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### Sontag: On Photography

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## Sontag: On Photography

Holocaust and after years of upheaval in Israel or whether it is a process of deeper character. In the current wave of similar books, expositions, and films using old photographs, changing interpretations of a nation's or a minority's past as generated by members of those nations, can be singularly noted. It is worthwhile to ascertain whether such changing perceptions as shown in *Image Before My Eyes* are indicative of a general tendency in societies throughout the world.

*On Photography*. Susan Sontag. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1977. 207 pp. \$3.95 (paper).

Reviewed by *Derral Cheatwood*  
University of Baltimore

The first question to ask is: "Why review this book in *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*?" There are three answers, each of which considers the relationship of *On Photography* not only to photography in general but to visual social study in particular. First, for better or worse, it has become a major work in photographic criticism and a best seller. As such, it is of tangential concern to our field, but we should be aware of what it has to say and of its strengths and weaknesses.

Second, others are going to read it because of its popularity, and many of these people are important to our profession. Over the next few years we will encounter students who have based some of their attitudes on this book, students who have read it and accepted it as a legitimate statement on photography. Also, we may reasonably expect that our colleagues in anthropology and sociology who are not directly involved in visual methods will, if they read anything on photography at all, be more likely to read this than any other single work. Others who are not in our area but who directly influence the future of the field may also read and be influenced by Sontag's arguments, and we will have to contend with directors, deans, presidents, and funding agency personnel who have secured the bulk of their misinformation from *On Photography*.

Third, Sontag makes two fundamental mistakes, both of which could have been avoided had she acquired any sociological or anthropological sophistication; these are not simple content errors, but essential misunderstandings of the nature of photography and its relation to social action. Sociologically, she fails totally to understand that the act of photographing is in its fullest sense a social act. Next, she never clearly states what the phenomenon is that she is investigating; she defines neither its limits nor the culture from which she is approaching it. The result is an unstated, presumably unrecognized, ethnocentrism of the worst sort.

Let me begin by saying that Sontag is a fascinating writer. I must note, however, that I considered and rejected the adjectives lucid, clear, and concise. In ways the book is an intellectual *Chariot of the Gods*: one must read it simply to know what the hell everyone else is talking about. William H. Gass of *The New York Times* called it a "brief but brilliant work on photography" and "a book on photography that shall surely stand near the beginning of all our thoughts on the subject." And in the *Washington Post* William McPherson called it "a tour de force of the critical imagination . . ."

Other critics, however, pointed out what is wrong with the book beyond those aspects relevant to visual social science. Maren Stange in the *New Boston Review* offers the most cogent, intelligent, and honest review of the book available and notes that "Sontag's actual topics are difficult to discern, so her arguments are hard to follow. Although her essays often seem to refer to traditional disciplines, especially history and aesthetics, they do not have a clear design or outline. Their structure is not the result of disciplined thinking." In *Afterimage* Michael Lesy pointed out a number of errors of fact that exist in the work and some of the apparent contradictions. The book abounds with these. To cite but one, Sontag states on page 33 that "[Diane] Arbus's photographs undercut politics just as decisively, by suggesting a world in which everybody is an alien, hopelessly isolated, immobilized in mechanical, crippled identities and relationships." Yet she has written on the previous page that "Arbus's work does not invite viewers to identify with the pariahs and miserable-looking people she photographed. *Humanity is not 'one.'*" Even if some rationalizing can reconcile these statements, they certainly are not made in the "crystalline style" McPherson finds.

The book should not be read as an introduction to photography or as an aid to understanding the use of photography in any sense. It is a fascinating account of one person's reaction to an exposure to photography, and if it had been clearly set forth as such, *On Photography* would be worthwhile within the field. However, it has been taken as an authoritative discussion of "photography," and the dangers that follow from this assumption are worthy of concern and evaluation within the disciplines of visual anthropology and visual sociology.

### Photography as a Something

It rapidly becomes apparent that Sontag fails to understand photography as a complex activity. It is her simplistic vision, in fact, that creates most of the problems within the book. She seems to posit some vague, unspecified, unnamed "professional photography" as the essential matter and act of photogra-

phy. She mentions only sketchily other forms of photography, and as quickly as they are named, most are dropped. More importantly, from the tone and content of her discussion the reader can assume only that she is speaking of some generic whole which is, to her, "photography"—i.e., the field is some unified phenomenon. Often the results of this view are shocking to those who work in the area. We find, for example, that American photographers make ritualized claims "to be looking around, at random, without preconceptions—lighting on subjects phlegmatically recording them . . ." At the same time, however, ". . . humanism has become the reigning ideology of ambitious professional photographers—displacing formalist justifications of their quest for beauty." This tends to imply that "photographers" are a unity, and the implication can be seen more strongly elsewhere.

