

# Sontag vs. Barthes



# Sontag

- January 16, 1933 – December 28, 2004
- Born in New York City.
- American writer, filmmaker, professor, literary icon, and political activist.
- Active in writing and speaking about areas of conflict, including the Vietnam War and the Siege of Sarajevo.
- *On Photography* published in 1977.

# Barthes

- November 12, 1915 – March 26, 1980
- Born in Normandy.
- A french literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician.
- Influenced development of schools of theory including structuralism, semiotics, social theory, anthropology, and post structuralism.
- *Camera Lucida* published 1980.

# Introduction

- Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes conclude to two different ideas, but they reach these conclusions with the same topics.
- Barthes talked about photography and how it related to himself. (Me, myself, and I)
- Sontag talked about the relationship between photography and society.
- Both are very opinionated, but they contrast, not by their opinion, but how they present their ideas.

# Object

- “To photograph is to appropriate the thing that is photographed... 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.” -*Sontag pg.4*
- “...for what society makes of my photograph I do not know... others – the Other- do not dispossess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal, classified in a file, ready for the subtlest deceptions.” -*Barthes pg.14*
- “...with still photographs the image is also an object, light-weight, cheap to produce, easy to carry about, accumulate, store.” -*Sontag pg.3*

# Representation



- “By nature, the Photograph...has something tautological about it: a pipe, here, is always and intractably a pipe.” -*Barthes Pg. 5*
- “To photograph is to appropriate the thing that is photographed...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.” -*Sontag Pg. 4*
- “Photography transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object...” -*Barthes Pg. 13*

# Micro-death

- “Just as the camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a sublimated murder - a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time.” -*Sontag Pg. 15*
- “I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am then truly becoming a spectre.” -*Barthes Pg. 14*





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This is why they remade Spiderman.

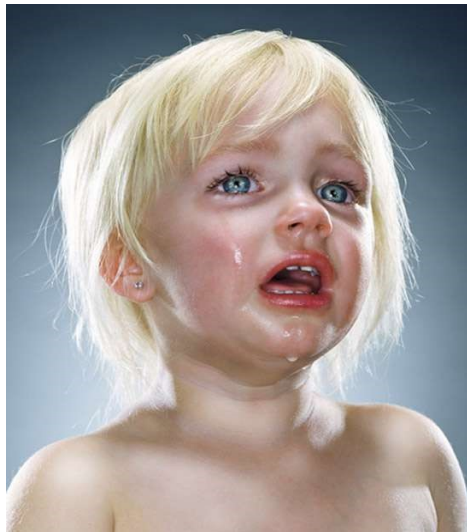
# Aggression/ Message

- “Even if incompatible with intervention in a physical sense, using a camera is still a form of participation. Although the camera is an observation station, the act of photographing is more than passive observing.” -*Sontag Pg. 12*
- “There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera.” -*Sontag Pg. 7*
- “Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings...This is very passivity – and ubiquity – of the photographic record is photography's “message,” its aggression...There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera.” -*Sontag Pg. 7*



# Aggression Cont'd

- “The portrait-photograph is a closed field of forces. Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.” -*Barthes Pg. 13*

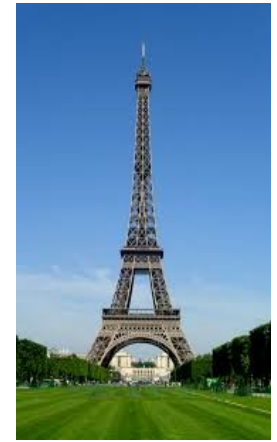


# The Importance of Images

- “Photography...decrees notable whatever it photographs.”  
-*Barthes Pg. 34*
- “After the event has ended the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed.”  
-*Sontag Pg. 11*



# Desensitization to Images



- “I see photographs everywhere, like everyone else, nowadays; they come from the world to me, without my asking; they are only “images,” their mode of appearance is heterogeneous.”  
*-Barthes Pg. 16*
- “For one thing, there are a great many more images around, claiming our attention.” *-Sontag Pg. 3*

# Banality of Images



“To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged, to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing – including when that is the interest, another person's pain or misfortune.” -Sontag Pg. 12

# Overcoming the Banality

- “The images that mobilize conscience are always linked to a given historical situation. The more general they are, the less likely they are to be effective.” - *Sontag pg.17*
- “Moral feelings are embedded in history, whose personae are concrete, whose situations are always specific.” - *Sontag pg.17*

# Overcoming the Banality Cont'd

- “In these photographs I can, of course, take a kind of general interest, one that is even stirred sometimes, but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture. What I feel about these photographs derives from an average affect, almost from a certain training.” - *Barthes pg.26*
- “It is by studium that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.” - *Barthes pg.26*

- “Without a politics, photographs of the slaughter – bench of history will most likely be experienced as, simply, unreal or as a demoralizing emotional blow.” - *Sontag pg.19*
- “My rule applied all the more closely in that other pictures from the same reportage were less interesting to me, they were fine shots, they expressed the dignity and horror of rebellion, but in my eyes they bore no mark or sign; their homogeneity remained cultural: they were “scenes” rather *à la Greuze* had it not been for the harshness of the subject.” - *Barthes pg.25*

- “I feel that it's mere presence changes its reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This 'detail' is the punctum.” - *Barthes pg.42*
- “...which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture...”  
*Barthes pg.25*
- “The *studium* is of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*; it mobilizes a half desire, a demi-volition; it is the same sort of vague, slippery, irresponsible interest one takes in the people, the entertainments, the books, the clothes, one finds 'all right'.” - *Barthes pg.27*



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# Punctum in Practice

- “...which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture...”  
-Barthes pg.25
- “Very often the *Punctum* is a “detail” ...Here is a family of American blacks, photographed in 1926 by James Van der Zee. The *studium* is clear: I am sympathetically interested, as a docile cultural subject, in what the photograph has to say, for it *speaks* (it is a “good” photograph” : it utters respectability, family life, conformism, Sunday best, an effort of social advancement in order to assume the White Man's attributes (an effort touching by reason of its naivete). The spectacle interests me but does not prick me. What does, strange to say, is the belt worn low by the sister (or daughter) – the “solacing Mammy” - whose arms are crossed behind her back like a schoolgirl, and above all her *strapped pups* (Mary Janes – why does this dated fashion touch me? I mean: to what date does it refer me?). This particular *punctum* arouses great sympathy in me, almost a kind of tenderness.” -Barthes Pg. 43



# Conclusion

- Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes conclude to two different ideas, but they reach these conclusions with the same topics.
- Barthes talked about photography and how it related to himself. Something about the punctum. :)
- Sontag talked about the relationship between photography and society. Blahblahblahblah studium.

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