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SUSAN SONTAG’S AESTHETICS OF PHOTOGRAPHY

SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS

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Keywords

Aesthetics of photography, archive, phenomenology of photography, realism, photographoc art, postmemory, museums of memory, surrealism, anesteziere, ontology of the photographic image, photography as transcription, the power of photography, photography as a way of seeing.

Introduction

We have the moral obligation, Susan Sontag writes, to acknowledge suffering and to contemplate its existing records; we are not allowed superficiality and ignorance. She discusses the relationship between morality and aesthetics. To speak of ‘aesthetics’ and ‘beauty’ in relation to suffering and war is a risky and a morally controversial approach. This is why Susan Sontag prefers to speak of the way in which we look at a photo, about the viewer’s experiences and his relation to reality. Photography presents things ‘as they are’. As a sign of the past, photography is the strongest form of memory. Walter Benjamin wrote in *Arcades Project* that history unfolds in images, not in stories. Although photographs provide us with the possibility of witnessing a world we no longer have access to, some authors consider that photography does not depict the truth and opposes history. Photographs are discontinuous, they ‘freeze’ events, whose traces they are. Unlike photography, which merely captures the moment without considering its meaning, history also tries to understand its significance. Photographs have capacity to capture events that cannot be told, that are deemed unrepresentable, which is why we would rather not speak of them. Some authors believe that, regardless of the consequences, we must see and understand these images. An event known through photographs can become less real through the repeated display of the images. Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, John Berger, Judith Butler and Siegfried Kracauer are some of the authors that analysed the relationship between photography, memory and history.

The Abu Ghraib photos prompted Americans to ask more questions, to want to know the truth, as up to that point the political and military authorities supervising the occupation of Irak declared that no ‘abuses’ were committed and that prisoners

were not maltreated despite having received such reports from various governmental organizations. The reports were no longer relevant when the images surfaced – these changed the people’s view of the war, raised the public’s awareness and ratified uncomfortable truths that were known, but difficult to accept. Susan Sontag became aware of photography’s importance from this point of view, from the perspective of war images in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, where she partly discarded the idea of the public’s inability to empathize as a result of the photos’ omnipresence. Starting from here, we wonder to what extent photographs can embed other historical truths that were not paid enough heed through the tacit adoption of the same conclusions. Georges Didi-Huberman is thus right when he urges that we speak of war photographs, arguing that we can no longer resort to the ever-invoked ‘unsaid’ or ‘unimaginable’, since images speak louder than any possible form of art.

The way in which photography and its aesthetic are understood cannot be appreciated in isolation from the author’s life and intellectual projects, her career trajectory, which reflects the continuity of her ideas and preoccupations. Susan Sontag has this coherence, although it might seem there is no obvious connection between her essays (on literature, photography, film, the theatre), prose or her passion for film if we read them separately. As hard to keep track of are the intellectual meanderings of Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes, who influenced Sontag’s works and about whom she wrote on more than one occasion. When she discusses the aesthetic experience, Susan Sontag also refers to ethics. In fact, the interest in ethics is the common point between Benjamin, Barthes and Sontag. It is here that the phenomenological traces of her writings, which we will approach in depth in the second part of the thesis, originate. Her essays on war and photography, as well as their ethical and aesthetic implications were also influenced by the photos of Leibovitz and her son David’s (a self-described combative aesthetician rather than moralist) pieces as a war correspondent.

Sontag traced the role of suffering in photography through the Crimean War, the American Civil War, WWI and WWII, concentration camps, the Vietnam and Cambodia wars, the Gulf War, the Bosnia and Kosovo wars, as well as postcards. Many of her opinions changed due to personal experiences during her trips to Sarajevo, as well as having survived cancer and experienced suffering herself. She left for Sarajevo at her son’s behest, who was already there as a journalist. She was

there asked to direct a play and she chose Godot. Sontag made a point of stating that she chose to go there, putting her life at risk, out of the need to help, which had nothing to do with 'intellectual privilege'.

Her first contact with war photography was at the age 12, when she found photos from Bergen-Belsen and Dachau in a Santa Monica bookshop, a painful moment that triggered a suffering long felt afterwards. It is evident that a large part of her experiences refer to suffering and horrors in photography, which is why the thesis will develop around these ideas, emphasizing several aspects, points of view, nuances. The aesthetic will be approached through the lens of war.

