photographic arts.

Alfred Stieglitz

Stieglitz (1864-1946) was an American photographer discussed at some length in chapter two of the text. Sontag asserts he was a "virtuos[o] of the noble image" (p. 6). Stieglitz worked to create photographs of items or persons he deemed significant in some way, and he was instrumental in making photography an acceptable art form. From 1903 to 1917 he published the serial Camera Week. He also displayed work in a famous New York gallery from 1905 to 1917. With Edward Steichen, Stieglitz created the Little Gallery of the Photo-Secession. Sontag asserts that Stieglitz's work was the most ambitiously Whitmanesque portrayal of photographs in American history.

Walker Evans

Evans (1903-1975) was an American photographer who worked for the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930s. His stated goal was to take authoritative photographs. His photographs are widely held in permanent museum collections. Evans, along with writer James Agee, published Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a book detailing the lives of poor farming families mired in rural poverty. The book and other of Evans's work are considered at some length in chapter two of the text, though virtually no biographic data are offered. Sontag asserts that Evans was the final great American photographer to believe in a legitimate sense of euphoric humanism. In

chapter two she compares his 1924 Chicago street photographs to the work of Diane Arbus.

Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) was an American poet, journalist, and humanist. He was enormously influential in American culture and society and helped drive the transition between Transcendentalist and Realism. The text does not consider Whitman's contribution to poetry, but instead to social philosophy and cultural opinion, summarizing Whitman's stance as seeking unity-within-diversity. In brief, Sontag asserts that Whitman's desire was to weld the human species into a homogeneous whole by noting that the threads of commonality far outnumbered elements of dissent. The early chapters of the text are difficult to comprehend without a basic knowledge of Whitman's philosophy—which is not wholly available within the text itself. Whitman's early Realism is also considered as inspirational for an entire generation of emerging photographers.

Edward Steichen

Edward Steichen (1879-1973) was an American photographer, artist, and gallery curator. He was born in Luxembourg and became an American citizen in 1900. With Alfred Stieglitz, Steichen created the Little Gallery of the Photo-Secession. He took extensive photographs of military operations in World War I and, later, moved into fashion photography. During World War II, he again returned to military operations photography. In 1955, he created The Family of Man, an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, featuring photographs from dozens of countries. The text refers to Steichen's work often, though usually without much comment beyond offering his work as an example of the topic being discussed.

Diane Arbus

Diane Arbus (1923-1971) was an American photographer who took portraiture of people on the fringes of society such as transvestites, nudists, prostitutes, and the physically deformed. In addition, she occasionally photographed "normal" people in poses and settings which caused them to appear as what Sontag refers to as "freaks". Arbus and her photographs are the dominant topic of chapter two of the text, though she is introduced rather late in the chapter. Sontag asserts that Arbus's single-minded pursuit of a single type of photograph allowed her to demonstrate that all humans are part of a global family—in essence, Arbus demonstrated what Whitman proposed, though via a different mechanism than Whitman envisioned.

August Sander

August Sander (1876-1964) was a German photographer. He spent several years during the late nineteenth century working in the military as a photographer's assistant.

He was a member, in 1920, of a group of progressive photographers and artists with plans to document contemporary society via portraiture. During the Nazi regime, Sander's work was largely suppressed. Much of his work was destroyed by the Nazis or in subsequent Allied bombing raids. In his latter life, Sander worked on landscapes and nature photography—though he is best known for his portraits.

Louis Daguerre

Louis Daguerre (1787-1851) was born in France and worked in architecture and design. Daguerre became interested in photographic processes after his associate, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, produced the world's first permanent photograph, called a heliograph, in 1827. Daguerre subsequently announced, in 1839, the process of producing a permanent photograph, called a daguerreotype, and the patent was essentially placed in the public domain by the French government. Daguerre was a competitor to Fox Talbot, and their processes, though similar in final results, were different in execution. Daguerreotypes were expensive and complicated to produce, and somewhat fragile—most early examples are portraits encased in glass. The text styles Daguerre as the co-inventor of photography—indeed, Daguerre made some of the first photographs in history.

