

# ...Susan Sontag On Photography - A Holistic View of the Medium in the Age of Capitalism

Photography, Book(s) in Focus

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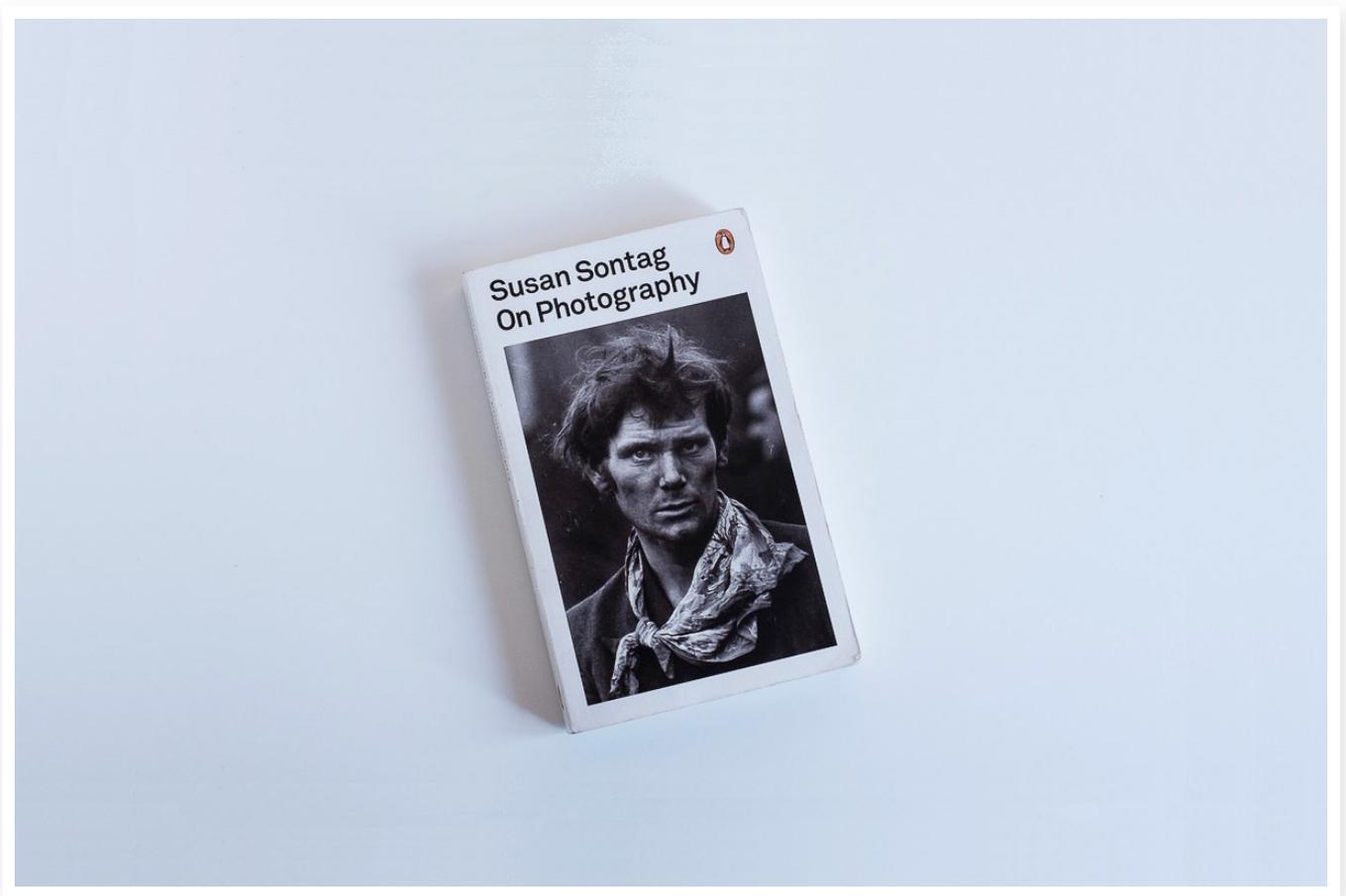
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*To collect photographs is to collect the world* — wrote Susan Sontag in her influential book *On Photography*, published in 1977. However, as some critics suggested, the book could have been as easily called *Off Photography* (offing as slang for killing someone) for its critical stance towards the medium.

*"To be legitimate as an art, photography must cultivate the notion of the photographer as auteur and of all photographs taken by the same photographer as constituting a body of work,"* reads a passage in which Sontag aims to position photography in relation to other art forms. However, her main preoccupation in the book remained with consumer culture, politics, and photography's relation to them.