Sontag analysed photography not only from the perspective of suffering, but also as a form of aggression, domination, demolition, supervision and performance. She was fascinated by the works of Diana Arbus, suggesting that, in her world, everyone is estranged, isolated in mechanical relationships, as well as the surrealist quality of Atget's photographs. Diane Arbus' photos were essential in prompting the taking of an ethical stance towards art. Sontag believed that, from an ethical viewpoint, Arbus elevated art to the level of ruin. Photos are important not so much for the frequency with which they catch the viewer's attention, but for the way the viewer looks at them, the transformations it triggers, as a photograph is only complete at the moment when the viewer interferes.

Susan Sontag assumes a favourable stance towards the aesthetic condition when she discusses reality, the truth, beauty, etc. In her view, photography is art to the extent to which we are willing to discard our obsolete conceptions about expression, beauty, the originality of art, etc. in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag seems to refute the aesthetic experience, as Evernden and Michael Kelly observe. At times she seems to agree with Plato's theory that art is a mere umbrella of reality, while on the other hand she emphasizes that the fact that photos make instantly accessible is not reality, but a way of seeing, adding that the platonic dichotomy between the world and the image is not suitable for photography, since the photographic image is a trace, something drawn directly on the real, like an imprint or death mask. Reality is the concept around which the aesthetic (and ethic) implications of photography are drawn, which is why the first part of the thesis mainly approaches debates and theories of representation, where photography is analysed alongside painting and film. The studies on the aesthetic of photography

mainly tackle the issue of the relation between the mechanicity of photography and the transparency of its objects and the realism of painting and occur in debates about painting or film. The differences between the realism of painting and the realism of photography were approached by authors such as Gregory Currie, Kendall Walton, Peter Alward or Roger Scruton. Continuing the discussions about realism, Susan Sontag claims that all photographs are looked at in a surrealistic way due to the attention they pay to the object they made a mark on. Photographs cannot be destroyed aesthetically, Susan Sontag writes, since they look much better as they get old, thus participating in the antiquation of reality. The author thinks that photographs are part of reality, not interpretations, arguing in *In Plato's Cave* that humanity still is in Plato's cave and photographs give the impression they can encompass the world. In fact, Plato's cave was often compared to the *camera obscura*, as well as to Descartes' concept of *mind*.

Aesthetics plays an important part in the making of ideologies, so that Walter Benjamin called fascism an anesthetization of the political life. Susan Sontag analyses the ethical implications of the cinematic and literary representations of fascism, at the same time making a comparison between communist and fascist art.

Since Susan Sontag believes photography is a trace of reality, an imprint, the second part of the thesis was devoted to the question of the trace and death. The event, as well as the trace, death and photography are apparitions, which is why a discussion on the phenomenology of photography in general is necessary, in addition to a discussion on photography as appearance and way of seeing as outlined by John Berger, for instance. The debates on photography mainly revolve around the concepts of absence and presence. Bazin notes that all arts focus on the presence of man except photography, which has the advantage of his absence. This leads to the association between photography and the trace, as well as the spectrum, since any trace is the sign of an absent presence, as Derrida writes, and the spectrum is a metaphor for the past and also implies the issue of the presence. Photographs are *memento mori*, Susan Sontag states, since they express death while trying to preserve life.

Taking into account all of the above, we hold that, when speaking of Susan Sontag's aesthetic of photography we mean, on the one hand, an aesthetic of

suffering, of war, and on the other, an aesthetic of presence. The endeavour appears to be a complicated one, since discussions on the aesthetic of photography are often controversial and contradictory, and Susan Sontag herself is the author of dispute-triggering pieces. We will address, however, the question from the title of the first chapter by saying that we are not afraid of Susan Sontag.

