

SUSAN SONTAG

THE HEROISM OF VISION

NOBODY DISCOVERED UGLINESS THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY...

- ▶ ...but many have discovered beauty
- ▶ People take photographs because something is beautiful
- ▶ Photographs have become the standard for determining what is beautiful

CLAIMS TO TRUTH

- ▶ A photograph that has been altered or gives a false caption lies about reality
- ▶ The history of photography can be seen as a struggle between the need to beautify and the need to tell the truth
 - ▶ The need to beautify comes from fine arts
 - ▶ The need for truth, from science and journalism

PAINTING VS. PHOTOGRAPHY

- ▶ Paintings take time
- ▶ Photography is quick, so anything can be photographed
- ▶ By trying to see everything, photography hoped to accommodate both beauty and truth

PHOTOGRAPHY & REALITY

- ▶ Photography has changed our idea of reality by establishing the way things should look

AN IMPERSONAL DEPICTION OF REALITY

- ▶ Henry Fox Talbot conceived photography as an impersonal way for nature to record itself
- ▶ He published a book of photographs entitled "Pencil of Nature" in 1844



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HENRY FOX TALBOT

Photograph of haystack from Pencil of Nature, 1844

AN INTERPRETED DEPICTION OF REALITY

- ▶ Though many others shared his view, it became apparent that different people took pictures of the same things in different ways
- ▶ The photography was not only recordings of the scene, but interpretations of how the photographer saw it

HEROISM OF VISION

- ▶ With the advent of travel photography, people began photographing not only beauty but ordinary things
- ▶ Individuals were expressing their unique vision in finding beauty in ordinary things
- ▶ Going to extremes to capture an image were what the heroic photographer was perceived to do



PAUL STRAND

Abstraction, 1916



PAUL STRAND

Wire Wheel, 1917



ALBERT RENGER- PATZSCH

Sempervivum percarneum,
1928



ALBERT RENGER- PATZSCH

Fungi Lepiota procera, 1930

SUBJECT IS OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE

- ▶ While the painter constructs, the photographer discloses
 - ▶ Therefore, the subject of a photograph always dominates our perception of it
 - ▶ Unlike painting, formal qualities are second, while the subject matter comes first
- ▶ In photography, we assume that the subject is a piece of the world and we only know how to react when we know what it is