William H. Fox Talbot

William H. Fox Talbot (1800-1877) was the English inventor of the negative-positive photographic process, patented in 1841, which ultimately proved to be the precursor to most modern photographic processes. Fox Talbot's invention relied heavily on prior work completed by others. Fox Talbot also created photographic reproduction techniques which led to photogravure. In addition, he was himself a noted photographer. Fox Talbot was a competitor to Daguerre and their processes, though similar in final results, were different in execution. Fox Talbot's negative-positive process was criticized by Daguerre for being overly complicated, but the negative allowed the production of many positives and the overall process was much less cumbersome and less expensive than Daguerre's process. Additionally, Fox Talbot's positives were sturdy and durable in comparison to daguerreotypes. The text styles Fox Talbot as the co-inventor of photography—indeed, Fox Talbot made some of the first photographs of history.

László Moholy-Nagy

László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) was a Hungarian artist and photographer. Moholy-Nagy was a vocal proponent of incorporating technology and industry in the arts, and advocated photography as a new art form. Moholy-Nagy is probably best remembered as an advocate of constructivism though this aspect of his career is not directly considered in the text. Instead, Sontag focuses on Moholy-Nagy's early critical writings about the function of photography and casts him as a sort of proto-Surrealist. Moholy-

Nagy's influence in modern photography stems from his corpus of theoretical writings and technical contributions. Several Moholy-Nagy quotes are contained in the text.

Edward Henry Weston

Edward Henry Weston (1886-1958) was an American photographer and a co-founder of the photographic group f/64. He typically utilized a large-format camera, even after smaller units became available. Weston was an early exponent of pictorialism and favored artistic but faithful renditions of typical subjects. Later in life he transitioned to so-called straight photography. He was considered a master of technique and presentation. In the text, Weston is presented as a proponent of Whitmanesque ideals, which were ultimately discarded in favor of Surrealist interpretation. This treatment of Weston has received much criticism.

Objects/Places

Daguerreotype / Calotype / Photograph

A daguerreotype is a photographic image produced by a methodology pioneered by Daguerre. In a daguerreotype, the image is exposed directly onto a polished surface of silver coated with a chemical. The mirrored surface is a negative but its reflection appears as a positive. Daguerreotypes can not easily be duplicated and they are fragile—historically, they were typically cased in glass for protection.

A calotype is a photographic image produced by a methodology pioneered by Fox Talbot. In a calotype, the image is exposed onto paper coated with a chemical. Several steps are used to stabilize and accentuate the chemical coating, resulting in a photograph. Calotypes are usually produced from negatives—they are robust, easy to duplicate from the same negative, and formed the basis for most modern chemical photographic processes.

A photograph is an image usually created by light interacting with a photo-sensitive surface—typically photographic film or an electronic imager. The captured image is then used to render one or more printed facsimiles or used for electronic display. During the period in which the text was written, electronic photography was in its very infancy and is not considered as a subject.

Les Carabineirs

Les Carabineirs, a 1963 film by Jean-Luc Godard, depicts two sluggish peasants who join the King's Army because they are promised they will be able to loop, rape, and murder—while simultaneously getting rich. Near the close of the movie the two peasants, Michel-Ange and Ulysse, return home after a many years' absence to present to their wives and families not riches but instead cases of picture postcards. Sontag asserts that the film accurately portrays the unequivocal magic of the photograph image.

Si J'avais Quatre Dromadaires

Si J'avais Quatre Dromadaires, a 1966 film by Chris Marker, presents an orchestrated depiction of enlarged still photographs from various themes. Sontag presents the film as an alternative—and preferable—method of presenting still photographs because the film controls the viewing order and duration for each photograph, allowing them to be presented with artistic control. Thus, the photographs "gain in visual legibility and emotional impact" (p. 5).

Camera Week

Camera Week, a serial published by Alfred Steiglitz, was produced from 1903 to 1917. Most of the images appearing in the magazine were subsequently displayed at the Little Gallery of the Photo-Secession. During the period of publication, the magazine was one of the most influential vehicles for photographic presentation in America.

Diane Arbus's Photographs

Arbus limited her photographic subjects to what Sontag summarizes as human "freaks"; an Arbus photograph presents the subject frontally, without sympathy or comment, and in such a way that everybody looks the same. Thus, Arbus photographs achieve a unity-in-confusion among people that rivals the intent of Whitman's affirmation of unity-in-diversity. Various Arbus photographs are considered in chapter two of the text, and her work forms a major theme in the early portions of the text.

