

On Photography

Susan Sontag

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To depict the 3-dimensional world on a flat surface is not a trivial task as testified by the long history of art. However the principles of projection giving us the rules of perspective are rather elementary. Nevertheless the problem was not solved until the early Renaissance and ever since then pictures have not been the same as we now are quite familiar with the process of flattening and the distortions it makes manifest and which may be unseen by the innocent eye. The principle of projection could at a fairly early age be manifested by the Camera Obscura that through a small hole projected an image on a flat wall. With the invention of the lens, this could be made more efficient, by allowing a larger aperture and thus a far brighter image. It seems clear that this was used by the classical masters¹ as a technical aid, transferring the image onto paper and canvas by mechanical copying. But the point of a painting is that it is moveable, that it depicts a scene not just at the presence of the observer, in which case the need for mediation is not necessary, but from other locations and at other points of time. A picture should be, like a painting for which it is often the inspiration, a material object. Thus the problem of photography is not so much producing the image but to fix it. Thus, as the name indicates, graphing it, not laborously by hand as the old masters, but automatically by light itself. At the beginning of the 19th century there were some preliminary attempts, but the first really successful one was by Daguerre, a process that gave a unique image - the Daguerrotype. This clearly brought about a revolution, the nature of which seems to have been more or less immediately recognised by contemporary observers. From having been the privilege of the very few, the possibility of having your likeness recorded and preserved, was now open to the many. Some painters, not Delacroix as I used to believe but his contemporary Delaroche announced that painting was now dead, a statement that has often been repeated along with its denial ever since. The Daguerrotype now strikes us as very primitive. Exposures were long, thus portraits were necessarily taken in studios forcing the sitters to sit absolutely still for very long times². In 1840 Talbot came up with a new process, one which produced at first a negative, which in its turn could be copied into potentially an unlimited number of copies. From then on photography had arrived. The steady improvement of the sensitivity of film as well as the increased portability of the camera soon made the activity of photography accessible to the general public as early as the end of the 19th century. And with the ease of use of the camera and the fast film, in principle anything could be photographed.

Photography in principle being an automated process had many applications. The obvious one is documentation, be it scientific, as in the astronomy or historical as in archeology or in forensic work, or simply in the fixing in time of ephemeral moments, the

¹ Notably Ver Meer as testified by a recent study

² Special aids were developed for the purpose.

latter being its most common use and with which photography is usually associated and which form the basis for the essay of Susan Sontag.

The photograph carries with it a stamp of authenticity. The authenticity stems from the unmediated and hence unfiltered recording providing an objective transmission, of the relevant as well as the irrelevant. And paradoxically it is the recording of the irrelevant, the innocuous detail, that makes of the photographic image a slice of reality fixed in space and time to be preserved for posterity. It is this totality that is so useful for scientific purposes, but also for the ability of the photograph to act as an eye-witness. Thus in particular, as Sontag notes, the older a photograph, the more fascinating it becomes acquiring a pathos as a privileged window into the past. I remember myself in my teens, having vaguely thought that photography came into existence at the turn of the century, a mere sixty years ago, the shock I experienced once coming across photographs from the American Civil War a century earlier and even ones from the Crimean. It made those to me distant events somehow more palpably real, it greatly extended the area of the past open to direct scrutiny. As Sontag remarks, what would people prefer? A masterly painting of the Bard by say Holbein or a photograph of the same? Clearly for most the latter would be far more preferable, however technically bad and artistically indifferent, because of this sense of authenticity, of 'really showing' how Shakespear looked like. In fact a photograph is like a talisman, it carries with it a material slice from a past. The light-rays that traced the likeness of the old playwright still trace him in front of you. The ability of the photograph, the automated process unmediated by human if abetted by its intervention, to convey this almost material slice, makes people unused to the process feel very uncomfortable of having their likeness taken. According to Nadar, Balzac dreaded the photograph, explaining that a man is but a sequence of changing appearances, and the fixing of one is like a robbing.