EDWARD WESTON

Cabbage Leaf, 1931



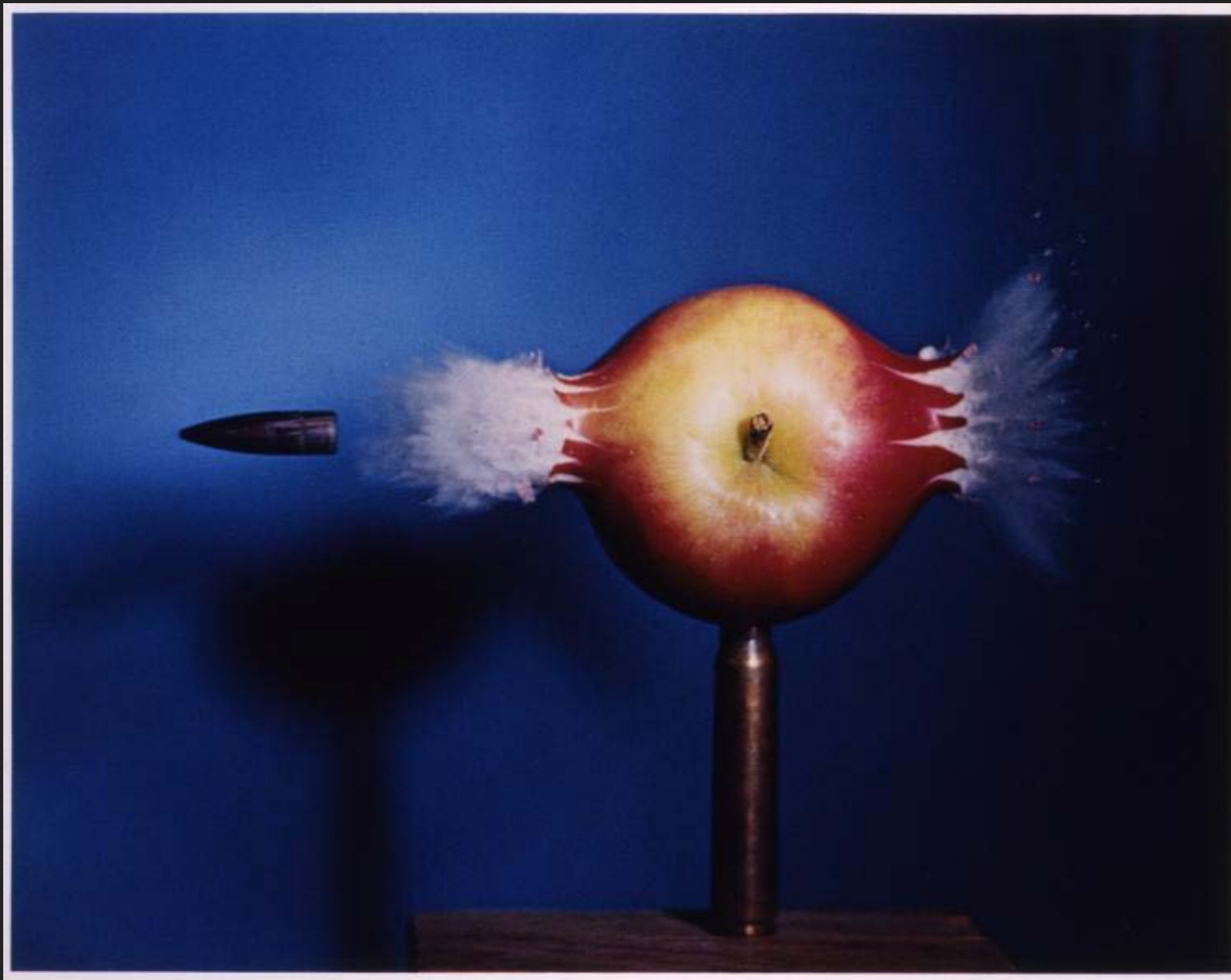
DR. HAROLD EDGERTON

Coronet, 1936



DR. HAROLD EDGERTON

Tennis, 1936



DR. HAROLD EDGERTON

Bullet through Apple, 1964

PHOTOGRAPHIC SEEING

- ▶ Sontag calls photographic seeing a 'kind of dissociative seeing'
- ▶ The difference between the way an eye and a camera focus and judge perspective are different
 - ▶ People used to comment on the difference, but have since begun to "see photographically"

PHOTOGRAPHIC SEEING

- ▶ Photography has been particularly successful at turning people into things, and things into people
 - ▶ Sontag uses Weston's nudes and peppers series as examples:
 - ▶ Nudes are de-sensualized
 - ▶ Peppers are photographed to suggest a touchable form



