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On (Digital) Photography: Sontag, 34 Years Later

By A. O. SCOTT

A while ago, a botched laptop sync wiped out all the pictures on my iPhone, consigning to oblivion 18 months of poorly framed vacation snapshots, blurred portraits of my children and candid, accidental glimpses of my feet. I should have downloaded it all earlier, winnowing as I went, but somehow I have never acquired that habit. Until I got that phone, I was never much of a photographer, so I’ve always depended on others — grandfathers, my mother, my father-in-law and especially my intermittently camera-obsessed wife — to keep me surrounded by images.

Various household computers have become the descendants and digital approximations of those shoeboxes stuffed with prints brought home in envelopes from defunct camera stores. A squadron of albums marches across a high bedroom bookshelf, though the chronological sequence halts around the turn of the present century. Photographs now live and die on phones and screens, in bits and pixels rather than in emulsion on paper.

Well, sort of. Around the time my telephone’s photographic memory expired, I wandered through a Manhattan gallery looking at an exhibition of beautiful new black-and-white prints, austerely framed, elegantly hung on blank white walls and priced at thousands of dollars each. A few months later, in Paris, my daughter and I were flies on the wall at a magazine photo shoot, a scene that had, to an outsider, the aura of an ancient rite. The photographer had flown in from London, the crew from New York, the subject from a movie set in North Africa. A flurry of makeup, hair and wardrobe adjustment preceded each session, and during these a whirl of human, mechanical and electronic activity coalesced around the goal of capturing a single moment of perfect stillness. My daughter and I stood back at a respectful distance, she with her pocket-size digital camera, I with my cellphone, discreetly capturing the capture of that moment. When a copy of the magazine arrived at our house in New York a few weeks later, we glanced at the solitary image whose making we witnessed, marveled at having witnessed it and turned the page.

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pedigree, does not so much exalt the everyday as establish the aesthetic parameters, the peaks and troughs, of everydayness. The camera may record astounding events or reveal shocking truths, but always within the context of the ordinary, the literal, the real. As Roland Barthes put it in “Camera Lucida,” his graceful and disarming poignant meditation on the nature of the art, the photograph always says the same thing: “That has happened.” Which means that every photograph is equivalent even as each one is distinct, and that they all capture a precise present and register its conversion into an irretrievable past. Photography is the definitively modern, technologically relentless engine for the mass production of nostalgia. Video may be live, instantaneous, perpetually current, but a still photograph takes up instant residence in the archive. It gives you not the gratifications of immediacy, which moving pictures deliver so readily, but rather a teasing and endlessly seductive sense of distance. When you leaf through old albums or tickle the touch screen, you are excavating memory, traveling into the past, whether your destination is the last century or last night.

Looking at pictures may be the most common way of reading history and learning to identify its modern phases. Decoding clothes, hairstyles and certain traits of the image itself — scalloped edges; Polaroid smear; Instamatic soft focus; digital fuzz — are among the primary skills of photographic looking. It is hardly surprising that thinking and writing about photography tend frequently toward retrospection, melancholy and anxiety. Photographs seem at once durable and fragile, trivial and powerful, and contemplation of their place in the world leads naturally to musings on loss, mortality — even apocalypse.

This is certainly true of one of the most important late-20th-century books on the subject: Susan Sontag’s “On Photography.” This slender, intellectually ambitious and emotionally ardent volume was published around the same time as Barthes’s “Camera Lucida” — Sontag’s in 1977 (after appearing in The New York Review of Books) and Barthes’s in 1980, just after his death. They share an eclectic, inexhaustible interest in images, an enthusiasm shadowed by almost superstitious forebodings about the unstoppable proliferation of those same images. “Consider the United States,” Barthes writes — always a dire prospect for a postwar French intellectual — “where everything is transformed into images. Only images exist and are produced and consumed.”

He was less troubled by this prospect than Sontag, whose prose, in the final pages of “On Photography,” ripples with alarm. “Images are more real than anyone could have supposed,” she wrote. She warned that our consciousnesses, individual and collective, were in danger of being overwhelmed, our aesthetic and ethical senses dulled and muddled, by an ever-intensifying blizzard of mechanically produced pictures. How would we be able to sort through them all, to
decode their messages and judge their merits? How would we know what was real? “We consume images at an ever faster rate,” Sontag observed, and the more we do, the more “images consume reality.”

Her solution was to call for “an ecology of images,” and it is hard to think of an appeal that has gone more spectacularly unheeded. A cursory glance away from the words you are reading now — whether you are reading them on a tablet, a desktop or a sheaf of inked pages — will confirm that nothing like the “conservationist remedy” Sontag called for has even been formulated, much less applied. The current slogan for packaging disposable commodities may be “reduce, reuse, recycle,” but in the domain of the image, two out of three only makes matters worse. To clip, copy and paste an existing picture is also, after all, to make a new picture, and thus to contribute to the global glut.

