

# **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





The fire

shadows cast  
on wall

Prisoners

Roadway where  
puppeteers perform

# PLATO'S CAVE

ILLUSTRATION



# 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”

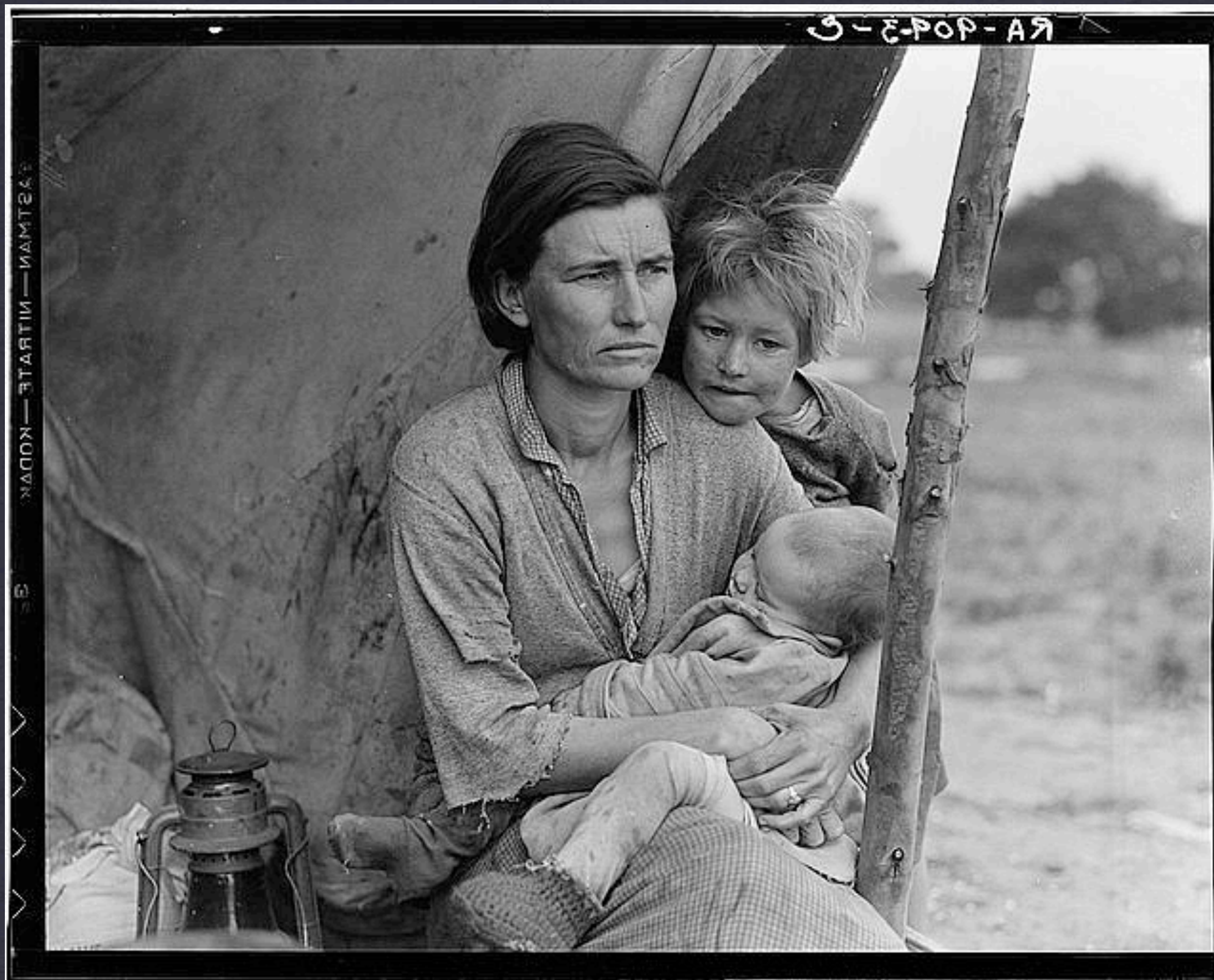




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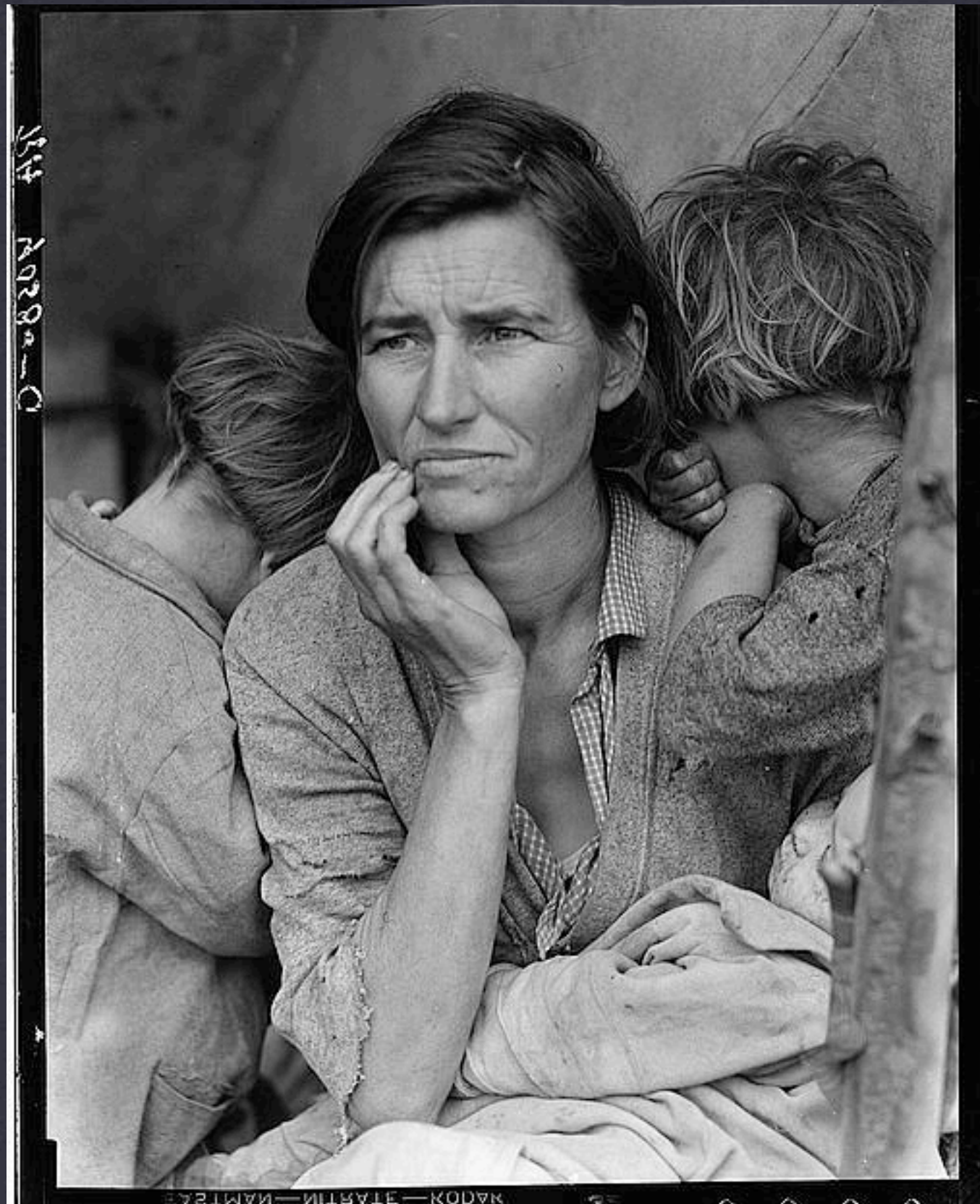




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PHOTOS OF THE “MIGRANT MOTHER”



# 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”



# Photography as an Art

- ✱ 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





**DETROIT**  
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