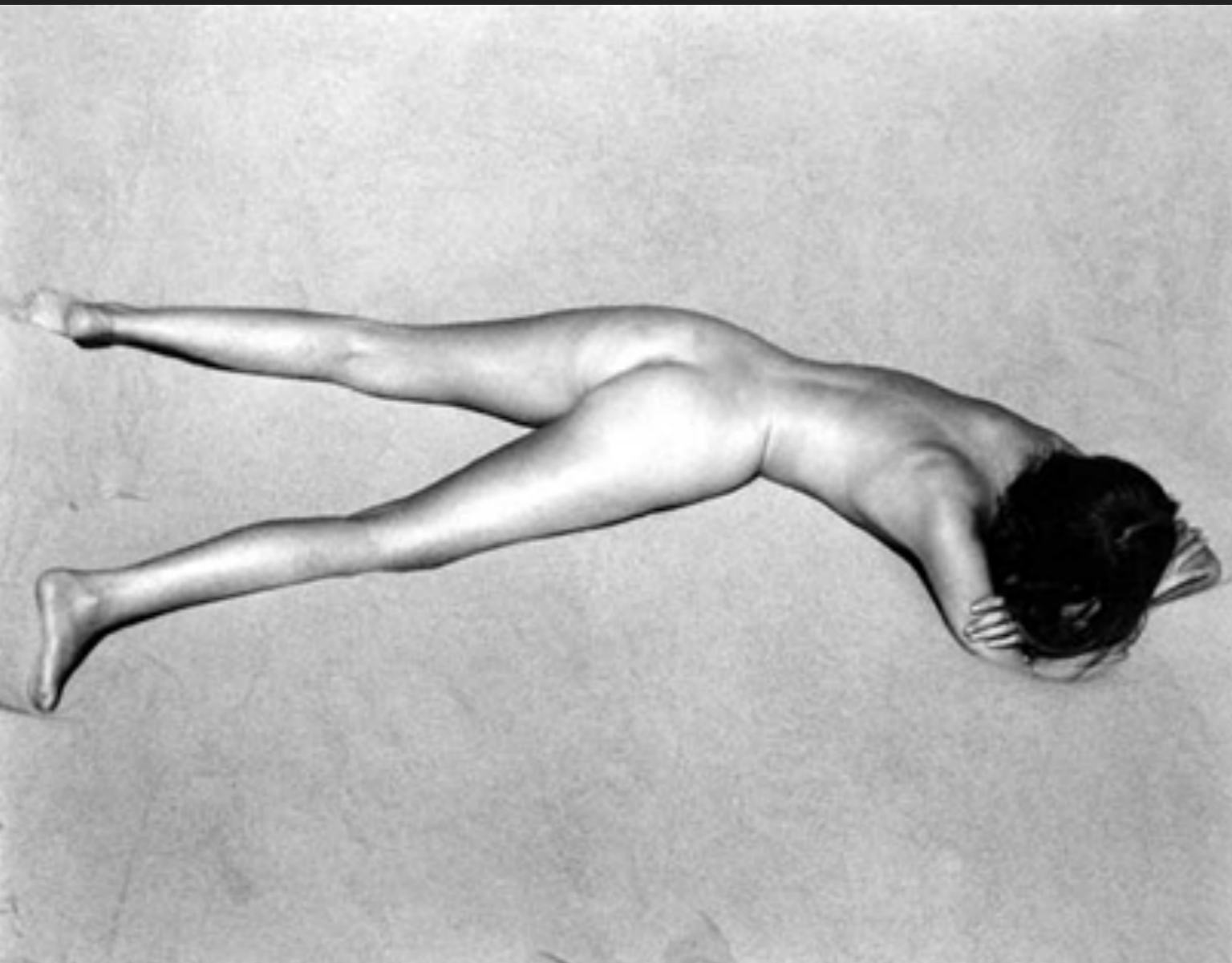
EDWARD WESTON

Nude 1925



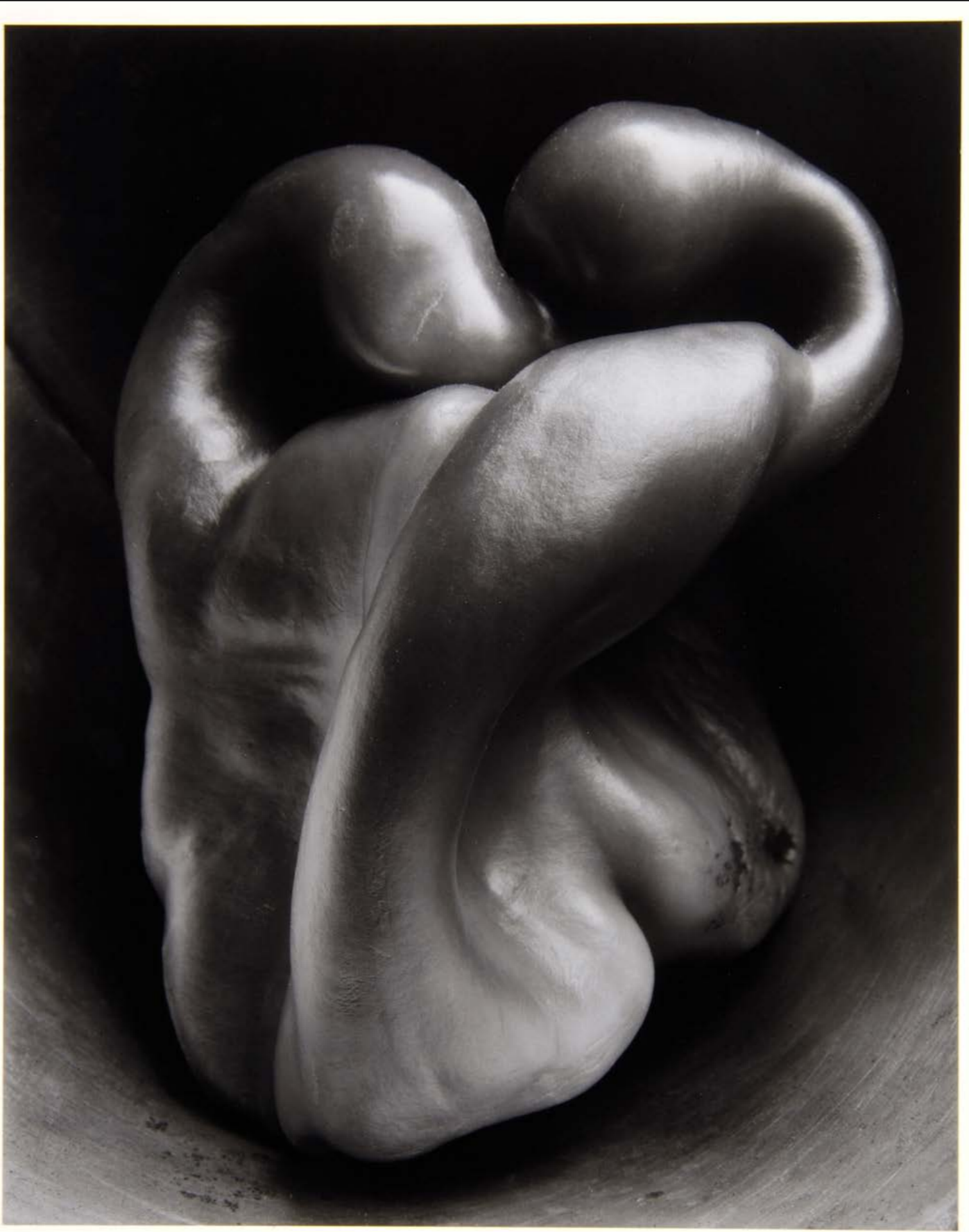
EDWARD WESTON

Nude 1927



EDWARD WESTON

Nude 1936



EDWARD WESTON

Pepper, 1930



EDWARD WESTON

Pepper, 1930



EDWARD WESTON

Pepper, 1929

REINVENTING CONVENTIONAL WAYS OF SEEING

- ▶ Photographers like Strand saw photography as “an intelligent new way of seeing,” but this also eventually became a standard which had to be broken
- ▶ Modernist subjects like leaves and shells became clichéd

