

Writing about Photography

1. Choose one of the following passages from Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, and write a brief paragraph of commentary on it. Feel free to agree or disagree with Sontag's ideas and claims. Note: Sontag's book was first published in 1977. In what ways has the advent of the Internet and digital photography changed—or confirmed—the sense of what Sontag is saying?

"In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe."
(3)

"A way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it—by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir. Travel becomes a strategy for accumulating images. The very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel." (10-11)

"To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strengthen conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them. Once one has seen such images, one has started down the road of seeing more—and more. Images transfix. Images anaesthetize." (20)

"Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say *no*. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph." (23)

"By furnishing this already crowded world with a duplicate one of images, photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is." (24)

2. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes says that photographs that capture his interest have two components, which he calls the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* is the collection of generic information that a photograph carries. Every person and thing in a photograph can signify some larger idea or set of facts: for example, a photo of congressional representatives at the U.S. Capitol might signify "the political process," "the center of power," "negotiation," "Democrats" or "Republicans," and so on. The *punctum* is the detail that stands out and deeply moves the viewer in some way; it is likely an accidental effect, not something that was intended by the photographer.

Choose a photograph—either one in your own personal collection or one you happen to like—and analyze it in Barthes' terms. What is its *studium*? What is its *punctum*—the non-obvious thing that stands out to *you* and matters in some way? In posting your response, please include the photo with your analysis.