But cultural prophecies are sometimes most interesting when they turn out to be wrong, and while “On Photography” can look, from one angle, like the expression of an obsolescent worldview, it also turns out to be jarringly prescient, one of a small handful of works of 20th-century criticism that speak, with uncanny directness, to the state of 21st-century culture. It is almost literally an antediluvian book, dating from a time just before the digital revolution unleashed a flood of images upon the world beyond anything Sontag or her editors could have imagined.

Those of us who were around in 1977 sometimes try to tell our kids what it was like in those days. We see their eyes widen in disbelief — or glaze over in boredom, or drift toward whatever screen is claiming their attention at the moment. Listen! When we were your age, there were maybe half a dozen television channels. No smartphones or laptops or digital flipcams. No Flickr streams or Tumblr cascades. No Facebook tags or twitpics. Can you imagine?

And yet the way we engage photographic images — the ones we make, the ones we look at — has not really changed. Or, to put it another way, the rise of digital culture has not fundamentally altered the nature of photography but rather fulfilled it. And that is because the first step in the march toward digital modernity was the invention of the camera.

“On Photography” spells this out, in part because Sontag, with her usual ambition, tries at once to trace the history of photography and to isolate its essential characteristics. This means that she is writing about both art and technology, about a specialized discipline that is also a commercial pursuit, a form of journalism and a hobby. Books on the history of painting do not, as a rule, consider the daubings of weekend watercolorists alongside the works of the old masters. And while the literary canon has made room for a handful of diaries, letters and newspaper articles, these exceptions tend to reinforce the exclusion of vernacular forms from the pantheon of art.
But to consider photography as a fine art — and to defend its claim to that status, which is a large part of Sontag’s agenda — all but requires attention to its everyday, vulgar, popular uses. The camera’s leveling, democratic potential was apparent from the start, as middle-class families sat for formal portraits in local studios. And as the photographic profession expanded and diversified to keep pace with the growing perception of the medium’s utility, so, too, did the range of pleasures available to the amateur. Aesthetic refinement went hand in hand with mass accessibility. Cameras became cheaper, lighter and easier to use. Exploration of the formal, ethical and ontological complexities of image making became a collective project — nowadays we might call it a wiki — pursued on divergent tracks by advertisers, fashion-mongers, avant-gardists, journalists, pornographers and shutterbug uncles at family reunions.

The chaos and pluralism that define Web culture, which make previously specialized pursuits ever more widely available to the curious and the untrained, were always part of photography. In its early years, in the middle of the 19th century, there was some argument about whether taking pictures with a camera could legitimately be called an art, and there may be cause to wonder now if it can remain one. How can particular images hold on to their distinction, their exalted particularity? Is it by retaining trace memories of older artisanal practices and materials — by being printed on special paper, framed and composed with exquisite care, shot in studios full of expensive equipment? Or is there some less-definable expressive quality that turns the banal into the beautiful?

One thing is certain: There is not, and will not be, an ecology of images. (Sontag acknowledged as much in her last book, “Regarding the Pain of Others,” published in 2002). Images make up our ecosystem, our native habitat, the only reality we recognize. And as we learn to negotiate the landscape of digital culture, the history of photography can provide a compass and a map. The camera, the darkroom, the museum and the archive all exist in the same place. Everywhere and nowhere; on Google Earth, in social networks, on a standard cellphone app. Every one of us commands a factory and a storehouse of images, vessels of information and nostalgia, desire and curiosity. And each of us spends more time than we care to admit browsing through it, searching out shards of memory and intimations of mortality.
Sontag Photography, Chicago, Illinois. 860 likes. modern portrait and event photographer. available worldwide. #34 #gobulls. Sontag Photography. 9 February ·. SO ready for more destination weddings, elopements, and adventure couple photo sessions this year! Booking 2020 and 2021 now. +4. SOMEHOW missed realizing I achieved 2 Bronze Merits last year when I submitted to @theportraitmasters ! Will post both the meriting photos today in belated celebration lol. Sontag Photography. "On Photography is to my mind the most original and illuminating study of the subject."—Calvin Trillin, The New Yorker. Susan Sontag was born in New York City on January 16, 1933. The suitcase of booty that Michel-Ange and Ulysse triumphantly bring home, years later, to their wives turns out to contain only picture postcards, hundreds of them, of Monuments, Department Stores, Mammals, Wonders of Nature, Methods of Transport, Works of Art, and other classified treasures. On Photography. On Photography. 18. to those unaware that urban poverty in late-nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian. Nevertheless, the camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses. Photography is a kingdom of glamour and banality. The photograph, whatever its cultural pedigree, does not so much exalt the everyday as establish the aesthetic parameters, the peaks and troughs, of everydayness. The camera may record astounding events or reveal shocking truths, but always within the context of the ordinary, the literal, the real. In its early years, in the middle of the 19th century, there was some argument about whether taking pictures with a camera could legitimately be called an art, and there may be cause to wonder now if it can remain one. How can particular images hold on to their distinction, their exalted particularity?