BEAUTY IN ORDER

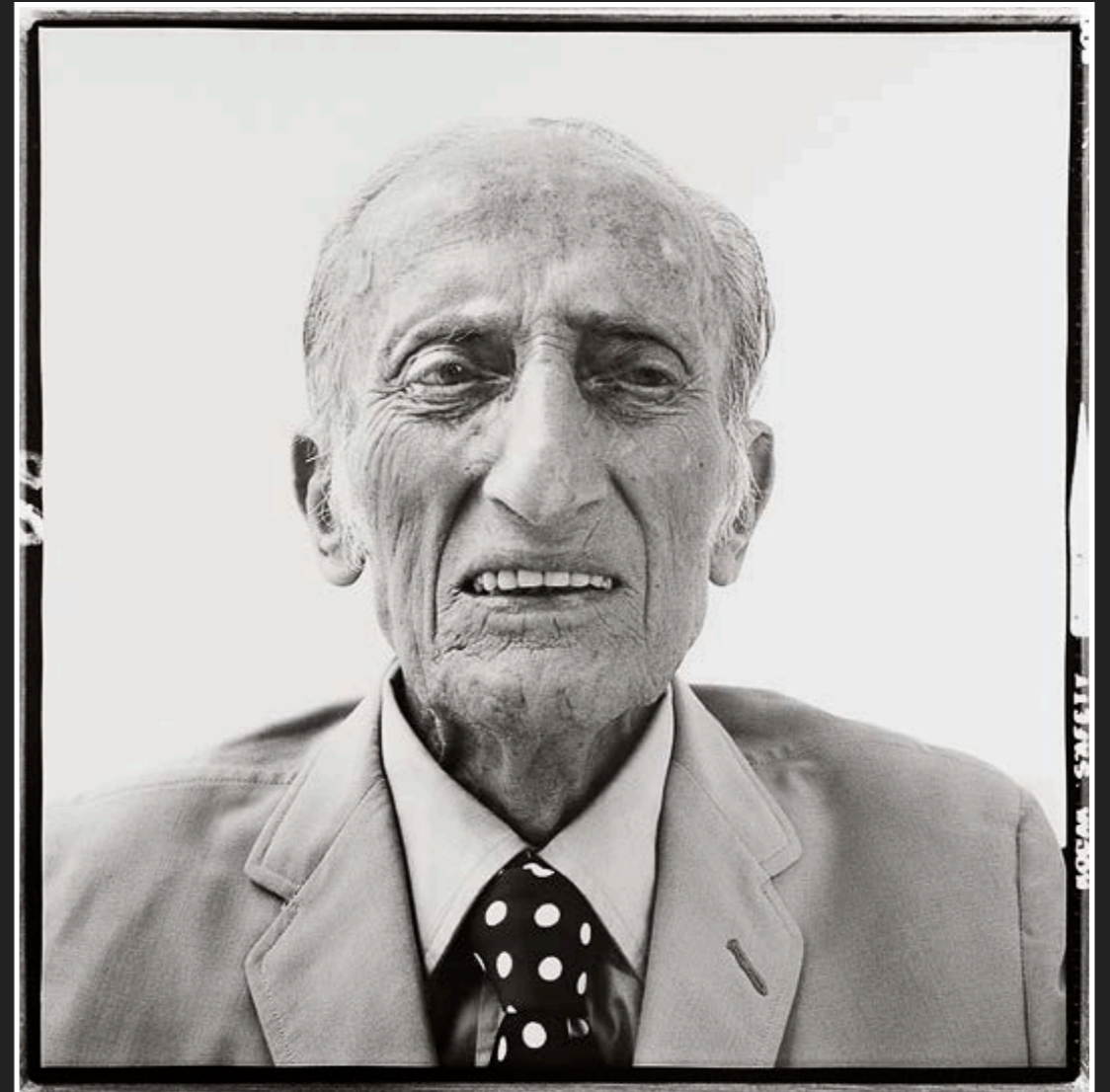
- ▶ Sontag sees the modernists notions of beauty as revolving around order
- ▶ She sees this as contrary to the "truth of disorder"