The Cameraman

The Cameraman, a 1928 silent film, depicts Buster Keaton as an incompetent photographer struggling with dilapidated photographic equipment in a vain attempt to make a decent photograph. Instead, he knocks out windows, smashes through doors, and makes a general inept job of everything. Finally, however, he manages to capture decent footage—a photojournalist scoop of a New York City tong war in Chinatown—because his pet monkey loads the camera with film and operates it. The movie is presented as a parody of the perceived simplicity of making good photographs.

Wisconsin Death Trip

Wisconsin Death Trip, a 1973 non-fiction book by Michael Lesy, featured a collection of late nineteenth century photographs by Charles Van Shaick. The book emphasized the harsh aspects of Midwestern rural life, focusing on disease, mental illness, crime, and rural decay. The text reconstructed this past in what Sontag says is a whimsical manner. The text suggests the book to be the logical then-present extension of photographic norms as formed through Surrealist theory. Thus, Surrealism is said to be like a "death trip" because it can't make anything new—it can only judge the past.

Surrealism

Surrealism is a cultural and artistic movement which began in the early 1920s and is best known for visual art, photographs, and writing of usually self-identified Surrealist exponents. The movement features unexpected juxtaposition and non sequitur presentations. Surrealism gained attention throughout the 1930s and 1940s and has had a tremendous impact on the arts and theater. The text argues somewhat

convincingly that photography is the ultimate expression of Surrealism because of its ability to over-produce controlled images, which purport to be entirely factual yet devoid of meaning. The impact of photography on Surrealism is a major theme of the middle chapters of the text.

The Magic Mountain

The Magic Mountain, a 1924 novel by Thomas Mann, tells the story of Hans Castorp's infatuation with Clavdia Chauchat. Both characters stay at a tuberculosis sanatorium where, among other recuperative efforts, Dr. Hofrat Behrens takes chest X-rays of his patients as diagnostic tools. Castorp, however, finds the upper-torso X-ray of Chauchat "'showing not her face, but the delicate bony structure of the upper half of her body, and the organs of the thoracic cavity, surrounded by the pale, ghostlike envelope of flesh'" (p. 163) to be irresistible sexualized. In fact, Castorp prefers the X-ray to a more-traditional but scandalous portraiture painting of Chauchat. The Magic Mountain is offered as a literary example of the far-reaching influence of photography.

Chung Kuo

Chung Kuo was a 1972 documentary film by Michelangelo Antonioni. It was made by invitation of Chinese authorities, but after its first showings was severely denounced by China as both anti-Chinese and anti-Communist. Their objections appear to have been largely based on Antonioni's framing and composition styles rather than the subject matter per se. The text features a description of the denunciation rather than a description of the film, and uses the film as an example of essential differences between American and Chinese values regarding photography.

Themes

Photography is Simple Mechanical Documentation

The earliest forms of photography, whether daguerreotype or calotype, use the same basic process: a substrate of paper or glass is coated with photo-sensitive chemicals and then exposed to reflected light emanating from the photographic subject. Various chemical methods, from the simple to the complex, are then used to develop the photo-sensitive chemicals such that they show a mimetic image of the photographic subject—though usually reduced greatly in scale. Since the earliest photographs of 1839 to the time of the text's publication in 1977, the photographic process hardly changed in conception, though obviously constant refinement in equipment, films, and papers was pursued with enormous success. The result, by 1977, was that virtually anyone could (and virtually everyone did) own a camera and take photographs. Most photographs were made for documentary or experiential purposes—people took pictures of their children, of their belongings, and of their vacations. Scientists used photographs in their work, doctors used specialized X-ray photographs as diagnostic tools, and military intelligence used reconnaissance photographs in strategic and tactical planning. The simple fact is that anybody can take a picture—the mechanical camera does most of the work—and any given negative can be used to produce a virtually limitless number of positives. Thus, at the most basic level, photograph is nothing more than simple mechanical documentation.

The text develops this theme in several ways. The basic methods of photography are presented; a concise history of photographic development is presented; a history of the thought of photography is developed. Throughout history, the text presents various ways in which photography has been used to simply document objects—quickly, cheaply, and accurately. Thus, when we take pictures of our children we do so such that in future years we may display to ourselves and others "what they looked like" in their youth.

