

In the first chapter of *On Photography*, “In Plato’s Cave,” Susan Sontag points out that photographs are like shadows, shaping how we understand the world. She draws on Plato’s allegory of the cave to show that people often mistake shadows for reality, just as we often rely on photographs to confirm and interpret the world around us. Photography can capture beautiful images and bring aesthetic pleasure, but it can also narrow our vision, making us believe that what appears in a photograph represents the whole of reality.

Sontag reminds us that a photograph is not a neutral reflection, but a reconstruction shaped by choices of framing and composition. It can reveal certain truths while hiding others. A photo may seem to capture a “real moment,” but in fact, it is already filtered through the photographer’s perspective, framing, and selection. In our daily lives, for example, when we take photos with our phones, we usually try to capture the most attractive views, while avoiding messy or unpleasant details. We often delete the photos we dislike and keep only the most appealing ones. These small choices shape how the photo will later represent memory and meaning. What looks like objective “evidence” is often only a carefully selected and constructed fragment of experience.

Sontag also stresses that photography creates a kind of “grammar of images.” It not only shapes memory but also influences how we think. Images may appear more natural than words because they look like direct imprints of reality. Yet this sense of “naturalness” can be deceptive. Photographs create an illusion of objectivity, making us believe that what we see is the truth. In reality, each image is a particular way for the photographer to express something about the world, and it frames how we perceive it. This reminds me of looking at photos of tourist sites. Many of these images are carefully staged or edited to attract visitors, but they do not necessarily show the full reality of those places. Sontag’s argument makes me wonder: what have I missed when relying on photographs? Am I only seeing “shadows” rather than the substance itself?

Sontag further argues that photography carries deep moral and political weight. On one hand, it can expose injustice, document history, and call for reform. Images of war, poverty, or social protest can move people emotionally and awaken a sense of responsibility. On the other hand, photography can also turn suffering into an object of aesthetic appreciation, packaging pain into images for consumption. When suffering is presented in a polished or beautiful way, it risks losing its original urgency and may become a visual commodity rather than a force for change. For Sontag, looking at photographs is not only a way of understanding the world but also an ethical act that requires critical reflection.

In the end, photography is both an expansion and a limitation in modern life. It opens up new ways of seeing, giving us access to distant places, historical moments, and the experiences of others. At the same time, it traps us in a metaphorical “cave of images.” We often confuse representation with reality, forgetting that behind each image lies a more complex lived

experience. In this sense, photography brings us closer to the world, but it can also keep us at a distance. Through images, we may “see,” but we do not always truly “experience.”