BEAUTIFYING THE WORLD

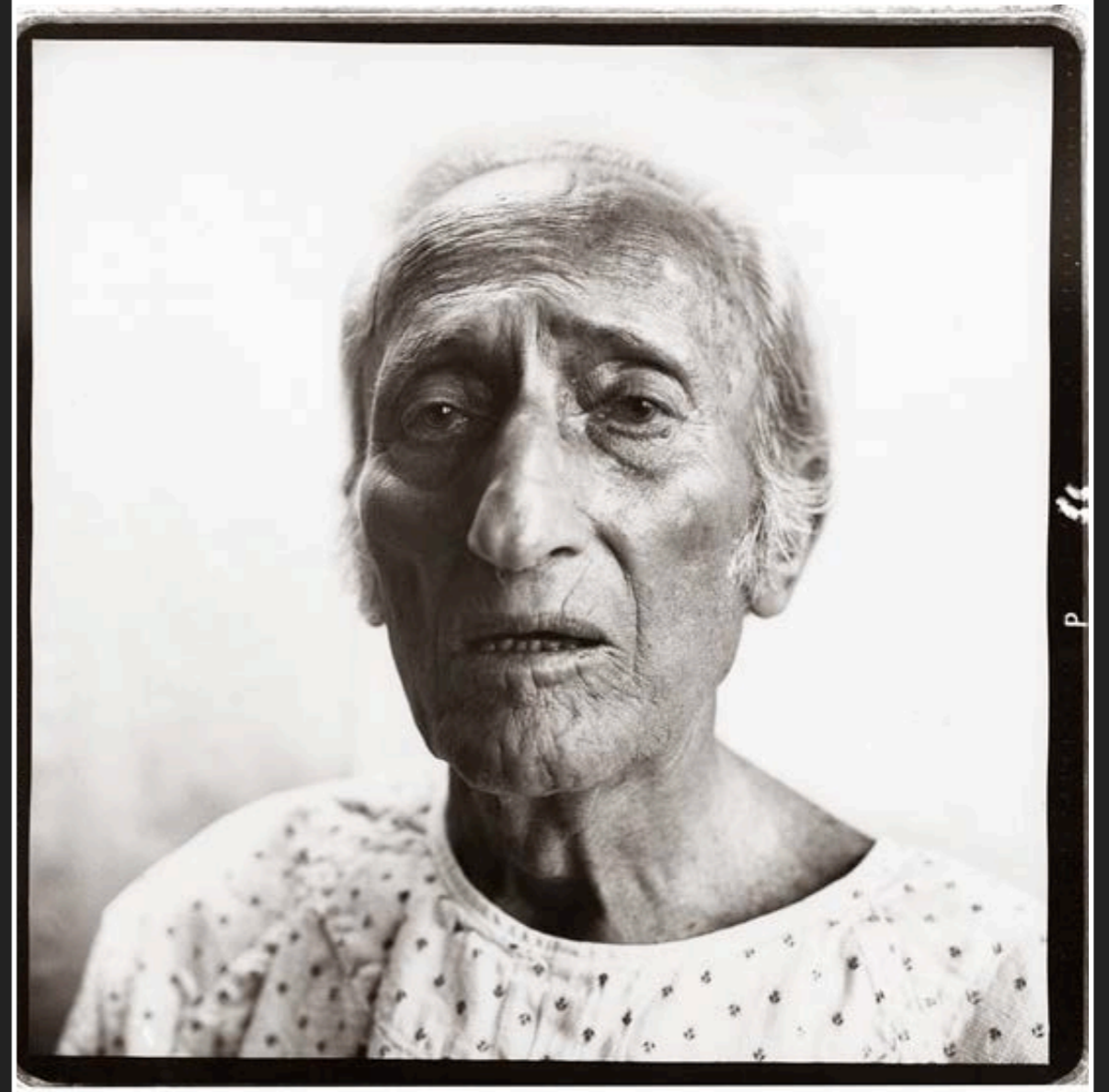
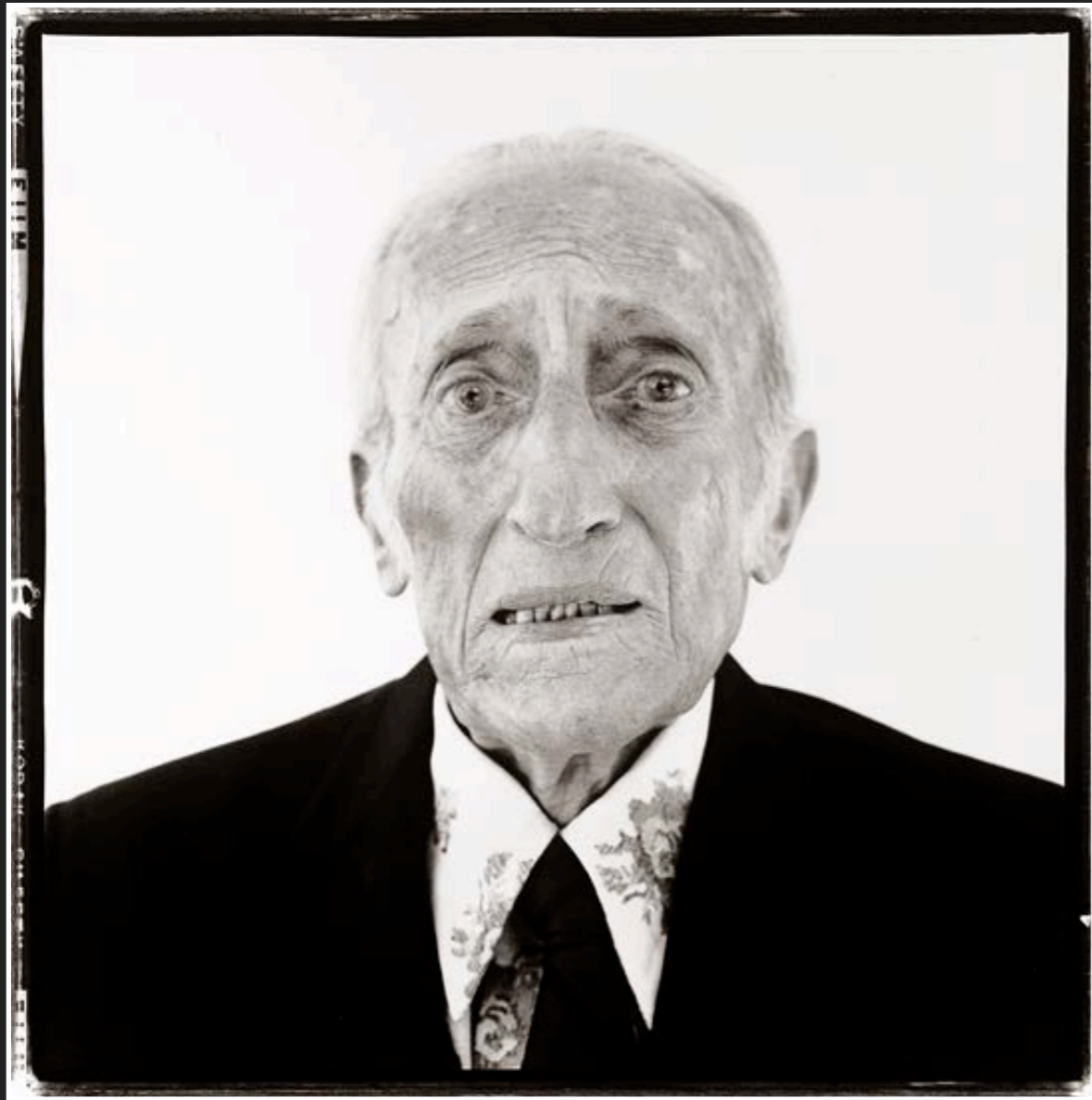
- ▶ In photography, the beautifying of the world is as legitimate as exposing it
- ▶ Portrait photographers take great care to make beautiful people more beautiful
- ▶ Less glamorous people are traditionally photographed in a more harsh way
 - ▶ It is the crueler side of photography that is more highly regarded as art