Chapter I. Who's Afraid of Susan Sontag? About and Against Photography

In her studies on photography Susan Sontag tackled numerous issues, such as the relation between photography and reality, modern technology and the overabundance of photographic images, the new forms of knowledge owed to photographic images, the public's desensitization etc. Since she criticized photography on several points, warning about the dangers it supposes, some theorists of photography wrote that *On Photography* should have been entitled *Against Photography* instead. Nevertheless, once *On Photography* was published, Susan Sontag made a name for herself alongside the well-known art critics Walter Benjamin and John Berger. Sontag discusses in the pages of the book the power and danger of photographs to anaesthetize their viewers. She claims that the camera is a kind of pass that annihilates moral borders and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from all responsibilities towards the photographed people. Sontag speaks of experience, which, in the case of photographs, becomes experience as a way of seeing, since experiencing something becomes identical to obtaining a photograph of the said experience, while participating in a public event becomes increasingly equivalent to looking at the photos that were taken. Susan Sontag also highlights photography as surrealist art, creator of a parallel world, and presents a reality that is at the same time more limited and more dramatic than the real world. The contingency of the photographs confirms the fact that all is perishable, the arbitrariness of the photographic evidence indicates the fact that reality is unclassifiable. Reality is summed up in a series of occasional fragments. Susan Sontag offers more reasons for which surrealism is at the center of photography.

Chapter II. Is Photography Art? Realism and Representation

The aesthetic qualities of photography reside in its power to reveal reality, since photography has the capacity to show the viewer a world he cannot know through imagination or perception. Realism in photography, according to Susan Sontag, is the belief that reality is hidden and that is why it must be revealed. All photographs are revelations, images of that which is hidden. One of the evaluation criteria available for painting, as well as photography is innovation, since they both often bring changes to the visual language. Like Walter Benjamin, the author believes that another characteristic is the quality of presence. As it is made mechanically, photography cannot be considered an authentic presence, but the fact that it is exhibited in museums and galleries shows that it has a type of authenticity. Susan Sontag insists on photography's relation with time, where the difference from photography and painting also resides. André Bazin, Stanley Cavell and Roland Barthes are the authors we approached in the chapter. We also discussed photography as antiquity and photography as souvenir.

III. War Photography. Aesthetization of Violence and Anaesthetic of Suffering

In *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag debates the opposition between art and morality, believing it to be a fake issue, since it would mean that we agree with the fact that there are two independent kinds of response, the aesthetic and the ethical one. In the author's viewpoint, art is tied to morality, and the connection between the two is that art can provide a moral pleasure, highlighting the fact that the moral pleasure specific to art is not the pleasure of approving or disapproving of certain acts. The moral impact of disturbing images is diminished with the people's constant exposure, as they become used to them. The photos that testify to horrors are often criticized because they seem 'aesthetic', i.e. too artistic. Susan Sontag claims that being a spectator of the calamities that take place in another country is an essential experience of modernity, due to 'those specialized tourists and professionals called journalists', so that the image and sound of war have entered the living rooms: 'The celebrated and over familiar image of suffering, of ruin – is an unavoidable presence in our knowledge of war delivered by camera objectives'. The images have always

had the capacity to draw attention, to scare or surprise, so that journalists have the tendency to look for images as dramatic as possible.

Photos have the capacity to capture events that cannot be described or uttered. By hiding behind the words ‘unsaid’ and ‘unimagined’ we choose not to talk about them. Didi-Huberman insists on the fact that we can no longer resort to these words since images speak more than any possible art. In spite of all, of the risks taken, of our impossibility to watch them, we must see these images and try to understand them.

Chapter IV. Photography as Trace and *Memento Mori*

Photography conceals a game between absence and presence, as do the trace and event. In André Bazin’s opinion, all arts focus on man, except photography, which sometimes has the advantage of capturing realities that are not reduced to human presence. The appeal to photography as a truthful source is not random, as one of the aesthetic qualities of photography is being capable of revealing reality. For Susan Sontag, photography is ‘at the same time a pseudo-presence and a proof of absence’. Continuing the debate, Roland Barthes claims that photography is a ‘certificate of presence’ that paradoxically suggests absence.¹ Photography’s role is to confirm that what we see really existed. Each photography is the living image of a dead thing, an image that produces death while it tries to retain life, but in war photographs keeping life is no longer possible. Like the spectrum, photography occupies the space between presence and absence, between the lost and returned, something already dead, but still alive. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag urges that we let photography haunt us, as it has a close relationship with the past. Coming back as a *has been* assumes the form of a haunting since the dead turn into ghosts.

