

## ***Sontag: On Photography & Barthes: Camera Lucida***

As part of the low-residency MFA program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts, I'm required to read and then write an essay/annotation. The following is the first of these papers.

Visual Studies Project

An Annotation of:

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. Print

And

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981. Print.

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### **An Introduction**

Photography is complex, partially because as a modern form of image making, it is ubiquitous and used in so many different spheres of influence. To name a few: photography is used in science by astronomers, physicists, chemists, and biologists; in mass communication to tell stories and send messages through photojournalism, political propaganda and advertising; it is a way of capturing personal memories of family events, through portraiture, travel snapshots and selfies; and as an art to suggest ideas, frame questions and express emotions. Photography also presents many antinomies, as Rudolf Arnheim stated, " ... photography is timeless yet anchored to a historical date; it mirrors reality but also interprets and judges it; it suffers from artful manipulation and profits from art; it estranges but arouses compassion; it is helped by accident and also by planning; it assaults reality and submits to it, etc."

The two short books presented in this paper are key sources to gain a basic understanding of photographic theory and criticism. Sontag and Barthes both provide their views on multifaceted and difficult questions, such as: What do photographs mean? How do they function in our society? How does one look at and understand photographs? Both books provide a social context and critique that encapsulates these questions and more. They are rich in aphorisms and flood the reader with thoughts and considerations.

### **On Photography by Susan Sontag**

Susan Sontag's "On Photography" was first published as a series of essays in "The New York Review of Books" and then in book form in 1977. This small volume of 180 pages is divided into each of the original six essays, and nearly every page contains a thought provoking insight into the function, value, structure and meaning of photographs and their makers. The 25 end pages include quotes from photographers, critics and philosophers.

Sontag references many of the major historically important photographers and their work, but the book does not include any reproductions. One must have a basic understanding of the history of photography and those that practiced this form to fully appreciate and understand the text.

It is not possible in a short paper to review the entire text. There are many themes and issues that recur throughout the six essays, including discussions on power, control, sexuality, memory, psychology, art, painting and commercialism. The following presents a summary of two of those themes.

### **On Beauty**

Since at least the time of Plato's Cave (referenced in the title of Sontag's first essay on photography) people have discussed the nature of beauty: What is beauty? How do we know what is beautiful? Is beauty a critical component of art? Is beauty essential to our lives?

Sontag points out that the early photographic process patented by Henry Fox Talbot in 1841 was called the calotype: from kalos, Greek for beautiful (p. 85) and further, referencing Walt Whitman, states that when a subject is photographed — any subject, from any angle, at any time — it is made beautiful. She states, "In recent decades, photography has succeeded in somewhat revising, for everybody, the definitions of what is beautiful and ugly ... If (in Whitman's words) "each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty," it becomes superficial to single out some things as beautiful and others as not." (p. 28)

In the essay titled, "Melancholy Objects", Sontag presents photography as the only "natively" Surrealistic form — more real than real — "Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, or a reality in the second degree ... " (p. 52) And, hence on beauty: "Bleak factory buildings and billboard-cluttered avenues look as beautiful, through the camera's eye, as churches and pastoral landscapes. More beautiful, by modern taste." (p. 78)

To contradict the notion that anything photographed becomes beautiful in a photograph, Sontag goes on to discuss how Bauhaus designers found the industrial and scientific photography of their time beautiful, but that this approach to beauty — the ability to see, for example, nature in startling close-up (crystals, snow flakes, etc.), did not last. As Weston and other photographers began to explore the banal objects of everyday life, such as, the toilet bowl, the pepper or the cabbage leaf, they proved that "In the main tradition of the beautiful in photography, beauty requires the imprint of a human decision ..." (p. 98)

Regarding Weston's "Cabbage Leaf", of 1931, Sontag teases out an interesting additional observation. She points out that at first glance this picture looks like gathered cloth, but the title clarifies that the subject is a cabbage leaf. She contends that these dual systems of communication, the photograph and the caption, unlike painting, are a fundamental aspect of a successful, or beautiful photograph. Or, rather, knowing what slice or fragment of reality is being presented in the photograph is paramount to appreciating and seeing its beauty. And, hence, "The form is pleasing, and it is (surprise!) the form of a cabbage leaf. If it were gathered cloth, it wouldn't be so beautiful." (p. 92)

The idea that photography permits anyone to make a beautiful photographic object or in Sontag's word, "Cameras implement an aesthetic view of reality by being a machine-toy that extends to everyone the possibility of making disinterested judgments about importance, interest and beauty. ("That would make a good picture.")" (p. 176) and "Nobody ever discovered ugliness through

photographs. But since many, through photographs, have discovered beauty," (p. 85) the question arises: how can one differentiate a good photograph from a bad one? If when the 'ugly subject' is captured by a camera it is always a beautiful photograph, how does this happen or why is it beautiful? The long debated aesthetic questions about art and beauty remain, and considering the deep history of this discourse, maybe appropriately, it remains unanswered by Sontag.