RICHARD AVEDON



Jacob Israel Avedon, in 1969 & 1971



RICHARD AVEDON

Jacob Israel Avedon, in 1973 & 1972

BEAUTIFYING THE WORLD

- ▶ Compassionate journalism must meet two different criteria:
 - ▶ Our surrealist way of viewing photographs
 - ▶ Our belief that photographs can give us truthful information about events
- ▶ Sontag feels our indignation is aroused by the suffering shown, but is distanced "because they are superb photographs of Agony confirming to surrealist standards of beauty."



W. EUGENE SMITH

Mercury Poisoning of a Japanese Fishing Village, Minamata, 1972

PHOTOGRAPHS AS FRAGMENTS

- ▶ Sontag states that photographs are fragments, and because of this their context changes them
- ▶ Each context suggests a different use for the photograph, therefore the meaning *is* the use
- ▶ Making the truth relative erodes the idea of meaning

A PHOTOGRAPH'S MEANING

- ▶ For Sontag, a photograph can never speak, it's voice is the caption
- ▶ Captions can override the evidence of the eyes, and captions can be easily changed
 - ▶ Therefore they cannot give a permanent meaning
- ▶ Beauty outlasts the relevance of the meaning

PHOTOGRAPHS AS FRAGMENTS

- ▶ Sontag states that the more unforgettable the image, the greater the chance of becoming both timeless and depoliticized
- ▶ Inhabitants of the richer part of the world tend to learn of troubles through photography
- ▶ By transforming history into a spectacle, it anesthetized the morals and stimulates the senses