The taking of a photograph is quick, thus it makes possible the taking of many. While the artist may only produce a very limited number of paintings and other depictions like drawings and lithographs in his life, a photographer can pack in an incredible number of images during his. Thus while the visual artist was confined to a rather limited repertoire of motifs, any undertaking necessitating an investment, the photographer is free to experiment frivolously. While traditionally only a limited number of objects were deemed beautiful and worthy of depiction, with the advent of the photographic process anything could be feed for the lens, thus making anything beautiful, because after all the original act of depiction being confined to the beautiful made the very act of depiction a confirmation of beauty. Thus with photography came the notion of the good eye. A photographer having no control over the details of a picture, everything is duly recorded by the process, his creativity is focuses on the framing and the angle, the way out of a potentially infinite number of views select the interesting and the pleasing. Versimilitude never being a problem, the photographer can concentrate on the compositional. A photograph is never divorced from reality being a slice of it, hence it always represents something, however abstract it may appear, it is not the mere imaginary phantom of somebodies mind. Thus the interest in the mundane and the imperfect, a celebration of the thing by itself and its existence. Hence the beauty we learn to find in the wear and tear of an everyday object, or the shimmering details of an object of nature.

With photography the mass-production of images became not only a possibility but a

fact. And whatever is mass-produced becomes an object of consumption. We are literally flooded by images, through newspapers, magazines, advertisements, not too mention the moving pictures, which strictly speaking is something quite different from photography. With the aid of photography are we able to 'know' how it looks in different countries all over the world, we are familiar with the sights of the pyramids, the Chinese wall, and all other well-known sights: as well as with the appearance of strangers we will never meet. Also we now know how our parents looked like as children, something that was impossible just a few generations ago. In fact personally speaking, I have access to many pictures of myself as a child, due to the excellent albums my father made. The pictures of my parents as children also exist, but not in the same profusion, thus their childhoods being less visually documented seem obscurer. There are also pictures of my grandparents as children, but they are very few and hard to locate, and each of them, would be precious gems. Then I remember from the home of my paternal grandparents a sequences of pictures of bearded men with large whiskers and their wives. Those I knew to be ancestors of my grandparents but in retrospect I am puzzled by my almost total lack of curiosity. The ancestors of your ancestors are also your own ancestors, so why did I never ask specifically whom they represented and when they lived, as I was at the time fascinated by personal history and the past the preceeded the recent.

The ready access to pictures and picture taking means consumption. The photographic image gives us access to information without experience, the photographic experience. And with the obsessive taking of pictures, direct experience is rejected for the possibility of photographic experience to be savoured at a later date. It is like the photograph being a slice of reality in the end bestows reality, thus unless captured on a photo it is not really real. The rainbow, like the mirage, is felt like not really being real, but some kind of illusion, thus the surprise when it can actually be captured on film. In the same way the existence of elves or ghosts and other super-natural phenomena are not really proved unless captured on photos³, hence the relentless, and up to now fruitless, ambition to do so. Thus the mere report of the senses are not enough, we need to objectify it with the photo which is duplicable, measurable and constant in time. Thus the spectacle of the tourist who only at home after a vacation can really appreciate the experience as real.

Is photography really an art? The fact that it is automated and eminently replicable goes against the grain of the work of art as a unique object created by a human hand of exceptional skill and a human temperament more often than not divinely guided. A painting exists as an object, and although it can be copied and disseminated to reach the multitudes⁴, the copies are not the real thing, which is being valued, not least monetarily, and hence taken into custody. On the other hand other works of arts like music, poetry and literature, do not exist as unique objects, and those that can lay claim to such status (original manuscripts etc) are more in the nature of fetishes, because it really does not matter when you read whether the book is a one of a multitude or not, the message being discretely mediated and thus reproducible without loss. So although you may treat the negative as the original, on par with a painting, a photograph is never savoured in its