Shortly after publication, the book received both a positive and negative critique, with those on the negative side even suggesting that the author was prejudiced against the medium. Colin Westerbeck, an *Artforum* contributor, wrote: *"Sontag is prejudiced. She doesn't see photographs as individual works in the same way that a bigot doesn't think of blacks or Italians or Jews as individual people."*

Today, however, Susan Sontag's *On Photography* is as resonant as ever. "The power and originality of Sontag's book lie in her eagerness to engage with photography's promiscuity," wrote in 2022 Mia Fineman, a photography curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Its significance is precisely in considering the medium's influence on modern consciousness, whether good or bad.



Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, via [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

## On Photography

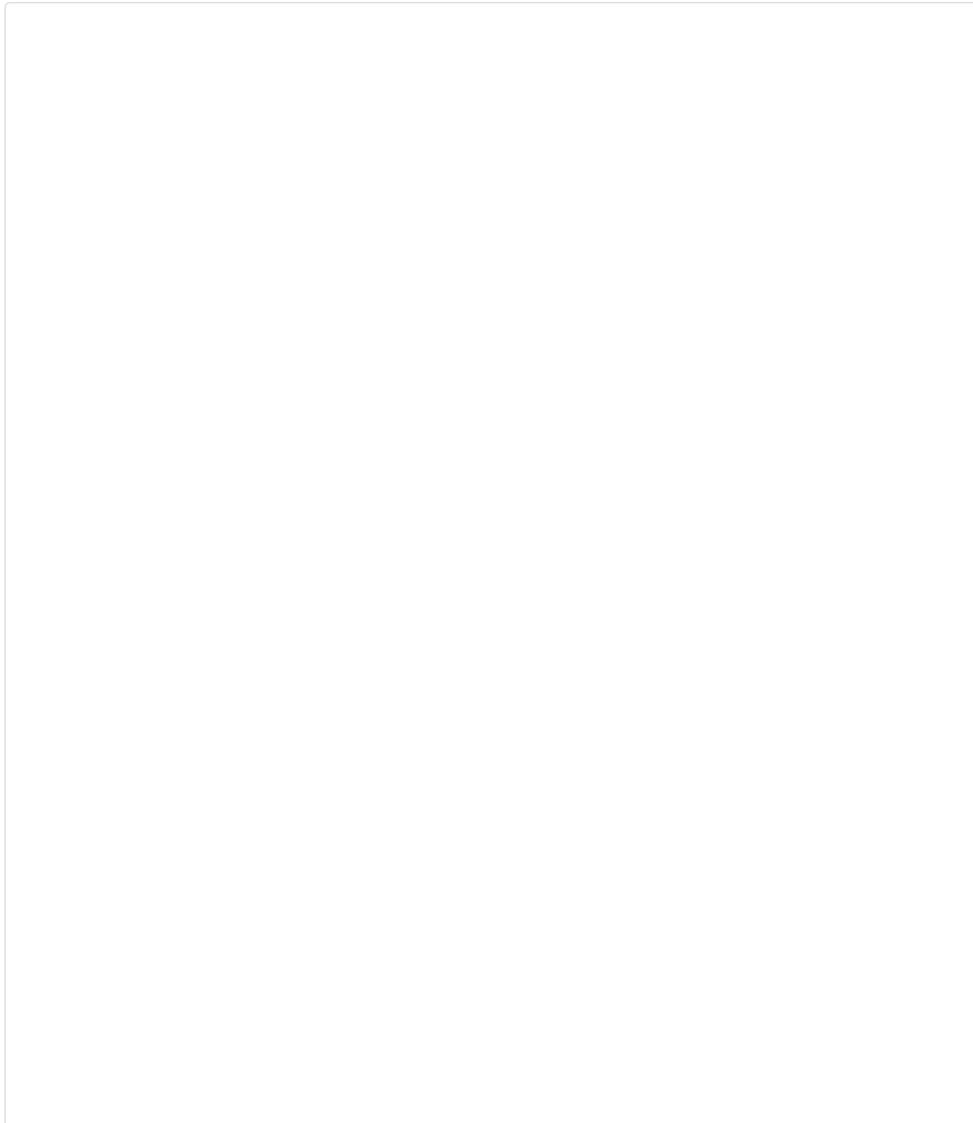
*On Photography* has been one of the most important pieces of writing in the field ever since its publishing. The book is a collection of essays that were first published in the *New York Review of Books* between 1973 and 1977. Although educated at different universities, her writing did not fit the rigid academic norms but is instead a polemic piece that problematizes the role of photography in contemporary society.