Photography is a High Art

Within a few years of the advent of photography, various photographers began to espouse the theory that photography is more than simple mechanical documentation—it is an art. Prior to about 1854, photography was considered as either a mere curiosity or at best as a useful method of documentation. Subsequent to 1854, photographers began to experiment with methods of composition, and various acceptable techniques and standards were developed. By the early 1900s, most professional photographers considered themselves to be more than simple documentary image makers. Some, like Weston, sought to capture the essential truth about humanity by careful application of technique to portraiture or landscape. Others, like Stieglitz, argued that subject was more-or-less irrelevant and focused nearly exclusively on composition and technique. By the mid 1900s, photography was firmly embedded in the world of high art; photographs were sold in galleries and hung in museums—alongside and "equal to"

paintings. Indeed, photographs today are often presented as if they are paintings, hanging in frames in museums and being reproduced for consumers as objects of art.

The text examines the development of this phenomenon, noting that photography as art nearly always focuses on the vapid or the banal. Thus, images of perhaps toilets are used to demonstrate technique and composition, whereas portraiture is often considered insufficient for artistic photography. Unless, that is, the portraiture is of socially marginalized individuals such as Arbus's portraits of criminals, the mentally ill, and the deformed. The text's most cogent argument about the distinction between photography as simple mechanical documentation and photography as high art indeed is one of subject matter. If the photograph focuses on something vapid, it is probably an artistic photograph.

Photography Changes Perception

The text presents numerous photographs or photographic assemblages which have shaped the world in which we live by altering our perception of the world. An early example deals with the author's initial viewing of photographs of victims of the Nazi holocaust. Like many, the author's essential innocence vanished upon the first traumatic viewing of these images of abject horror. Another example, with more of a social grounding in American politics, concerns the Farm Security Administration's 1935 photographic project to document the harsh conditions faced by poverty-stricken families in America's depressed rural regions. The images recorded were used to initially bolster support for reform and governmental assistance to the blighted areas. But saturation of such forlorn images led the public to tire of the situation, eventually ignoring it again. The Farm Security Administration reacted by urging its cadre of photographers to focus on making images of positive change in the regions considered.

Another development of this theme concerns the public taste for innovation in photography. Photographs hailed one year as revolutionary and desirable are quickly labeled clichés and viewed the next year with little interest. One of the text's most surprising claims is that modern society is defined by its consumption of images; modern society prefers images to reality. The text suggests this is the case because photographs are safe and allow the viewer to "legitimately" and dispassionately view the subject matter, however shocking or sexualized it may be. Indeed, Sontag argues—somewhat unconvincingly—that capitalist society is wholly dependent upon photography to inform public perception of reality.

Style

Perspective

Susan Sontag was an American essaying, novelist, filmmaker, and the author of the monograph. Although she considered herself primarily a novelist, her literary fiction output was rather meager compared to her volume of essays and critical thought. Sontag professed in the text to be highly influenced by photographic images and processes and, as a filmmaker, was professionally interested in the topic. Sontag presents the text from the position of an accomplished author, an expert critic and writer, and as a deeply interested participant in making and consuming photographs. Sontag's monograph On Photography is perhaps her most enduring work. Critically well received upon publication in 1977, the text has received continuous examination. Although Sontag later reversed her position on several seminal arguments in the text, it remains a fundamental body of thought about photography and the photographic arts. The text is weakened by Sontag's tight focus on American photography nearly to he exclusion of other geographical areas (her consideration of Chinese photography is not insightful or particularly helpful).

The text is intended for an audience of photographers and consumers of photographic images. The presentation of the text as an academic monologue obviously limits readership greatly, which is unfortunate as the basic messages of the text are not intended solely for academia. The text intends to examine the history and process of photography within society and to that end it is successful. The text is markedly dated, however, by its understandable failure to anticipate digital photography in any robust way.

Tone

The tone of the monograph is subjective, though the material is presented as if it were objective—much of it is not obviously objective, and the text is too brief to include adequate supporting documentation. The consistent tone is enjoyable and accessible and contributes materially to the text's success. Readers familiar with academic and critical writing of the 1970s and 1980s will find the casually provocative tone to be typical of that era. The isolated authorial use of strong profanity in a brief passage of chapter two—"fuck Vogue, fuck fashion, fuck what's pretty" (p. 44)—is jarring and needlessly mars the text.