LEWIS HINE

*Child Labor in America,
1908-1912*



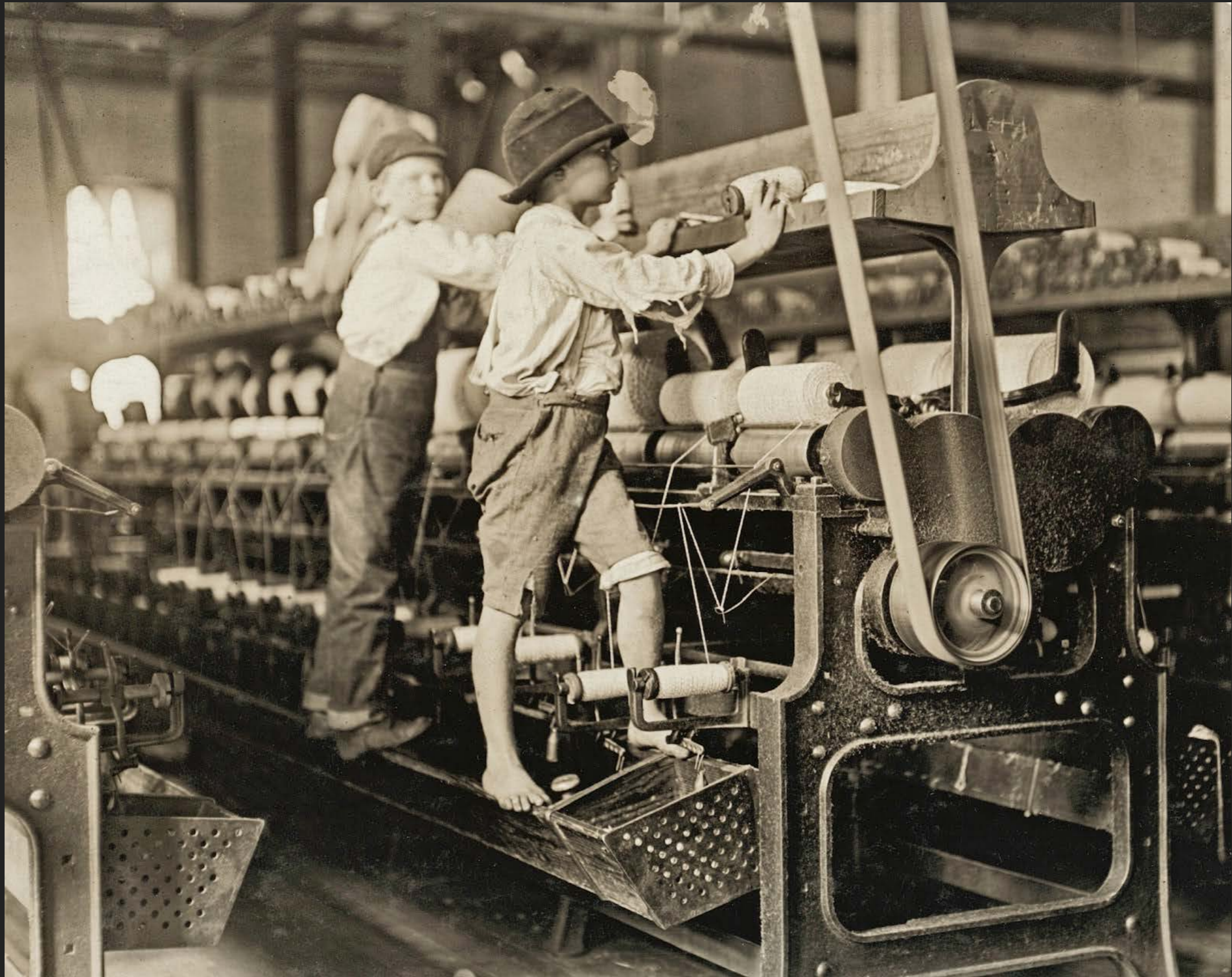
LEWIS HINE

Child Labor in America, 1908-1912



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SUMMARY

- ▶ Sontag claims that photographic seeing is dissociative, alienates and replaces the real by the photographic
- ▶ Moreover, due to the wide-spread availability of cameras, accessible to all
- ▶ Captions cannot save the truth from reality in photographic translation