Each essay took about six months to write, with Sontag paying careful attention to each word and sweating over every sentence. The lyricism of each segment was also infused with profound

considerations of reality and abstract concepts. Although occasionally revealing logical inconsistencies and contradictions, the book is a well of information and inspiration for art and culture theorists and the general public who are interested in photography.

Routinely quoted in debates about photography's role in modern life today, Sontag did not go easy on the subject; early on in the book, she writes that photos contribute to a mental pollution everyone is now addicted to.

*Needing to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs is an aesthetic consumerism to which everyone is now addicted. Industrial societies turn their citizens into image-junkies; it is the most irresistible form of mental pollution.*



## Main Themes and Arguments

Sontag examined the history and role of photography by looking at works of different photographers, including Diane Arbus, Walt Whitman, and Depression-era documentary images, arguing that the medium fosters a voyeuristic interaction with reality, which can compromise the importance and meaning of events.

While discussing many examples from modern photography, Sontag touched upon different topics, including American idealization, photography and politics, and the tension between intervention and recording. Diving into photography's ethical aspects, she claimed that recording hampers action as those who record cannot intervene, highlighting the complex relationship between politics and the medium.

Some major outtakes from the book include considerations of the notion of beauty and how photographs have changed it (*The image-surfeited are likely to find sunsets corny; they now look, alas, too much like photographs.*), the role of images in antiquing reality (*The photograph offers a modern counterpart of that characteristically romantic architectural genre, the artificial ruin...*), and the anxiety of photo-taking (*People want the idealized image... The news that the camera could lie made getting photographed much more popular.*)

Sontag also questioned the effect photography has on us (*Through the camera people become customers or tourists of reality*) and elaborated on its existential poignancy.

*All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless*

## *melt.*

She also explored the medium's ability to deceive and exploit truth and be deployed in propaganda. *"Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy,"* she wrote.

Besides capturing positive aspects of reality, Sontag was also painfully aware of the medium's ability to reflect everything destructive as well. This is particularly evident in parts of the book where she addressed images of atrocities and **compassion fatigue**. As she notes, images of atrocity and the impulse to voyeuristically take and observe them can lead to desensitisation.



Susan Sontag, 1979 © Lynn Gilbert, via [Creative Commons](#)

## The Author and Her Book

Born in New York City in 1933, Susan Sontag studied at the College of the University of Chicago and did graduate work in philosophy, theology, and literature at Oxford and Harvard University. She was a human rights activist and president of the American Center of PEN and was the recipient of many awards and honours, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for *On Photography*.

One of the most influential thinkers of her time and a prolific commentator on art and culture, Sontag was among the first authors who wrote about photography's ability to **deceive**. She focused on moral and aesthetic issues related to the medium, including its power to idealize and shock, but also to work as a propaganda and memorial.

While the book focuses on photography, the essays are also revealing of the author. Sontag lost her father when she was five and was raised by her cold mother, leading her to leave the home at the age of 17, after which she married one of her lecturers. Forced to carve her path alone from an early age and navigate an industry dominated by older men, Sontag allows **few inconsistencies** in her argumentation, which *"help us to understand the woman who wrote them,"* Fineman explains.

## It Is Not About Photography

When interviewed about *On Photography* in 1978, Sontag explained that it is not about the medium but about *"the way we are now."* Her understanding of the role of photography was ahead of her time as

understanding of the role of photography was ahead of her time as she observed it in relation to consumer culture instead of being preoccupied with its status as art.

*"The subject of photography is a form of access to contemporary ways of feeling and thinking,"* she explained. At the time the book was published, photography was still not considered a legitimate art form and was just establishing its status. For Sontag, photography acted as an *"exemplary activity"* that revealed all that is poetic and brilliant, but also all that is destructive in our societies as well.

Although Sontag died in 2004, six years before the launch of Instagram, she understood that having an experience became *"identical with taking a photograph of it."* Although many assumed that she was critical of the medium — she wrote in one chapter that the camera is *"a predatory weapon"* — in fact, she enjoyed thinking and writing about photography, as evident from the book.

Re-evaluating her stance in 2003, she published *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which she partially refuted some of her previous arguments. The book could be considered a postscript to *On Photography*.

Featured image: Susan Sontag, On Photography, via [photolari.com](http://photolari.com)