

Commentary
The Image-World
Susan Sontag

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Susan Sontag's essay *The Image-World*, originally published under the title of *Photography Unlimited*, first appeared on 23 June 1977 in «The New York Review of Books», to be later included, always in 1977, «in a slightly different form» as Sontag herself explains, in the successful volume *On Photography* (Sontag, 1977, p. 1). In my commentary on the above mentioned text, I will refer to this last edition.

In the beginning of the essay, the author underlines the fact that reality was originally interpreted by means of the significant effect of images. Starting from the Platonic philosophy, this dependence on images is questioned by the philosophical thought in favour of a rational model: a model that promises an understanding of the “reality” independently from its images. All of this, according to Sontag, lasted until the second half of the 19th century, when the profound infidelity of the rational model toward the real was recognized. And thus: «The credence that could no longer be given to realities understood *in the form of images* was now being given to realities understood *to be images, illusions*» (Sontag, 1977, p. 153). In support of this thesis, Ludwig Feuerbach was called upon, and particularly the Preface to the second edition (1843) of his *Das Wesen des Christentums*, where the German philosopher claims that in the modern epoch the image is preferred to the thing, the copy to the original, and the representation to reality. In the 20th century, Feuerbach's point of view becomes so evident and it is actually considered as a matter of fact that one is able to claim, just as Sontag does, that

a society becomes “modern” when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images, when images that have extraordinary powers to determine our demands upon reality, and are themselves coveted substitutes for firsthand

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experience, become indispensable to the health of the economy, the stability of the polity, and the pursuit of private happiness. (Sontag, 1977, p. 153)

Such reflections focus particularly on images produced by cameras because they replace reality. A photograph, in fact, is not only an image, an interpretation of what exists (like, for instance, a painting), but it is an exegesis of the real and, as Sontag claims, «a trace, something directly stenciled of the real, like a footprint or a death mask». What is at the heart of the American writer's argument is essentially the question of realism, which in the era of technical reproducibility – where photographic images have a fundamental role – can no longer be merely thought by means of the traditional controversy between the copy and the image, or by regarding the image just as an appearance, utterly separated from the object. And here is the problem. Photography has caused a crisis for the Platonic criticism of the image itself, which is both authentic – inasmuch as it looks like something that is – and false, because it is nothing but conformity to the thing. As Sontag writes in a quite significant passage:

What defines the originality of photography is that, at the very moment in the long, increasingly secular history of painting when secularism is entirely triumphant, it revives – in wholly secular terms – something like the primitive status of images. Our irrepressible feeling that the photographic process is something magical has a genuine basis. (Sontag, 1977, p. 155)

The photographic image is not a representation or a depiction of its content; it is rather a constitutive part of it, an enhancement: «photography is acquisition in several forms». One of the first forms of this acquisition is its owning a person or a thing by substituting them, by rendering photography itself a unique piece. The second is that images render us spectators-consumers of events lived in first person or virtually. The third consists in the opportunity to learn something from the real as knowledge and not as experience. The latter surely represents photography's most accomplished form of acquisition. And here we reach some of the central points of Sontag's reflections. In fact,

through being photographed, something becomes part of a system of information, fitted into schemes of classification and storage which range from the crudely chronological order of snapshot sequences pasted in family albums to the dogged accumulations and meticulous filing needed for photography's uses in weather forecasting, astronomy, microbiology, geology, police work, medical training and diagnosis, military reconnaissance, and art history. (Sontag, 1977, p. 156)

Photographic images do not limit themselves to reformulate the ordinary experience's products, but also reformulate reality as such, as a material to analyze, as an object to control, offering thus an unprecedented possibility of control in comparison to, for instance, those related to writing.

The fundamental characteristic that turns photography into a new system of images is its not being dependent only on a creator-photographer. Its mechanical process is mainly optic-chemical and then electronic. This introduces an uncommon relation between image and reality, according to which, Sontag claims, if in the beginning images could be considered at most as endowed with the qualities of real objects, the ultimate propensity of the modern man – on the contrary – is to assign image qualities to real things. This leads to questioning the long accepted Platonic assumption that what is real is conserved statically and inalterably, while its images are the only things that change. As a consequence, the concepts of reality and image acquire certain complementarity. The order of factors has been particularly overturned. In our societies, Sontag says, it is reality that tends to resemble more and more what photography represents. We are always trying to be photographed in order to become real *through* images.