### **On Travel & Tourism**

On July 3, 1839, Dominique Francois Arago, presented his famous report to the Commission of the Chamber of Deputies in Paris, which formally released the patents of the daguerreotype processes to the world. He presents M. Daguerre's four aspects to the discovery: "its originality, its usefulness in the arts, the speed of execution, and the valuable aid which science will find in it." And further suggests, that all of the hieroglyphs of Egypt can now be recorded for future study in Europe.

So, as the industrial revolution matured in Europe and the USA, the daguerreotype exploded onto the scene. World populations and wealth expanded at a rapid rate. Safe and distant travel became possible. An expanding human curiosity about nature, places, culture and people was born — and with this, tourism. (The Japanese, with a relatively late arrival to the industrial revolution, joined this adventure some 30 years later.)

Sontag describes how photography helped people "to take possession of space in which they are insecure." (p. 9) As the modern activity of tourism placed people in strange, unusual, or for them exotic environments. She suggests that the camera became a kind of way to experience travel, first by separating the tourist from reality — placing a box with a lens between them and their views, makes it easier for people to manage their displacement — and then to provide evidentiary proof, in the form of a photograph, that the trip actually took place. Mission accomplished!

Sontag goes on to state, "... 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. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating photographs." (p. 9) This thought has become even more evident in today's world, where everyone has a cell phone and hence a convenient camera. We have all experienced this in a museum or at a historic site, as tourists move from place to place, from picture to picture, hardly looking, taking photographs with their phones. Do they see the art, artifact or object? Or do they only wish to prove to their friends and colleagues, with a photographic souvenir, that the experience and luxury of being able to travel, was 'real'? Or possibly, they prefer to rush through the physically real place, protected by their camera, and then with the picture in hand, the experience can be contemplated in the safety of their home.

Sontag, in her continuing social critique, points out that this kind of activity is particularly prevalent to those that come from workaholic societies, such as Germany, Japan, and the USA.

As photographic technology became easier and more widespread, as picture magazines, books and other means of distribution arrived, Sontag points to the photographer's desire to expand the milieu of subject matter and the meaning of photographic 'seeing' while traveling. "Photographic seeing meant an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary. Photographers were supposed to do more than just see the world as it is, including its already acclaimed marvels; they were to create interest, by new visual decisions." (p. 89-90)

## **A Brief Conclusion**

As is noted in the book review by Harvey Green, "On Photography" is not an academic text. There are few footnotes, no bibliography or index. And, in the words of William Gass, "No simple summary of the views contained in Susan Sontag's brief but brilliant work on photography is possible, first because there are too many, and second because the book is a thoughtful mediation, not a treatise."

## **Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography by Roland Barthes**

Roland Barthes book, "Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography," published in 1980, is a short book divided into two parts and then into 48 one to three page chapters. Each chapter presents either an additional new concept or an elucidation of the previous one. The first part presents a more global response to photography and the second part is almost entirely focused on a single photograph of Barthes' mother.

"Camera Lucida" is a first person narrative presenting Barthes ideas, reflections, perspectives and observations on the nature of photography. Although associated with post-structuralism, Barthes is clearly informed by the core tenets of structuralism, in that he provides a defined and universal framework: a nearly scientific formulation; a classification system on how to understand photographs. However, as indicated earlier in this paper, photography is fraught with many antinomies, and Barthes' book contains its share of paradoxes.

(Throughout the following text, the author has used the chapter number rather than the page number to reference quotations.)

Barthes sets out to present as fact that a photograph "is never anything but an antiphon of "Look," "See," "Here it is" and that "A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents) ... By nature, the Photograph ... always carries its referent with itself." (c. 2) Barthes considers this a fatal flaw in that since the photograph relies on and must have a subject it "involves Photography in a vast disorder of objects – of all the objects in the world: why choose (why photograph) this object, this moment, rather than some other?" (c. 2)

This flaw, this disorder, suggests an inability to classify photography or a photograph. Barthes decides that he would start by examining a small number of photographs that he personally liked. And, with this obstacle momentarily cleared, he determines that there are three universally required ingredients of every photograph. The "operator" (the photographer), the "spectator" (those looking at the photograph), and the "spectrum" (the subject). (c. 4) Barthes then notes that he cannot explore the practice of the "operator" since he doesn't take pictures himself.