The controlled tone allows the reader to investigate the text with only limited resistance. New ideas—even difficult ones—are presented in conversational methods. Strident rhetoric is absent, though unsupported statements of fact are frequent. Sentences and paragraphs are well-constructed and the text flows easily throughout each chapter. Chapter-to-chapter transitions are often vague, which is somewhat frustrating, but

overall the text is designed well. The text uses a large number of difficult words, and even uses several newly-coined terms for thorny issues.

Structure

The 208-page monograph is divided into six named sections, or chapters of nearly equal length. The monograph concludes with a seventh section—a twenty-eight page anthology of quotations related to photography—which includes sixty-six quotations ranging from a single sentence to a full page; the anthology includes several quotations from advertising materials provided by major vendors of photographic equipment. The monograph is visually presented as a critical text, with occasional lengthy footnotes and many quotations. The visual presentation, however, does not particularly match the accessible prose which comprises the bulk of the text.

Each chapter is an atomic essay and is probably best understood as such. The text's material is organized into a rough structure, with each chapter building upon previously-considered themes, and being at least somewhat dependent upon previous chapters. The text suffers, however, from being overly loose on topic or, rather, from being overly ambitious in the treatment of such a vast topic. Like an essay, the text presents much opinion and many statements of fact without adequate supporting documentation or development. What is forgivable in an essay becomes questionable in a monograph of this length and in the end the text feels rather unsupported and speculative.

Quotes

"There is a much stronger sexual fantasy in Michael Powell's extraordinary movie Peeping Tom (1960), which is not about a Peeping Tom but about a psychopath who kills women with a weapon concealed in his camera, while photographic them. Not once does he touch his subjects. He doesn't desire their bodies; he wants their presence in the form of filmed images—those showing them experiencing their own death—which he screens at home for his solitary pleasure. The move assumes connections between impotence and aggression, professionalized looking and cruelty, which point to the central fantasy connected with the camera. 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.
"The old-fashioned camera was clumsier and harder to reload than a brown Bess musket. The modern camera is trying to be a ray gun. One ad reads:
"'The Yashica Electro-35 CT is the spaceage camera your family will love. Take beautiful pictures day or night. Automatically. Without any nonsense. Just aim, focus and shoot. The GT's computer brain and electronic shutter will do the rest.'" pp. 13-14

"Photographs shock insofar as they show something novel. Unfortunately, the ante keeps getting raised—party through the very proliferation of such images of horror. One's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany. For me, it was photographs of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau which I came across by chance in a bookstore in Santa Monica in July 1945. Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide me life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about. What good was served by seeing them? They were only photographs—of an event I had scarcely heard of and could do nothing to affect, of suffering I could hardly imagine and could do nothing to relieve. When I looked at those photographs, something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror; I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.
"To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anesthetize. An event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs—think of the Vietnam War. (For a counter-example, think of the Gulag Archipelago, of which we have no photographs.) But after repeated exposure to images it also becomes less real." pp. 19-20

"The other world is to be found, as usual, inside this one. Avowedly interested only in photographing people who 'looked strange,' Arbus found plenty of material close to

home. New York, with its drag balls and welfare hotels, was rich with freaks. There was also a carnival in Maryland, where Arbus found a human pincushion, a hermaphrodite with a dog, a tattooed man, and an albino sword-swallower; nudist camps in New Jersey and in Pennsylvania; Disneyland and a Hollywood set, for their dead or fake landscapes without people; and the unidentified mental hospital where she took some of her bland, and most disturbing, photographs. And there was always daily life, with its endless supply of oddities—if one has the eye to see them. The camera has the power to catch so-called normal people in such a way as to make them look abnormal. The photographer chooses oddity, chases it, frames it, develops it, titles it.
"'You see someone on the street,' Arbus wrote, 'and essentially what you notice about them is the flaw.'" p. 34

