Susan Sontag: Photographs, Evidence and Selection

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 9–10; return December 15 and 18. “In Plato’s Cave,” On Photography (1977).

Before reading:

Sontag asks how photographs become objects, records and forms of possession. The opening comparison with Plato’s cave concerns the difference between images and understanding. The selected paragraphs hold two claims together: a photograph can record something and still interpret it through selection. Her historical examples are part of her argument, not instructions to accept every generalization.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Source quotations:

Supplied nineteen-page chapter PDF, pages 2–4. The opening appropriation sentences and later evidence/selection paragraphs are nonconsecutive; the gap is marked.

Source text: 455 words. Introductions, vocabulary and questions are course commentary. Paragraphs below retain the author’s wording; line wrapping is removed.

To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.

[Passage omitted.]

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. In one version of its utility, the camera record incriminates. Starting with their use by the Paris police in the murderous roundup of Communards in June 1871, photographs became a useful tool of modern states in the surveillance and control of their increasingly mobile populations. In another version of its utility, the camera record justifies. A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what’s in the picture. Whatever the limitations (through amateurism) or pretensions (through artistry) of the individual photographer, a photograph—any photograph

—seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects. Virtuosi of the noble image like Alfred Stieglitz and Paul Strand, composing mighty, unforgettable photographs decade after decade, still want, first of all, to show something "out there," just like the Polaroid owner for whom photographs are a handy, fast form of note-taking, or the shutter-bug with a Brownie who takes snapshots as souvenirs of daily life.

While a painting or a prose description can never be other than a narrowly selective interpretation, a photograph can be treated as a narrowly selective transparency. But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth. Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience. The immensely gifted members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project of the late 1930s (among them Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee) would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject's face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry. In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are. Those occasions when the taking of photographs is relatively undiscriminating, promiscuous, or self-effacing do not lessen the didacticism of the whole enterprise. This very passivity—and ubiquity—of the photographic record is photography's "message," its aggression.

Vocabulary:

- **Appropriation:** Taking something into possession or use, including making it available as an image.
- **Presumption:** Something initially taken to be true.
- **Veracity:** Truthfulness.
- **Interpretation:** A selection or explanation that gives what is seen a particular meaning.

- **Indexical trace:** A physical or causal connection to what was recorded. This additional working term does not guarantee that a caption is true.

Discuss:

- What claim could the image support? What larger claim would require another source?
- Why does Sontag's account of selection leave room for a photograph to be evidence?
- Compare a personal photograph with a public image. When might keeping a photograph express care, and when could photographing someone exert control?

Connection:

Jacobs tests a definition of photography centered on recording light against one centered on selecting a view.

Use reproduction to distinguish what an image makes available from what a specific factual claim requires.

Printable handout:

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