

Susan Sontag
On Photography

There is one medium that almost any person on earth can access. There is one way of communication that is nearly universal. This medium is in the form of image and, more precisely, photography. Photography has become something that no one can't understand. No one sees an image who can't begin to interpret it, unravel it, make it part of the story that they create. Unlike words a photograph can communicate an entire world to anyone in a glimpse—a trace. In her compilation of essays, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag unravels the truths about what makes photography such an important and substantial medium and what it meant and means for our world of images, while calling attention to the consequences that the world's obsession with photography might bring about.

Sontag begins by making a reference to one of the most well known philosophical ideas of history. Indeed Plato's cave story is one of the first things to come to a person's mind when they get on the topic of philosophy, and it is also extremely relevant to photography. Plato talks about the images the people in the cave see, they could be shadows or rough paintings, but they are always images; "...true insofar as it resembles something real, sham because it is no more than a resemblance (154)." What the people in the cave don't see, are the figures themselves—the real figures. There are those in the cave that are happy seeing these shadows, content with the idea that they are the real thing. However, others are not, and soon enough they will venture out into the world to see what these things are really like. Sontag first compares photographs to these shadows. Not only that, but she wonders if there are too many people in the world now dependent on images, as though the image has again become the reality.

The reason the world has become so entranced with images is fairly simple. These photographs capture something that no words, painting, drawing, etc. can capture. They are an instance of reality that one can hold in his or her hand. They are a tangible glimpse of a moment past. "To collect photographs is to collect the world (Sontag, 3)." People feel as though they can keep a part of the world around them forever--in a photograph--without ever having been there. The real world is no longer the concern, rather,

the real world inside a photograph is the concern. Why stay somewhere when you can take a photograph, take it home, and enjoy the place whenever you like?

The world needs to be careful of where its priorities are. The push for images has stripped the world of its interest in real things. Images are more interesting now; "...photographs, rather than the world, have become the standard of beautiful (85)." Sontag uses the example of a sunset to clarify her argument, saying: "[t]he image-surfeited are likely to find sunsets corny; they now look, alas, too much like photographs... It is reality which is scrutinized, and evaluated, for its fidelity to photographs." This is a scary thought, that the world would choose an image over reality.

Therefore the camera has become impulsive and intrusive. A person holding a camera feels the right to take photos of whatever they please, whether the subject wants it or not. They become a predator, always looking for a time to strike. All that matters is getting that photograph. It has become a game in which the photographer seeks to play out his or her desires through the camera, and the subject becomes the game piece, only there to obey the camera's authority. This game has many players and the number keeps on rising. Photography, being the world's most universal medium for communication, is huge. But Sontag argues that people need to be more careful about what they are doing with the camera. It is a tool, and tools should be used in a proper manner. Sontag says about the hoarding of images today: "[p]hotography has become the quintessential art of affluent, wasteful, restless societies... (69)." This should be taken to mean that every photo should count for something. Each photograph should take the time, thought, and emotion of the photographer.

At its start, photography was meant to portray an idealized form of reality. It was meant to be a true depiction of reality, and therefore things that were photographed were mainly meant to be beautiful in reality. This changed quickly, however, and soon anything that was photographed became beautiful. Anything that was photographed became significant. The idea that someone made the choice to capture any one thing on a photograph, which lends to the idea of permanence, makes that subject substantial. "To photograph is to confer importance (Sontag, 28)." This idea came out in Walt Whitman's works, but photographers like Alfred Stieglitz and Walker Evans embraced the idea in photography, changing the way photographs were taken. Later, a photographer names Diane Arbus took the idea to another level.

Rather than simply showing everyday people in their everyday routine, Arbus showed the viewer the grotesque underworld of society. She showed those people that would never before be seen in a gallery. The idea of the photograph creating something beautiful out of something ugly has been a constant theme that comes and goes.

Sontag goes on to talk about photography's role in surrealism. It is in photography's nature to be surreal. The very essence of what makes a photograph—taking a split second of time and freezing for view in a later time—is quite surreal. Sontag argues that photography is the most surreal of all mediums. “Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world... (Sontag, 52).” Not only this, but photography lends itself to surrealism because it presents itself as real. To create, in a photograph, a scene in which things do not relate to this world, or do in an abstract manner, presents a false scene as real. It tricks the viewer into positioning themselves in that world. Unlike painting or drawing or writing, which present ideas of the surreal, photography presents it in a way that becomes believable.

“Photography is the inventory of mortality (70).” Here Sontag claims photography to be something which has played a role in the world. In a very real manner, photography has become the most basic and best means of adding to the archive of humanity. It is able to capture people as they are, without the judgment and manipulation of a painter's hand. It is for this reason, along with the nostalgic look and feel, that old photographs are considered so much more prominent and exciting than many new ones. A photograph becomes a part of history, and it makes that history feel so much more real. Even immediately after being taken it is a trace of something past. “Photographs themselves are instant antiques (80).” This has also had an effect on the equipment that photographers use. Many photographers feel like as technology advances there is something lost in the photographs taken. This is why many photographers use old equipment, and even today with digital, many professionals still shoot film as well. This can be seen in many things: cars, homes, a beautiful desk; while the new one might be more practical and easy to use, the old ones keep something that the new ones can't, and people like that.

Sontag talks a bit about photography's relationship to painting. She notes what photography has that painting doesn't, and she also dispels the myth that photography freed painting, as if photography gave painters the motivation to move to surrealism and impressionism. One difference she points out is the difference in truth conveyed through photos or painting. She notes that while a painting can lie only about art history, a photograph can lie only about reality. This puts photography in the more difficult spot. If a photographer depicts something in a manner that is not true to the subject, then they are falsifying that subject. Because it is in painting's nature to falsify a subject, the painting can only lie about painting itself.

She goes on to talk about this idea of photography freeing painting. She notes that painting had already begun its swing towards abstraction before photography was truly on the scene. In fact, painting and photography shared a similar path. Photography was invented to create a precision of representation that painting could not, but some, like Fox Talbot, quickly trounced this and began creating images that strove to push away representation. However, one of the major differences between painting and photography is that a photograph can only ever represent something; "...it is in the nature of a photograph that it can never entirely transcend its subject, as a painting can (95)." This means that photography will always have something that painting does not, and vice versa.

Another difference between painting and photography has more to do with the perception of these two art forms than what is intrinsic about them. Photography's limitation to portraying reality, whether obvious or not, has given it a sense of truth, and no matter what the subject there is always a lure because of that. Even photographs which were taken poorly are quite interesting, and often end up being "happy accidents." This means that while a painting can be uninteresting due to its subject or the way in which it was painted, or could have just been painted poorly, a photograph is always somewhat interesting. "It is not altogether wrong to say that there is no such thing as a bad photograph—only less interesting, less relevant, less mysterious ones (141)."

Photography has also become one of the most quickly evolving mediums of art, separating it from all other ways of art making. No other art form has gone through its entire life-cycle and over again in a matter of 200 years. "There is a more rapid sequence of rediscovery in photography than in any other

art." Also, because so many photos have been taken of other art forms, it is as though photography has a hold over them; "...all art aspires to the condition of photography (149)." A work is more likely to be successful if it looks good in a photograph.

Sontag makes many interesting points about photography. Some of them may be true, but others are more questioning. It is up to the reader to take these things to heart and think about what it means to take a photograph. Sontag creates a sense of importance when looking at photography, which is something even many artists would look past.