"'I would never choose a subject for what it meant to me when I think of it,' Arbus wrote, a dogged exponent of the Surrealist bluff. Presumably, viewers are not supposed to judge the people she photographs. Of course, we do. And the very range of Arbus's subjects itself constitutes a judgment. Brassaï, who photographed people like those who interested Arbus—see his 'La Môme Bijou' of 1932—also did tender cityscapes, portraits of famous artists. Lewis Hine's 'Mental Institution, New Jersey, 1924' could be a late Arbus photograph (except that the pair of Mongoloid children posing on the lawn are photographed in profile rather than frontally); the Chicago street portraits Walker Evans took in 1946 are Arbus material, as are a number of photographs by Robert Frank. The difference is in the range of other subjects, other emotions that Hine, Brassaï, Evans, and Frank photographed. Arbus is an auteur in the most limiting sense, as special a case in the history of photography as is Giorgio Morandi, who spent a half century doing still lifes of bottles, in the history of modern European painting. She does not, like most ambitious photographers, play the field of subject matter—even a little. On the contrary, all her subjects are equivalent. And making equivalences between freaks, mad people, suburban couples, and nudists is a very powerful judgment, one in complicity with a recognizable political mood shared by many educated, left-liberal Americans. The subjects of Arbus's photographs are all members of the same family, inhabitants of a single village. Only, as it happens, the idiot village is America. Instead of showing identity between things which are different (Whitman's democratic vista), everybody is shown to look the same." pp. 46-47

"Photography has the unappealing reputation of being the most realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts. In fact, it is the one art that has managed to carry out the grandiose century-old threats of a Surrealist takeover of the modern sensibility, while most of the pedigreed candidates have dropped out of the race.
"Painting was handicapped from the start by being a fine art, with each object a unique, handmade original. A further liability was the exceptional technical virtuosity of those painters actually included in the Surrealist canon, who seldom imagined the canvas as other than figurative. Their paintings looked sleekly calculated, complacently well made, undialectical. They kept a long, prudent distance from Surrealism's contentious idea of blurring the lines between art and so-called life, between objects and events, between the intended and the unintentional, between pros and amateurs, between the noble and the tawdry, between craftsmanship and lucky blunders. The result was that Surrealism

in painting amounted to little more than the contents of a meagerly stocked dream world: a few witty fantasies, mostly wet dreams and agoraphobic nightmares. (Only when its libertarian rhetoric helped to nudge Jackson Pollock and others into a new kind of irreverent abstraction did the Surrealist mandate for painters finally seem to make wide creative sense.) Poetry, the other art to which the early Surrealists were particularly devoted, has yielded almost equally disappointing results. The arts in which Surrealism has come into its own are prose fiction (as content, mainly, but much more abundant and more complex thematically than that claimed by painting), theater, the arts of assemblage, and—most triumphantly—photography." p. 51

"Surrealism is a bourgeois disaffection; that its militants thought it universal is only one of the signs that it is typically bourgeois. As an aesthetics that yearns to be a politics, Surrealism opts for the underdog, for the rights of a disestablished and unofficial reality. But the scandals flattered by Surrealist aesthetics generally turned out to be just those homely mysteries obscured by the bourgeois social order: sex and poverty. Eros, which the early Surrealists placed at the summit of the tabooed reality they sought to rehabilitate, was itself part of the mystery of social station. While it seemed to flourish luxuriantly at extreme ends of the scale, both the lower classes and the nobility being regarded as naturally libertine, middle-class people had to toil to make their sexual revolution. Class was the deepest mystery: the inexhaustible glamour of the rich and powerful, the opaque degradation of the poor and outcast." p. 54

"The photographer both loots and preserves, denounces and consecrates. Photography expresses the American impatience with reality, the taste for activities whose instrumentality is a machine. 'Speed is at the bottom of it all,' as Hart Crane said (writing about Stieglitz in 1923), 'the hundredth of a second caught so precisely that the motion is continued from the picture indefinitely: the moment made eternal.' Faced with the awesome spread and alienness of a newly settled continent, people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited. Kodak put signs at the entrances of many towns listing what to photograph. Signs marked the places in national parks where visitors should stand with their cameras." pp. 64-65

"In principle, photography executes the Surrealist mandate to adopt an uncompromisingly egalitarian attitude toward subject matter. (Everything is 'real.') In fact, it has—like mainstream Surrealist taste itself—evinced an inveterate fondness for trash, eyesores, rejects, peeling surfaces, odd stuff, kitsch. Thus, Atget specialized in the marginal beauties of jerry-built wheeled vehicles, gaudy or fantastic window displays, the raffish art of shop signs and carousels, ornate porticoes, curious door knockers and wrought-iron grilles, stucco ornaments on the façades of run-down houses. The photographer—and the consumer of photographs—follows in the footsteps of the ragpicker, who was one of Baudelaire's favorite figures for the modern poet: 'Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot, he catalogues and collects. . . He sorts things out and makes a wise choice; he collects, like a miser guarding a treasure, the refuse which will assume the shape of useful or gratifying objects between the jaws of the goddess of Industry.'" p. 78

