

## Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

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What is Sontag's approach in the collection of writings titled *On Photography*?

1. It's not **explanatory** analysis — the articles don't attempt to show how photos work.
2. It's not **argumentative** analysis — they don't defend a particular thesis.
3. It's not **philosophical** analysis — they don't give us concepts for understanding photography.

In the foreword, Sontag describes the project as starting with “some of the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographed images”, and turning into “a progress of essays, about the meaning and career of photographs”. But this is still rather elusive.

To get a clearer sense for what's going on here, let's start with a collection of salient assertions made by Sontag in that first, exploratory essay. (The emphases in boldface are mine.)

### In Plato's Cave

[If you're not familiar with the allegory of the cave from Plato's *Republic*, you should review the excerpt at: <http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/platoscave.html>]

- 3 “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notion 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.**”
- 3 “To collect photographs is to collect the world.”
- 3f “Photographs are really **experience** captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood. To photograph is to **appropriate** the thing photographed.”
- 4 “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.”
- 5 “Photographs furnish **evidence.**”
- 9 “As photographs give people an **imaginary possession of a past** that is unreal, they also help people to take **possession of space** in which they are insecure.”
- 9 “A way of **certifying** experience, taking photographs is also a way of **refusing** it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir.”
- 10 “Using a camera appeases the anxiety which the work-driven feel about not working when they are on vacation and supposed to be having fun. They have something to do that is like a friendly imitation of work: they can take pictures.”
- 11 “Taking photographs has set up a chronic **voyeuristic** relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events.”
- 11 “Photographing is essentially an act of **non-intervention.**”
- 13 “To take a picture is to have **an interest in things as they are**, in the status quo remaining unchanged (at least for as long as it takes to get a “good” picture), to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune.”
- 15 “Photography is an **elegiac** art, a twilight art.”
- 16 “A photograph is both a **pseudo-presence** and a token of **absence.**”

- 17 “Photographs cannot create a **moral** position, but they can reinforce one—and can help build a nascent one.”
- 19 “What determines the possibility of being affected **morally** by photographs is the existence of a relevant **political consciousness**.”
- 21 “Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art.”
- 21 “The industrialization of photography permitted its rapid absorption into rational—that is, bureaucratic— ways of running society.”
- 23 “Photographs, which cannot themselves **explain** anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.”
- 23 “Strictly speaking, one never **understands** anything from a photograph.... Only that which **narrates** can make us understand.”
- 24 “Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form. That most logical of nineteenth-century aesthetes, Mallarmé, said that everything in the world exists in order to end in a book. Today everything exists to end in a photograph.”

Here’s a collection of terms and concepts Sontag uses in constructing her reading of photography in the first essay:

collecting [3]	vernacular [8]
appropriation [4]	tourism [9]
interpretation vs. “pieces of the world” [4]	souvenir as substitute [9]
reproducibility [5]	non-intervention [11]
collectibility [5]	perversity [13]
evidence [5]	predatory aspect [14]
“souvenirs of daily life” [6]	objectifying [14]
truth [6]	temporal [15]
framing and selection [6]	nostalgic [15]
interpretive aspect [6]	talismanic (magical) aspect [16]
aggressive aspect [7]	moral [16f]
voracious aspect [7]	

And finally, let’s be sure to mark the pivotal moment in the opening essay, Sontag’s epiphany — holocaust victims seen by her in a book at the age of 12. [19f]

## Comments

Sontag’s essays, published in the mid-1970s, were revolutionary at the time. Well, revolutionary in the U.S., to readers relatively unfamiliar with intellectual life in Western Europe. The work of writers whom Sontag counted among her influences, such as Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, and Antonin Artaud, would not have been well-known in the States. Some thirty-five years later, her essays strike some as naive and “romantic”. Visual culture has changed a great deal in the intervening years. And yet concerns and needs cycle back, making early work such as Sontag’s relevant and inspiring to contemporary writers, artists, and activists.

I see Sontag’s work on photography somewhat the way I see John Berger’s — as a rich and suggestive resource that never takes the workings of power for granted. Note the frequent references to evidence, truth, appropriation, and moral position. The tension between the moral and the aesthetic is there throughout OP. It sets up the increasingly complex discussions in the later essays — reflections on the decline of democratic vision, humanism and anti-humanism, myths of redemption (Walt Whitman)

replaced by myths of despair (Diane Arbus), the social and political role of the portrait, intrinsic versus instrumental value, and the role of spectacle for the masses and surveillance for the rulers.

Sontag's approach lays the groundwork for what, in the digital age, is being referred to as "visual citizenship". (See, for example, the writings of Fred Ritchin and Ariella Azoulay, and in the work of photographers such as Alan Chin, Joseph Rodriguez, and Sebastiao Salgado.)

Photography no longer has the automatic credibility that it used to have. Sontag saw that credibility as a "footprint" from the real world — an "indexical sign" in the technical language of semiotics — a trace of evidence marking the contact of one thing with another. We can no longer assume that relation holds between the image and the world. This suggests both the **liberation** of the photographic image and **uncertainty** about its status, use, and value.

The implications are far-reaching and serious. One of the founders of *Doctors Without Borders* has pointed out, according to Fred Ritchin, that "without a photograph we would never have been able to prove a massacre". That's because eyewitness testimony is not always reliable. And the photograph, which used to provide the evidence necessary to prove an atrocity had taken place, is too easily manipulated. It follows (in the face of the law) that if you don't have credible images documenting such events, then "there are no massacres".<sup>1</sup>

In response, Ariella Azoulay argues that we have to rehabilitate the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment concept and practice of citizenship, which relates to only a part of the population and is understood almost exclusively in terms of the distribution of, and subordination to, power. In **visual** citizenship there may be **power**, but without a sovereign. No one has sovereignty in the realm of photographic images.<sup>2</sup>

These concerns are traceable to Sontag's ruminations in *On Photography*. What are the political demands of photography? How do photographs affect those who are photographed? What is the photographer's and the spectator's responsibility to the people **in** the photographs? How does our response to this situation alter who we are both collectively and individually? How do we look both inside and outside the frame? How do we balance the aesthetic and the moral? How do we engage the ethical demands of "visual citizenship"?

Timothy Quigley, 4 Feb 12

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<sup>1</sup> <http://vimeo.com/album/1700458/video/22035652> (Last access 4 Feb 12).

<sup>2</sup> <http://vimeo.com/album/1700458/video/25369128> (Last access 4 Feb 12).