That all the different kinds of photography form one continuous and interdependent tradition is the once startling, now obvious-seeming assumption which underlies contemporary photographic taste and authorizes the indefinite expansion of that taste. To make this assumption only became plausible when photography was taken up by curators and historians and regularly exhibited in museums and art galleries. Photography's career in the museum does not reward any particular style; rather, it presents photography as a collection of simultaneous intentions and styles which, however different, are not perceived as in any way contradictory.

#### Further:

The museum levels up all schools of photography. Indeed, it makes little sense even to speak of school. . . . movements in the history of photography are fleeting, adventitious, sometimes merely perfunctory, and no first-rate photographer is better understood as a member of a group.

Such amazing simplification and ignorance of the continuing traditions within photography (and the constantly recurring conflicts among them) suggest a depressing absence of any serious involvement in photography by the author. Maren Stange notes: "Such an approach treats the entire medium and craft process as if it were simply a self-contained aesthetic object or performance functioning with reference to concrete purposes and situations." If nothing else, Sontag would do well to read the conversation between Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead which appeared in *SAVICOM* (Vol. 4, No. 2, 78–80).

Sontag apparently considers photography to be predominately and fundamentally the production of a paper image for commercial use. It is embarrassing, then, to find her asking the same questions of abstract photography, which is the process of playing with light and the effects of light (and perhaps sound) that her counterparts asked at the beginning of abstract painting, which plays with color and form. It appears that criticism has learned very little in a century. Although we can accept, understand, and excuse the mother who disgustedly remarks that she has a 6-year-old daughter who can paint better than "that," it is depressing to find an intelligent, educated

critic asking "what an abstract photograph is of" and arguing that "in photography the subject matter always pushes through." Again, she simply seems to have no idea of what is going on in the field.

Perhaps the fact that she is unaware of how much she is unaware of is what enabled her to write the book; certainly a similar ignorance is what allowed the *Times* and *Post* critics to gush praise. The problem is highlighted in such passages as:

Like language, photography is a medium in which works of art (among other things) are made. . . . Photography is not an art like, say, painting and poetry. Although the activities of some photographers conform to the traditional notion of a fine art, the activity of exceptionally talented individuals producing discrete objects that have value in themselves, from the beginning photography has also lent itself to the notion of art which says that art is obsolete.

We must assume "photography" is something unknown, that "painting" means fine-art painting rather than, for example, house painting or car painting. We must assume there is some logical comparison intended in the lack of symmetry in the comparison of forms: photography is like language; language is *not* like poetry. Photography is not like poetry any more than vegetables are not like oranges. Sontag has a vague set of layman's perceptions backed up by an intellectual's vocabulary. And nonsense, no matter how disguised by verbiage, is still nonsense.

*On Photography* seems to ignore most scientific work and all amateur work, and draws little or no distinction between good and bad work. Again, it is as if photography is a monolith, instantly recognizable to all but those inside it. She notes: "In photography's early decades, photographs were expected to be idealized images. This is still the aim of most amateur photographers, for whom a beautiful photograph is a photograph of something beautiful, like a woman, a sunset." Yet she blatantly states that ". . . the line between amateur and professional, primitive and sophisticated is not just harder to draw with photography than it is with painting—it has little meaning. Naive or commercial or merely utilitarian photography is no different in kind from photography as practiced by the most gifted professionals: there are pictures taken by anonymous amateurs which are just as interesting, as complex formally, as representative of photography's characteristic powers as a Stieglitz or an Evans." For those of us who teach photography in our disciplines and have to work with unsophisticated students who believe this, encountering this same logic in a critic is irritating. Not only is Sontag overawed in her evaluation of painting, but she underestimates photography to an incredible degree. She needs to go into Woolworth's and buy a genuine original oil painting with wooden frame for \$29.95, and she needs to go into the field and shoot 5000 shots in order to get the 50 that will eventually be published. It is even more depressing to read in *The New York Times* review that "the decisions a photographer must make, compared to those of the flower arranger or salad chef, are few and simple indeed.