Thus he begins a personal exploration of himself as spectator. Like everyone else, he sees photographs everywhere, but amongst those that have been pre-selected by others, having passed through a cultural filter (picture editors, curators, etc.), "some provoke tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself .... And that others, on the contrary, were so indifferent to me that by dint of seeing them multiply, like some weed, I felt a kind of aversion toward them, even of irritation." (c. 6) This subjectivity — some photographs he likes, some he doesn't — is not satisfying and drives him to consider ways to evaluate photographs beyond his personal tastes.

He first considers a number of strategies on trying to understand what makes a photograph interesting to him. Is it that “The principle of adventure allows me to make Photography exist. Conversely, without adventure, no photograph.” (c. 7) or is it a particular phenomenological power found in a photograph, its affect? (c. 8) Or, as he looks at the Koen Wessing’s photograph made in Nicaragua during the 1979 revolution (soldiers walking down a street with two nuns in the background), is it the duality of subject matter – the soldiers and the nuns – a “rule” that makes a picture good? (c. 9).

This criteria, the duality of the subject matter, is then extended when he realizes that every photograph he likes doesn’t necessary have this blatant quality and that there is a human interest in all kinds of subject matter, that he now frames with his own, specialized term: studium. “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 (this connotation is present in studium) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.” (c. 10)

The idea of studium, takes the reader back to the original quandary: the flaw, the disorder of photographs, filled with endless and eclectic content. Barthes hence adds a second specialized, or if you will, Barthesian term: punctum. He states, “it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. ... This second element which will disturb the studium I shall therefore call punctum; ... A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” (c. 10)

Barthes then proceeds through many chapters to provide examples and greater depth to these potential fundamental and universal criteria: the studium and the punctum. He discusses how the numen (Latin: “divinity”, or a “divine presence” ... used by sociologists to refer to the idea of magical power residing in an object ) of photography is different than of text or painting; how surprise, contortions or special techniques in photography by themselves do not provide punctum; how a landscape must induce one to visit or inhabit the space for it to have punctum, and how “It is not possible to posit a rule of connection between the studium and the punctum. ... It is a matter of a co-presence. (c. 18).

He presents with several examples, that a detail or fragment of a photograph may provide for him its punctum and “however lightning-like it may be, the punctum has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic.” (Greek: figure of speech in which a thing or concept is called not by its own name but rather by the name of something associated in meaning with that thing or concept ). (c.19) But a detail purposely added by the operator (the photographer) does not provide punctum. Punctum “occurs in the field of the photographed thing like a supplement that is at once inevitable and delightful; it does not necessarily attest to the photographer’s art; it says ... still more simply, that he could not not photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object.” (c 20)

Leading us to the close of part one, Barthes states, “Last thing about punctum; whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there.” (c 23)

Through out part one, Barthes uses examples of publically available photographs; not personal ones. He states that he has learned something about his own desires, but “had not discovered the nature

(the eidos) of Photography.” And further admits to his own imperfections as a mediator, unable to recognize the universal. He leads us into part two by stating, “I would have to make my recantation, my palinode.” (an ode or song recanting or retracting something in an earlier poem ) (c. 24)

Part two, as mentioned earlier in this paper, is a detailed account of his reflections and thoughts about finding a photograph that provides him with the greatest sense of truly knowing his mother. Barthes was very close to his mother and lived with her until she died, about a year before this book was published. Barthes said in an interview, quoted in the foreword by Geoff Dyer, “If photography is to be discussed on a serious level, it must be described in relation to death.” (p x)

Through a long process he determines that a photograph of his mother as a young girl, age 5, called the “Winter Garden Photograph” speaks most clearly, he states, “The Winter Garden Photograph was indeed essential, it achieved for me, utopically, the impossible science of the unique being.” (c. 28)

As Barthes considers the photograph of his mother, he continues to seek what is universal about photographs and determines that there is a certain “superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noeme of Photography. ... Photograph ... is neither Art nor Communication, it is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography. ... The name of Photography’s noeme will therefore be: “That-has-been,” or again: the Intractable.” (c. 32) Through this discovery and definition Barthes expands on how photographs are irreducibly connected to a moment in time that is instantly in the past and as framed by Lior Levy in her essay on Barthes, “All photographs show, albeit we do not always notice, the passing of time. The photograph shows us what necessarily stood in front of the camera. At this point the past, which is usually the forgotten time, that cannot resist the distortions of our memories or escape our short memory, becomes real, and contrary to our everyday attitude it gains priority over the present. ”

### **A Brief Conclusion**

In the foreword, by Geoff Dyer, he states, “To copy out and formalize Barthes’s argument is not simply to diminish it, but to rob it of so many subtleties as to misrepresent it entirely (all in the name of representing it more clearly and rigorously).”

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### **End Notes**

Readings by the author prior to the submission of this paper

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