³ Naturally paintings would never bestwo the same kind of confirmation

⁴ Long before the advent of photography there were means of visual replications like wood-cuts,etchings and lithographs.Rembrandt often made etchings of his paintings as means of advertisement

negative state⁵ and the positive prints have of course no claim to uniqueness and the appreciation is indifferent to which one is chosen. But the real case against photography as an art is the ease with which it can be executed, there really being very little room for manual skill save the most marginal kind⁶. Thus a snapshot can be as aesthetically satisfying, as informative and interesting as any professionally taken picture. Also it is, unlike painting, hard if not impossible to discern in a picture the hand (or eye) of the photographer, unlike the case of painting. A photographer can exhibit his self only in the kinds of subjects he chooses to depict. Thus the artistic impact of a photo is less in the individual image as in the series. A photographer can express himself and contribute in an artistic sense only by opening up new ways of seeing, usually by producing a series. Examples of that kind abound, one need only to think of Edward Westons peppers, Atgets scenes from Paris, Kertesz linear compositions; but the point is, according to Sontag, that when a photographer decides to take other kinds of pictures, there is no intrinsic connection in style between them. To take the example of Muybridge, whose studies of animals in locomotion are well-known and easily recognised, but who would detect his eye behind the image of say the vulcano of Quetzaltenango? A good photographer will most of the time come up with more arresting images than the mere amateur, but this does not prevent the former, as noted above, to accidentally produce images (at least if properly framed and cut) comparable to the most dedicated professional.

The exclusion of the hand from the photographic process concentrates all the attention to the eye, to the exclusion of all other senses⁷. Thus photography has, as noted above, greatly extended the visual scope, bestowing beauty more indiscriminantly than ever before. Our sight is the most sensuous of our senses, and also the one we are most fearful of losing, blindness being a half-way stop to death, depriving us of most of the world. It stands to reason that this development of visual appropriation of our world should have an influence on art. Photography in 'killing' painting liberated it from the demands of verisimilitude to which it had always been implicitly subjected, thus providing it the license and the obligation to concentrate on what photography could not do. Nevertheless it could not resist taking up photographic clues, and it seems to be agreed among art-historians that nowhere was this adaptation to photographic idiom more pronounced than among the French impressionists. Among those the accidental framing of the picture and the inarticulation of back-ground as well as the choice of subjects, may be the most prominent. Although the photographic device of out of focus (especially of foreground) seems to have had little impact on painting⁸.

⁵ The human mind is remarkably inefficient at interpreting negatives, so while we are very adept at recognising faces, faces in the negative invariably stymie us

⁶ This is ignoring the kind of technical photography, say exemplified by the work of the Swede Lennart Nilsson, in which great ingenuity is called for as well as called forth to penetrate areas, usually within the body, not normally conducive to photographic visits

⁷ In painting and drawing you cannot really divorce the visual perception of a form or a sinuous line from the tactile feeling it gives tracing it by the hand. In fact much of the visual pleasure it inspires comes from the simultaneous stimulation of at least an imagined motion of the hand, a pleasure, maybe absent from an individual totally confined to the visual.

⁸ Tendencies to abstraction in paintings clearly antedates the advent of photography, one obvious case

Photography as an art having hundred and fifty years of history, has had time to establish schools and traditions, serving as a means of reference and guidance of taste. Sontag does briefly refer to a canon of photographers of the past hundred years or so. Photography being a Victorian invention, one of its first practitioners was Cameron whose paintingly portraits with soft focus provided the first self-conscious tradition of photography as an art, with the pictorial portraits of Stieglitz and his followers as a natural continuation. Weston and his disciples like Adams reacted by putting emphasis of the technical quality of a print with sharpness of focus being at a premium, While Weston et al followed in the artsy direction of the pictorialists with their interest in composition for its own sake, the documentary trends staked out another direction with their social reportage and their ambition to change by instructing and moving an audience.