The effects of his actions are dominated by accident: the ambiance of an instant in the camera's apprehension of the world." Sontag notes: "Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art." Further, "Photographs don't seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist. . . . The myth is tenderly parodied in a 1928 silent film 'The Cameraman,' which has an inept, dreamy Buster Keaton . . . getting some great footage . . . by inadvertence. It is the hero's pet monkey who loads the camera with film and operates it part of the time." This sounds cute, but she ignores the discrimination between what is common or average and what is good (which she later claims is impossible). The monkey analogy does not mention J. Fred Muggs displaying his modern art in museums. His work is gone, but Pollack remains. The same is true with photography. The ability to buy hundreds of tintypes, any one of which is over 100 years old, for less than \$1.00 apiece scarcely suggests that they have been elevated to art.

Sontag also slights the uses and functions of photography in the sciences, including the social sciences. She observes: "Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph," and "In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand." We can not go into the details of what distinguishes understanding *gained from* photographs from understanding *gained from* written forms, since in one sense understanding is an internal process, never residing in an external object. However, to argue that a single photograph is not a narrative or that we can not understand from photographs is to ignore, for the most specific example, the bubble chamber in subatomic physics. It is only through the photographs of the tracks of subatomic particles that we can discover them, analyze them, or understand them. The track left is the movement of the particle *over time*, and as such is as much of a narrative as the words which are then written about the particle. And even this does not open a discussion of the use of photography to record and to come to understand cultures, times, and places which are no longer present, or to understand the complexities of cultures—complexities those cultures may not even be aware of because they are strictly visual or because they are so inherently unstable that they can be understood only when abstracted into the visual format.

The problem is not that we simply offer intellectual disagreement on these areas or that our professional pride is hurt. Rather, our colleagues, and those who have responsibility over our work in terms of financial rewards, financial support, and academic survival, may read this and believe it. We are always "aware" of the simplicity of other areas. Who can distinguish the second-rank Baroque composers from one another, the second-rank medieval or Renaissance painters

from one another, or the multitude of second-rank photographers, anthropologists, or sociologists from one another? The specialist in each area has that capacity, but for others, amateurs in the strictest sense, such real discriminatory ability is beyond their capacity, so all seem the same. In photography most of us can, most of the time, distinguish an Adams from an Atget from a Cartier Bresson. Some can tell a Winoograd from a Davidson from an Evans from a White. The inability on Sontag's part, and the resultant belief that it cannot be done, is not a comment on photography.

## THE SOCIAL ACT OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Throughout Sontag's book other problems quite common even to those working within the field arise: a confusion between "real" and "image" and ignorance of the complex questions concerning the social relationship of photographer to photographed and the meaning of that relationship.

The existence of a photograph is a statement of someone's perception of the world; that makes it as real as that world itself, and at the same time as false. To argue that one is or is not as real, or is or is not primary or causal, is to misunderstand the creation of reality. We define our lives on the sliding, relative scale of time and space. Neither time nor space nor the "reality" of the life is absolute, and objects and events are created products. In learning how to weave this fabric of our lives, we rely on those meanings and principles of organization which are regularly provided in our culture, and this process of creation then feeds back into the culture to affect those meanings and principles.

Sontag observes, for example: "Life is not about significant details, illuminated in a flash, fixed forever. Photographs are." She is fundamentally wrong in both senses. Our memory does consist of the significant details, but they are not necessarily set in a flash (although if we accept some of the premises of various psychological theories this may be true); neither are they fixed, but alter as required in the course of our lives. Further, pictures are not fixed forever. The patterns of silver grains are relatively permanent, but the meaning attached to them alters over time, which is to say that the act of looking at a picture is also a social act, and what we see changes as we change and our society changes. What a photograph *means* is not captured in the silver grains; it is created anew each time the image is viewed by social creatures, and the meaning and thus the object itself are no less, or no more, real than any other symbolic object.

Sontag notes that:

So far as we care about the subject photographed, we expect the photographer to be an extremely discreet presence. Thus, the very success of photojournalism lies in the difficulty of distinguishing one superior photographer's work from another's, except insofar as he or she has monopolized a particular sub-

ject. . . In the vast majority of photographs which get taken—for scientific and industrial purposes, by the press, by the military and the police, by families—any tract of the personal vision of whoever is behind the camera interferes with the primary demand on the photograph: that it record, diagnose, inform. It makes sense that a painting is signed but a photograph is not (or it seems in bad taste if it is).