In her considerations, Sontag also highlights the way in which the world of images can be useful for the creation of a surrogate for the real world.

Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote. One can't possess reality, one can possess (and be possessed by) images – as, according to Proust, most ambitious of voluntary prisoners, one can't possess the present but one can possess the past [...]. To possess the world in the form of images is, precisely, to re-experience the unreality and remoteness of the real. (Sontag, 1977, pp.163–164)

This re-proposes the complex theme of existence. Reality remains irresolute not only as concept but also as image. It appears inaccessible once again. In fact, photographic images diminish the real, just as paintings – Sontag notes – change it, in turn, by adding too much. The main difference between painting and photography, in particular as regards portraiture, is that whereas paintings make everything emerge majestic and appear as judgmental, photographic images are testimonies of a biography and take their non-exclusivity for granted.

But what photography supplies is not only a record of the past but a new way of dealing with the present, as the effects of the countless billions of

contemporary photograph-documents attest. While old photographs fill out our mental image of the past, the photographs being taken now transform what is present into a mental image, like the past. Cameras establish an inferential relation to the present (reality is known by its traces), provide an instantly retroactive view of experience. (Sontag, 1977, pp. 166-167)

Furthermore, the author also refers to cinema when, discussing photography as the instrument capable of depersonalizing the subject-world relationship, she claims that in the filmic experience any activity of spectatorship is barred. The camera sees on behalf of the spectator and the film condenses in a few minutes an event that demands much more time, presenting the events in a way to cause shock.

Dwelling on the Chinese reception of Michelangelo Antonioni's film-documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972), Sontag states that nothing manifests the meaning that photography has for us better than the venomous Chinese journalistic campaign waged against the director. If we read and see photographic images starting from the intrinsic discontinuity with which they communicate the message, in China, on the contrary, these images are interpreted following only the logic of continuity. The Chinese do not accept photography's decomposition of reality. Sontag notes:

We have a modern notion of embellishment – beauty is not inherent in anything; it is to be found, by another way of seeing – as well as wider notion of meaning, which photography's many uses illustrate and powerfully reinforce. The more numerous the variations of something, the richer its possibilities of meaning: thus, more is said with photographs in the West than in China today [...]. The Chinese don't want photographs to mean very much or to be very interesting. They do not want to see the world from an unusual angle, to discover new subjects. Photographs are supposed to display what has already been described. Photography for us is a double-edged instrument for producing clichés (the French word that means both trite expression and photographic negative) and for serving up “fresh” views. For the Chinese authorities, there are only clichés – which they consider not to be clichés but “correct” views. (Sontag, 1977, pp. 172–173)

The limits imposed in China on photography are read by Sontag as a reflection of the character of the Chinese society, a society unified by an ideology that exacerbates the idea of conflict (against the West). On the contrary, Western society – a society shaped by the unlimited use of photographic images – is actually «unified by the denial of conflict»:

Our very notion of the world – the capitalist twentieth century’s “one world” – is like a photographic overview. The world is “one” not because it is united but because a tour of its diverse contents does not reveal conflict but only an even more astounding diversity. This spurious unity of the world is affected by translating its contents into images. Images are always compatible, or can be made compatible, even when the realities they depict are not. (Sontag, 1977, p. 174)

In conclusion, the liveliest point in Sontag’s argument is perhaps in highlighting the way in which the photographic method has led to the “deplatonization” of our conception of reality, or rather, to lay bare our experience based on the ideal distinction between images and things, between copies and originals. The power of images is, indeed, in establishing real materials in themselves, capable of overturning “the real”, transfiguring it into something that is barely a point of departure. It is therefore also inevitable that art has always sought to turn to photography, video, images of movement, just as – to say and see it with Jean-Luc Godard and his film *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1988-98) – to all the probable images and sounds gathered to offer a meaning to the moving pictures and the history of the 21st Century, which indissolubly belong to each other.