"The consequences of lying have to be more central for photography than they ever can be for painting, because the flat, usually rectangular images which are photographs make a claim to be true that paintings can never make. A fake painting (one whose attribution is false) falsifies the history of art. A fake photograph (one which has been retouched or tampered with, or whose caption is false) falsifies reality. The history of photography could be recapitulated as the struggle between two different imperatives: beautification, which comes from the fine arts, and truth-telling, which is measured not only by a notion of value-free truth, a legacy from the sciences, but by a moralized ideal of truth-telling, adapted from nineteenth-century literary models and from the (then) new profession of independent journalism. Like the post-romantic novelist and the reporter, the photographer was supposed to unmask hypocrisy and combat ignorance. This was a task which painting was too slow and cumbersome a procedure to take on, no matter how many nineteenth-century painters shared Millet's belief that le beau c'est le vrai. Astute observers noticed that there was something naked about the truth a photograph conveyed, even when its maker did not mean to pry. In The House of the Seven Gables (1851) Hawthorne has the young photographer, Holgrave, remark about the daguerreotype portrait that 'while we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it.'" pp. 86-87

"The substance of Weston's 'Cabbage Leaf,' taken in 1931, looks like a fall of gathered cloth; a title is needed to identify it. Thus, the image makes its point in two ways. The form is pleasing, and it is (surprise!) the form of a cabbage leaf. If it were gathered cloth, it wouldn't be so beautiful. We already know that beauty, from the fine arts. Hence the formal qualities of style—the central issue in painting—are, at most, of secondary importance in photography, while what a photograph is of is always of primary importance. The assumption underlying all uses of photography, that each photograph is a piece of the world, means that we don't know how to react to a photograph (if the image is visually ambiguous: say, too closely seen or too distant) until we know what piece of the world it is. What looks like a bare coronet—the famous photograph taken by Harold Edgerton in 1936—becomes far more interesting when we find out it is a splash of milk." pp. 92-93

"Thus, according to one critic, the greatness of Paul Strand's pictures from the last period of his life—when he turned from the brilliant discoveries of the abstracting eye to the touristic, world-anthologizing tasks of photography—consists in the fact that 'his people, whether Bowery derelict, Mexican peon, New England farmer, Italian peasant, French artisan, Breton or Hebrides fisherman, Egyptian fellahin, the village idiot or the great Picasso, are all touched by the same heroic quality—humanity.' What is this humanity? It is a quality things have in common when they are viewed as photographs. "The urge to take photographs is in principle an indiscriminate one for the practice of photography is now identified with the idea that everything in the world could be made interesting through the camera. But this quality of being interesting, like that of manifesting humanity, is an empty one. The photographic purchase of the world, with its limitless production of notes on reality, makes everything homologous. Photography is no less reductive when it is being reportorial than when it reveals beautiful forms. By disclosing the thingness of human beings, the humanness of things, photography

transforms reality into a tautology. When Cartier-Bresson goes to China, he shows that there are people in China, and that they are Chinese." pp. 110-111

"Questions about knowledge are not, historically, photography's first line of defense. The earliest controversies center on the question of whether photography's fidelity to appearances and dependence on a machine did not prevent it from being a fine art—as distinct from a merely practical art, an arm of science, and a trade. (That photographs give useful and often startling kinds of information was obvious from the beginning. Photographers only started worrying about what they knew, and what kind of knowledge in a deeper sense a photograph supplies, after photography was accepted as an art.) For about a century the defense of photography was identical with the struggle to establish it as a fine art. Against the charge that photography was a soulless, mechanical copying of reality, photographers asserted that it was a vanguard revolt against ordinary standards of seeing, no less worthy an art than painting." p. 126

"The real problem with bringing functional photographs, photographs taken for a practical purpose, on commercial assignment, or as souvenirs, into the mainstream of photographic achievement is not that it demeans photography, considered as a fine art, but that the procedure contradicts the nature of most photographs. In most uses of the camera, the photograph's naïve or descriptive function is paramount. But when viewed in their new context, the museum or gallery, photographs cease to be 'about' their subjects in the same direct or primary way; they become studies in the possibilities of photography. Photography's adoption by the museum makes photography itself seem problematic, in the way experienced only be a small number of self-conscious photographers whose work consists precisely in questioning the camera's ability to grasp reality. The eclectic museum collections reinforce the arbitrariness, the subjectivity of all photographs, including the most straightforwardly descriptive ones." pp. 132-133