There is no feel for the social act of taking, developing, transmitting, distributing, viewing, reviewing, or evaluating photographs in *On Photography*. Photography is an amazingly complex set of social relationships, from the small-scale dyadic interaction of one photographer and one subject through the clan level usage of the photograph as a statement of family identity on to the national level of perceptions of photography which enabled *On Photography* to receive the National Book Critics Circle Prize in criticism. Sontag begins by saying that “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.” She goes on to note that although “a painting is commissioned or bought, a photograph is found (in albums or drawers), cut out (of newspapers or magazines), or easily taken oneself.” Through all of this we are left asking what of those who had carried an 8 by 10 view camera across the Rockies on horseback, died taking pictures in New Guinea, or been threatened for taking a picture of a stranger in a study of a neighborhood? How can a photograph inform without helping us to understand? Why do galleries regularly display what are obviously signed photographs? And how, without the distinct imprint of the photographer, can a photograph diagnose?

Each step of the process of photography involves the participant at that step as a social actor. Sontag writes that “it is common now for people to insist about their experience of a violent event in which they were caught up—a plane crash, a shoot-out, a terrorist bombing—that ‘it seemed like a movie.’ This is said, other descriptions seeming insufficient, in order to explain how real it was.” She opens a discussion of the potential for discovering and dealing with the ways in which people engage in creating worlds with visual tools and defining these tools with their world. She is well aware of the constantly evaluative nature of looking at photographs, and observes that “presumably, viewers are not supposed to judge the people [Arbus] photographs. Of course, we do.” She even understands that on the social level the act of photography is an act of social drama, that “through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself—a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness.”

But she misses the logical extensions of what she is saying, and when she speaks of photography’s control in modern life, understates its power dramatically by this omission. Photography has assumed a control over what we see and how we see by ingraining a “common sense” way of seeing which so permeates the structure that it becomes one of the assumed fixtures of social life. This is its control. This is what

Edmund Carpenter is saying in his work, this is why we constantly have to be aware that the process of photographing is changing the very nature of that which is photographed. In our normal life activity we react to monuments, natural wonders, and real people via our photographic expectations; we all assume this way of seeing is *the way*. And although this may be quite functional for us in daily life, it is not the proper foundation for the adequate use of visual media in social study.

In all, then, *On Photography* is relevant to us along four lines. First, we need to know what is contained in order to understand reactions and perceptions of persons involved in our profession but uninvolved in our craft. Second, we need to understand the book to understand its effect upon the students we will encounter in our work. Third, we can approach the work to deal with the problems contained; there are few better ways to sharpen our personal images than to attempt to counter popular views in opposition. Finally, we can approach the book as a personal account and private discussion of an intelligent layman’s reaction to the ubiquitous visual image.

Essentially, Sontag has written a “gee whiz” book. As someone once noted about a Jerry Lewis movie, it will impress the critics and a few others. Of course the ability to say gee whiz will be qualitatively different within this audience. Whereas a high school student may be able to muster no more than a mumbled sentence about concise criticism, the professional critics outdid themselves. William McPherson of the *Washington Post* managed:

Click. Flash. The roving lens snaps shut, the film records and advances, and another experience is captured, proof that it happened, as Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, a tour de force of the critical imagination . . . written in a crystalline, epigrammatic style that is as clear and as resonant as Richard Avedon’s photographs of his dying father.

Even this was topped by William H. Gass in *The New York Times*:

. . . what of the most promiscuous and sensually primitive of all our gadgets—the camera—which copulates with the world merely by widening its eye, and thus so simply fertilized, divides itself as quietly as amoebas do, and with a gentle buzz slides its newborn image into view on a coated tongue? . . . Sontag’s . . . book is a thoughtful meditation, not a treatise, and its ideas are grouped more nearly like a gang of keys upon a ring than a run of onions on a string.

It is of no worth to criticize Mr. McPherson’s amazing lens that snaps shut, or to wonder on Mr. Gass’s phallic Polaroid with the oral fixative procedure. Rather, we suggest that we will be confronted with colleagues and students whose knowledge of photography comes in part from Sontag’s work and in part from the additional understanding offered by these reviews. No matter how sophisticated the “gee whiz” imparted, we will have to deal with it and try to create some sense of visual social reality and the promise and pitfalls of photography. It is in this sense that *On Photography* has done its greatest disservice and in which we will most feel its impact.

