

# ON PHOTOGRAPHY



SUSAN SONTAG

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# **On Photography**

BY SUSAN SONTAG



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### On Photography

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(A one pager by SS, May 1977)

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## eForeword

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One of the most highly regarded books of its kind, *On Photography* first appeared in 1977 and is described by its author as “a progress of essays about the meaning and career of photographs.” It begins with the famous “In Plato’s Cave” essay, then offers five other prose meditations on this topic, and concludes with a fascinating and far-reaching “Brief Anthology of Quotations.”

“A brilliant analysis of the profound changes photographic images have made in our way of looking at the world and at ourselves over the last 140 years.”—*Washington Post Book World*

“Every page of *On Photography* raises important and exciting questions about its subject and raises them in the best way.”—*The New York Times Book Review*

“*On Photography* is to my mind the most original and illuminating study of the subject.”—Calvin Trillin, *The New Yorker* .

Susan Sontag was born in New York City on January 16, 1933. She received her B.A. from the College of the University of Chicago and did graduate work in philosophy, literature, and theology at Harvard University and Saint Anne’s College, Oxford. A human rights activist for more than two decades, Ms. Sontag served from 1987 to 1989 as president of the American Center of PEN, the international writers’ organization dedicated to freedom of expression and the advancement of literature, from which

platform she led a number of campaigns on behalf of persecuted and imprisoned writers.

Among Ms. Sontag's many honors are the 2003 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, the 2003 Prince of Asturias Prize, the 2001 Jerusalem Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award for *On Photography* (1978).

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*It all started with one essay—about some of the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographed images; but the more I thought about what photographs are, the more complex and suggestive they became. So one generated another, and that one (to my bemusement) another, and so on—a progress of essays, about the meaning and career of photographs—until I'd gone far enough so that the argument sketched in the first essay, documented and digressed from in the succeeding essays, could be recapitulated and extended in a more theoretical way; and could stop.*

*The essays were first published (in a slightly different form) in The New York Review of Books, and probably would never have been written were it not for the encouragement given by its editors, my friends Robert Silvers and Barbara Epstein, to my obsession with photography. I am grateful to them, and to my friend Don Eric Levine, for much patient advice and unstinting help.*

S.S.

May 1977

## *In Plato's Cave*

Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato's cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of the truth. But being educated by photographs is not like being educated by older, more artisanal images. For one thing, there are a great many more images around, claiming our attention. The inventory started in 1839 and since then just about everything has been photographed, or so it seems. This very insatiability of the photographing eye changes the terms of confinement in the cave, our world. In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing. Finally, the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise is to give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads—as an anthology of images.

To collect photographs is to collect the world. Movies and television programs light up walls, flicker, and go out; but with still photographs the image is also an object, lightweight, cheap to produce, easy to carry about, accumulate, store. In Godard's *Les Carabiniers* (1963), two sluggish lumpen-peasants are lured into joining the King's Army by the promise that they will be able to loot, rape, kill, or do whatever else they please to the enemy, and get rich. But the suitcase of booty that Michel-Ange and Ulysse triumphantly bring home, years later, to their wives turns out to contain only picture postcards, hundreds of them, of Monuments, Department Stores, Mammals, Wonders of Nature, Methods of Transport, Works of Art, and other classified treasures



from around the globe. Godard's gag vividly parodies the equivocal magic of the photographic image. Photographs are perhaps the most mysterious of all the objects that make up, and thicken, the environment we recognize as modern. Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood.

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power. A now notorious first fall into alienation, habituating people to abstract the world into printed words, is supposed to have engendered that surplus of Faustian energy and psychic damage needed to build modern, inorganic societies. But print seems a less treacherous form of leaching out the world, of turning it into a mental object, than photographic images, which now provide most of the knowledge people have about the look of the past and the reach of the present. What is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings and drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.

Photographs, which fiddle with the scale of the world, themselves get reduced, blown up, cropped, retouched, doctored, tricked out. They age, plagued by the usual ills of paper objects; they disappear; they become valuable, and get bought and sold; they are reproduced. Photographs, which package the world, seem to invite packaging. They are stuck in albums, framed and set on tables, tacked on walls, projected as slides. Newspapers and magazines feature them; cops alphabetize them; museums exhibit them; publishers compile them.

For many decades the book has been the most influential way of arranging (and usually miniaturizing) photographs, thereby guaranteeing them longevity, if not immortality—photographs are fragile objects, easily torn or mislaid—and a wider public. The photograph in a book is, obviously, the image of an image. But since it is, to begin with, a printed, smooth object, a photograph loses much less of its essential quality when

reproduced in a book than a painting does. Still, the book is not a wholly satisfactory scheme for putting groups of photographs into general circulation. The sequence in which the photographs are to be looked at is proposed by the order of pages, but nothing holds readers to the recommended order or indicates the amount of time to be spent on each photograph. Chris Marker's film, *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (1966), a brilliantly orchestrated meditation on photographs of all sorts and themes, suggests a subtler and more rigorous way of packaging (and enlarging) still photographs. Both the order and the exact time for looking at each photograph are imposed; and there is a gain in visual legibility and emotional impact. But photographs transcribed in a film cease to be collectable objects, as they still are when served up in books.

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. Starting with their use by the Paris police in the murderous roundup of Communards in June 1871, photographs became a useful tool of modern states in the surveillance and control of their increasingly mobile populations. In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph—any photograph—seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects. Virtuosi of the noble image like Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand, composing mighty, unforgettable photographs decade after decade, still want, first of all, to show something "out there," just like the Polaroid owner for whom photographs are a handy, fast form of note-taking, or the shutter-bug with a Brownie who takes snapshots as souvenirs of daily life.

While a painting or a prose description can never be other than