Reflection on *In Plato’s Cave* by Susan Sontag

In class, we saw the image of Plato’s Cave figures chained in darkness, watching shadows on a wall, believing those shadows were reality. Susan Sontag uses this metaphor to describe how we experience the world through photographs. Just like the prisoners in the cave, we often mistake images for truth. We think we’re seeing reality, but we’re really seeing fragments of shadows.

Sontag says the “inventory started in 1839” when photography began cataloging the world. From that moment, cameras weren’t just tools they were instruments of control. Everything became photographable, collectible, and ownable. Sontag makes it clear: to photograph something is to claim it. That idea made me reflect on how often we see images without thinking about what they mean or who chose to show them.

Over time, photography evolved. Sontag talks about how photographs became expressive, how they taught us “a grammar and... an ethics of seeing” That line made me pause. It’s not just about what we look at, but how we’re taught to look. Even artistic photos carry assumptions. They frame reality in ways that feel natural but are constructed. I see how it shapes perception, even when it’s beautiful.

Then photography became a tool for journalism. We saw this in class when we looked at the image of the little girl running naked in the street during the Vietnam War. That photo raw, painful, unforgettable, provoked different reactions. Some people felt compassion, others felt rage (some at the photographer for taking the photo). And (in that year 1972) I believe was documented how political leaders wanted to suppress the media from disclosing it to the public. She talks about how photographs can “shock,” “educate,” and “exploit” That tension between revealing truth and manipulating emotion is central to her critique.

Sontag also warns about the abuses of photography. she writes about its use in pornography, political propaganda, and appropriation. These aren’t just theoretical concerns they’re real consequences. A photo can strip away dignity, turn suffering into spectacle, or reinforce stereotypes. Sontag’s point is that photography isn’t innocent. It can be used to dominate, distract, or deceive.

One example that stood out to me was her mention of the film *Peeping Tom*. In it, the camera becomes a weapon, the killer films women as he murders them, then watches the footage to take pleasure and relive the act. It’s disturbing, but it also shows how photography can be tied to power, control, and even violence. Sontag uses this example to show how the act of looking can become predatory. It made me think about how often cameras are used not just to observe, but to invade.

In the end, Sontag doesn’t reject photography. She just wants us to be more critical. Today, photography is everywhere, on our phones, in our devices, films T.V. social media etc. Shaping how we see ourselves and others. The technology has advanced, but the questions remain: Who’s behind the lens? What’s being shown? What’s being left out? *In Plato’s Cave* reminded me that images aren’t just reflections, they’re constructions. And if we’re not careful, we’ll stay chained to the wall, mistaking shadows for truth.