*Ways of Seeing*, a book made by John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis. New York and London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972. 160 pp., photographs. \$7.95 (cloth), \$2.50 (paper).

*Ways of Seeing*, four programs produced by BBC-TV, 1972. Sale: \$1170 for set (16mm), \$820 for set (video); Rental: \$325 for set (16mm), \$230 for set (video), \$120 each (16mm), \$35 each (video), from Time-Life Multimedia.

Reviewed by *George F. Custen*  
University of Pennsylvania

In 1972, John Berger manufactured (the choice of this term rather than the more conventional options "produced" or "wrote" will become apparent) a book and a series of four BBC films entitled *Ways of Seeing*. With the intellectual inspiration of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1969), Berger set out to redefine certain modes of analysis in the study of both "unique" and mass-produced images. The idea for the book was apparently conceived as an afterthought.

*Ways of Seeing* contains seven essays. According to Berger, these may be read in any order. Four of the essays contain words and images. Number 1 is concerned with the rise of new kinds of meanings for images once they have been restructured by the different processes of mechanical reproduction. Number 3 investigates how a type of oil painting, the nude, reflects a culture's political attitudes toward the predominantly female subjects of this genre. Number 5 focuses on an analysis of oil painting as the tacit partner of capitalism, while Number 7 probes the use of images in the hyperrealized world of publicity, or advertising. The remaining three essays, comprised solely of images, are meant to function as wordless dialectical stimuli for the ideas presented in the written text.

Utilizing different media to produce essentially the same content forces one to ask, "How will the visual and verbal content of Berger's productions be altered vis-à-vis the purposive manipulations inherent in the differing formats of each medium?" Berger notes, "It is no longer what . . . [an] image shows that strikes one as unique; its first meaning is no longer to be found in what it says, but what it *is* (p. 21., italics mine)."

Since the issue of the effect of a medium or mode of reproduction on an image is at the heart of Berger's work, one would think that he would evince an awareness of possible differences that might arise in presenting his ideas in a color film or showing reproductions in black and white in a paperback book format. However, such sensibility is not apparent. I shall discuss the book and the four films almost interchangeably, because Berger's lack of reflexive awareness of the different media as vessels of intent is manifested to an equal degree in both mediums.

Berger's forays, for the most part, are centered on a special kind of image, the oil painting. He attempts to investigate the effects that mass reproduction has had on the social uses of these images. His basic contention is: "Today we see the art of the past as nobody saw it before. We actually perceive it in a different way (p. 16)." Using the now familiar argument that the various "ways of seeing" what have been manufactured as images has always been based on the cultural conventions dominant at particular times, he goes one step further. He asserts that the "privilege" of seeing an image correctly has resided in the hands of those curators of esoterica, art historians, whose language of description tends to distance the average participant's access to a meaningful understanding of these images. Why is this linguistic mystification occurring? Berger, in a nickle-Marxian-world stance notes: "In the end, the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes, and such a justification can no longer make sense in modern terms (p. 11)."

One of the primary reasons for such an elitist justification no longer making sense was noted by Benjamin some forty years ago. The meaning of an image is no longer chained to its basis in ritual life, in the synchronic elements of its unique production, display, and social use. Instead, meaning has become polysemic in nature as a result of the multiplied possibilities of access and interpretation through varying modes of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin stated: ". . . for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility (Benjamin 1972:224)."

To Benjamin and Berger, then, the unique value of an original work has now become subject to the fluctuating social values of its differential use and display because of its transportability and reproducibility. Anyone who has affixed Robert Indian's "Love" postage stamp to a letter, or used similar postal reproductions of the works of Harnett and others, can immediately see a single application of Benjamin's insights: *commercium cum ars*.

According to Berger, the meaning of paintings is no longer attached *in situ*. Meanings become transmittable; theoretically, pieces of information can be used by anyone in a variety of ways in differing contexts. Thus, what was once a fairly monolingual "language of painting" has instead become a multidialectical "language of images." Both book and films emphasize that "what matters now is who uses that language for what purpose (p. 33)." Reproduction, by detaching art from a reified "domain of tradition," forces Berger to man the barricades of a politics of art, suggested by Benjamin, and ask, ". . . to whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong? To those who can apply it to their own lives, or to a cultural hierarchy of relic specialists (p. 32)." Berger