One important aspect of photography, only peripherally treated by Sontag is the uneasy symbiosis between advertisement and art. While the hyperbolic nature of advertising texts is, or should be clear to everyone and saundry⁹ the message conveyed by a picture, preferably a photograph, is far more seditious. Thus in the area of commercial photography I suspect that much of visual creativity and innovation has been engendered by external and focused pressures as well as almost unlimited resources, probably influencing photography as an art far more than the latter has inspired the advertising picture. And in fact many professional and artistic photographer, with an emphasis on the former, has either had a past in advertising, often fashion photography, or an on-going relation with it. This points to another seemingly paradox, the pursuit with a passion based on the most questionable of motivations, the turning of the wheels of the consumer society.

Susan Sontag makes a point that photography is the most surreal of all the arts, emphasizing the object and by singling it out removing it from its context. Thus photography becomes in essential a surreal depiction of the world as disassociated bodies, like a collage or a collection of quotations. Sontag is very critical of the ability of the photograph to convey understanding. A picture can of course at times say more than a thousand words, but most often it is mute and requires a context or at least a caption to become meaningful at all. Sometimes the information of a place and a date may be enough to set the associations of an informed spectator; but if the picture would be more than an agent of nostalgia, the context needs to be spelled out in far more detail. One important function the photograph has been asked to fulfil is to fuel indignation by making explicit the face of suffering. However the power to stir, unlike the ability to invoke nostalgia, is rapidly sapped by repeated exposure leading to saturation¹⁰. One simply gets used to the visual expressions of misery, they become standardized icons, the effect of which is more one of reference than renewed revelation. The act of seeing, unlike the act of hearing and smelling, is an aggressive one. The gaze is directed and intended to penetrate, and the vocabulary

in point being the seascapes of a Turner, becoming increasingly sketchy, fuzzy and abstract with time, no doubt of a desire to accurately predict reality or at least our visual perception of it

⁹ although Orwell once remarks in one of his novels ('Coming Up for Air'?) that it is far easier to find a competent craftsman than one able to provide snappy copy

¹⁰ which could be contrasted against the seemingly inexhaustible source of sexual arousal the nude image constitutes, although even in the pornographic arena, there is a need to overextend in order to reach the prematurely jaded

of photography is laced with expressions of predation. One 'aims' and one 'shoots' in order to appropriate. The lens of the camera protrudes like a phallus. No wonder that the act of documenting suffering becomes less an act of compassion than one of intrusion and theft, fuelled by a desire not of aid but of ambition. Realistic as the footage from wars, famines and catastrophes may be, they do however in the end contribute little if anything to either our understanding or to our revulsion and horror.

Susan Sontag concentrates on the still picture not the movie acknowledging that there is a crucial distinction to be made between them. Cartier-Bresson has said famously that in film the interest is always on the next picture to be shown. So although film in a sense is nothing more than many photos¹¹ shown in rapid succession creating the illusion of continuous movement the impact is profoundly different. The movie is not just a slice of life it purports to go beyond and give the total thing, yet in so doing it loses much of the magic of the still photography if admittedly compensating by magics of its own. A film is about the reinstitution of narration, a narration that seldom is carried out by visual means alone, but the caption, in the silents provided by actual slides of text and with the advent of the sound-movie continuously supplied by spoken dialogue or voice-overs, becomes an integral part of the movie. In fact movies being like operas, trying to incapsulate all the senses, the continuation of the silent-movie tradition of supporting musical scores, survives in most modern films at least in an intermittent sense. Still movies contribute to the profusion, not to say inundation of visual images, and while the memories of films often take the form of still photographs, it is remarkably how different a movie appears from a collection of stills (i.e. isolated frames from its footage) compared to the real screening itself. More awkward and stylized itself than the relation our memories have to our lives. Also the movie, even with the recent invention of the video-camera, has never become the province of the amateurs as the snap-shot, in spite of valiant efforts. The unedited home-movies tend also to be insufferable in the long run even when enjoyed by the closest of kin, and inevitably take second seats to the photo-album as a documentation of life.

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¹¹ or pictures in general to include the phenomenon of animation co-existent with the photographic movie from the invention of the moving picture