"There is an equivocation at the heart of all aesthetic evaluations of photographs; and this explains the chronic defensiveness and extreme mutability of photographic taste." p. 136

"Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask. While a painting, even one that meets photographic standards of resemblance, is never more than the stating of an interpretation, a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects)—a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be. Between two fantasy alternatives, that Holbein the Younger had lived long enough to have painted Shakespeare or that a prototype of the camera had been invented early enough to have photographed him, most Bardolators would choose the photograph. This is not just because it would presumably show what Shakespeare really looked like, for even if the hypothetical photograph were faded, barely legible, a brownish shadow, we would probably still prefer it to another glorious

Holbein. Having a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross." p. 154

"The final reason for the need to photograph everything lies in the very logic of consumption itself. To consume means to burn, to use up—and, therefore, to need to be replenished. As we make images and consume them, we need still more images; and still more. But images are not a treasure for which the world must be ransacked; they are precisely what is at hand wherever the eye falls. The possession of a camera can inspire something akin to lust. And like all credible forms of lust, it cannot be satisfied: first, because the possibilities of photography are infinite; and, second, because the project is finally self-devouring. The attempts by photographers to bolster up a depleted sense of reality contribute to the depletion. Our oppressive sense of the transience of everything is more acute since cameras gave us the means to 'fix' the fleeting moment. We consume images at an ever faster rate and, as Balzac suspected cameras used up layers of the body, images consume reality. Cameras are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete.
"The powers of photography have in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals. It suited Plato's derogatory attitude toward images to liken them to shadows—transitory, minimally informative, immaterial, impotent co-presences of the real things which cast them. But the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality—for turning it into a shadow. Images are more real than anyone could have supposed. And just because they are an unlimited resource, one that cannot be exhausted by consumerist waste, there is all the more reason to apply the conservationist remedy. If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well." pp. 179-180

Topics for Discussion

The text, written in 1977, makes a single passing reference to digital photography as an unlikely and unsuitable alternative to film photography. Given the state of modern photography, do you thing the text is still at all useful?

The text argues that all photography is inherently perverse and "naughty" because it makes photographic viewers into voyeurs. While this may be true of intimate portraiture, do you feel like a voyeur when viewing, say, an 1899 photograph of the Eiffel Tower? Discuss.

The text mentions pornography on only a few occasions and in essence merely as a nod to its existence. Given today's widespread—nearly pervasive—pornographic images, do you feel that the text failed to anticipate the allure of pornography? Why or why not?

Sontag states "[p]hotography is a . . . heroic copulation with the material word" (p. 30). What do you think this statement infers about the process of "taking" a picture? Does taking a landscape photograph somehow violate or trespass upon the subject?

Sontag asserts that photography lowers societal sensitivity. That is, images which shock one day become blasé the next day such that the reality behind horrific images is often dismissed as de rigueur. Do you agree with this interpretation of photography's impact?

After reading the text, define the goals of the Surrealist movement. How does the text's portrayal of the Surrealist movement differ from your prior knowledge of Surrealism? Do you think that photography is, in fact, the crowning achievement of Surrealism?

Sontag states that photography presupposing reality can be a comprehensible totality. Do you think that reality is a comprehensible totality? If reality is in fact incomprehensible, would photography still be a useful form of simple mechanical documentation?

The text discusses the similarities and differences between painting and photography. Enumerate the differences and discuss the idea that photography somehow "liberated" painting from the necessity of producing realistic renditions.

The text's central tension is in the nature of photography—is it simple mechanical documentation or is it a high art? Which interpretation would you favor, and why?

Each chapter, or essay, in the text has an interesting title—for example, "Photographic Evangels". Discuss the titles of the chapters and consider how they apply to the topic of the chapter. Are the titles suitable? Should the chapters simply be numbered?

The text mentions several novels—for example, Herman Melville's Pierre—which, however briefly, discuss photographic interpretation. The text also mentions several films—for example, Jean-Luc Godard's Les Carabineirs—which play with the notion of the image as opposed to the real. After reading the text would you consider reading one of these novels or viewing one of these films? Why or why not?