On Photography: In Plato’s Cave

Susan Sontag
Susan Sontag

- Lived from 1933 - 2004
- An American essayist, short story writer, novelist, screenwriter, filmmaker, and film critic
- A provocative commentator on modern culture who came into high influence in the 1960’s through 70’s
- Longtime companion of Annie Leibovitz
Susan Sontag

On Photography

- A collection of essays published in 1977
- The essays are of a polemic nature, rather than academic
  - An aggressive attack on the conventional values and opinions regarding photography
  - No bibliography or documentation of research
In Plato’s Cave

- Prisoners mistake the forms of the shadows for reality.
- Their language is based on their perception of the shadows, not the real objects that cause them.
- A shadow of a cat would be perceived as the actual cat.
- When prisoners are freed and able to see the source of the shadows, they are blinded by the light source.
- The shadows will at first seem more real than the objects themselves.
In Plato’s Cave

- In time, the prisoner’s eyes would adjust and he could comprehend the objects with his mind using reflective understanding.
- Once enlightened, the prisoner would return to his fellow prisoners to enlighten them as well with his new knowledge.
- In descending back into the cave, the prisoner would appear to lose his eyesight (from losing his night-vision).
- Based on this, the prisoners would not want to be enlightened and would view it as a negative experience.
PLATO’S CAVE
ILLUSTRATION
On Photography
In Plato’s Cave

- Sontag draws an analogy between the prisoners in Plato’s cave and our viewing of photographs.
- The multitude of images lead us to construct our perception of the world & its events in our heads.
On Photography
In Plato’s Cave

 Photography is so widespread, and subject matter so encompassing, that it has influenced our tastes and ethics

 What we think is worth seeing

 What we feel we have a right to see
On Photography
In Plato’s Cave

- Photographs are not considered interpretations in the same way as writings or illustrations.
- Photography’s association with reality sets it apart from other media, in terms of how we regard it.
- Behind every photograph, there was something there in the first place.
Photography as a Social Rite

- Photography is mass produced, but is also a social rite, a mass art
- We certify our experiences through taking photographs
  - Photographs are a token of absence—specific, historic and immediate
  - The world portrayed is not one of understanding or knowledge, but of aesthetic consumerism
Photographs are Reality Interpreted

- Sontag describes painting, speech and writing as “narrowly selective interpretation”
- She describes photography as “narrowly selective transparency”
Photographs are Reality Interpreted

- Sontag references photos taken for the Farm Security Administration (FSA) project as an example of the interpretation

- Photographers would take numerous photos of the same person until they had captured the correct expression that conveyed their interpretation of the poverty
FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (FSA)

PHOTOS OF THE “MIGRANT MOTHER”
FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (FSA)
PHOTOS OF THE “MIGRANT MOTHER”
FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (FSA)
PHOTOS OF THE "MIGRANT MOTHER"
Photography & Events

- Photographs cannot identify events, photography follows the naming of events.
- A moral reaction depends on the moral / political standpoint.
- Without this, horrifying photographs will be seen as unreal or demoralizing.
Impact of Photographs

- In order to shock, photographs need to be novel, hence they become more and more horrific.

- Sontag refers to seeing photos of the Nazi death camps at Bergen-Belsen and Dachau and states that was a turning point in her life.

  “Some limit had been reached... I felt irrevocably grieved, wounded, but a part of my feelings started to tighten; something went dead; something is still crying.”
BERGEN-BELSEN CONCENTRATION CAMP

1945
VILLAGERS FLEEING A NAPALM ATTACK

NICK UT, 1972
Impact of Photographs

*Sontag concludes that seeing a photograph like Nick Ut’s napalm bombed child can have far greater impact than words ever could.*

*What good is served from seeing images like these?*
Impact of Photographs

- Initially photography can make things seem more real, but constant exposure makes it less real.
- Photographs do not hold their moral value with age, but become “ethical reference points.”
Sontag states, “Photography is a elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by being photographed, touched by pathos.”

An elegy being a poem, usually about the dead

By freezing a moment, photographs show the subject’s mortality and inevitability of change
EUGENE ATGET
PARIS
DETOUR IN THE 1920'S
One Never Understands Anything from a Photograph

- Sontag states that photographs fail for five reasons
- **Reason #1:**
  - A photograph is a piece of time and space. By excluding or including things within the frame, it creates or breaks relationships; thus presenting reality in small, discontinuous particles
One Never Understands Anything from a Photograph

- **Reason #2:**
  - A photograph only shows us the surface, leaving the viewer to deduce or intuit what the reality was like
One Never Understands Anything from a Photograph

Reason #3:

- Photography can only give us knowledge of the world if we accept the world as we see it.
- This is the opposite of understanding.
- Photographs can give a mental picture, but hide more than they reveal.
- They require a narration for understanding.
One Never Understands Anything from a Photograph

Reason #4:

Photographs can arouse conscience, but it is only a semblance of ethical or political knowledge because it is always sentimental.
One Never Understands Anything from a Photograph

Reason #5:

- By duplicating the world in such a comprehensive way it has made the world seem more available than it really is