Conclusions

According to Susan Sontag, most artworks are known, today, through photographic copies and photography fundamentally transformed the traditional fine arts, the traditional norms of taste and the very idea of art. Photography gained recognition, first grudgingly, then enthusiastically. Sontag considers that photography is not a form of art at all, but medium through which works of art are created, just as language. The power of photography and its central place in present aesthetic preoccupations lie in the fact that they manage to confirm both views on art, but only the way in which photography transforms art in something obsolete is stronger. Sontag argues that photography, although not a form of art in itself, has the capacity to turn its objects into works of art.

The transparency of photography is at the center of discussions on aesthetic significance and of those that try to determine whether photography is a representational art. Some authors argue that it's impossible to have an aesthetic interest in photographs since it is the world represented, not the representation of the world, transparently that presents interest.

Sontag emphasizes that despite the premise of accuracy that confers authority, the work of photographers is no exception from the subtle negotiation between art and truth, since even when they are preoccupied with mirroring reality, photographers take into account what taste and conscience impose. She sets the example of the members of the Farm Security Administration photographic project from the end of the 30s (Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee, among others), who took tens of frontal portraits of one of the farmers until they were satisfied with what they captured on film: the exact facial expression of the subject that would confirm their own notions of poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry. Although photography tries to capture reality, it imposes certain standards to the subject and interprets the world in the same way that a painting and a drawing do.

Following up on the idea of transparency of photography, Stanley Cavell describes photography as being the visual transcription of an object. The magic of photographs is determined by the possibility of deciphering, revealing and allowing us to know the world that they provide. Roger Scruton was mentioned before in chapter II, arguing the case that photography is not a representational art. His statements generated a lot of debates. Walton de-constructed the theories and noted that photography makes use of subtleties of texture, shading and reflection. The transparency of photography is important, but at the same time we must not ignore its remarkable ability to reveal the world to us and establish contact with it, even by the means of blurred captures with few details. Marinating this point of view, Scruton claims that photography is not representation in the case of photos that try to recreate a narrative scene, either. Susan Sontag warns that photos provide the most contradictory details about the type of knowledge they possess or the type of art they practice. Susan Sontag differentiates between photography conceived as 'true expression' and photography conceived as a faithful recording. Realism in photography, Sontag agrees, actually supposes the conviction that reality is hidden and, consequently, it must be revealed and the camera's recordings are revelations, regardless of them being mere 'imperceptible, transient fragments of motion, an order which natural sight is incapable of perceiving, a higher form of reality, or an elliptical way of seeing.'

Photographs have two contradictory features: on the one hand they refer to intrinsic objectivity, on the other they express points of view. They are records of reality and testify to it. Photographs help recreate our image of a far-off past. According to André Bazin, the aesthetic qualities of photography have the ability to reveal reality, which is the most important event in the history of fine arts.

Throughout chapter I we discussed the association made by the theorists of photography between Plato's cave and the *camera obscura* and *camera lucida*. Susan Sontag wrote in *On Photography* that mankind was still in Plato's cave. The world duplicated by photographs has the capacity of changing people's perception of reality.

We can notice another approach on the aesthetic of photography when the authors speak of surrealism as the heart of the aesthetic endeavour. The relation

between the surrealist aesthetic and photography was approached before by Rosalind Krauss, Walter Benjamin and André Bazin. 'Beauty shall be convulsive or shan't be at all.', André Breton said. He named this aesthetic ideal 'surrealist'. In the case of Bazin, the photographic experience appears as the relation between perception and image, mechanical objectivity and affective subjectivity, in keeping with the surrealist vision of André Breton's union between dream and reality. Sontag gave three reasons why surrealism is the essence of photography. First of all, photography creates a duplicate world, a reality of the second degree. Then, the very notion of reproducing something with so little effort and that can be improved through an accident. Lastly, photographs do not seem closely tied to the photographer's intentions.

Sontag believes that surrealists are wrong to assume that the surreal was universal and its source, the atemporal, unconscious. Past moments are much more surrealist than any of the abstract poetic images of the surrealists. Surrealism aimed at blurring the lines between art and life, objects and events, professionals and amateurs. The more naïve and the less manipulated the image, the greater its impact. Sontag shows that the oldest surrealist photos date from the 1850s, when life on the street was photographed for the very first time. The past is the most surrealist of subjects, making it possible, as Benjamin said, for us to see new beauty in the midst of dissolution. From the very beginning, photographers not only aimed at recording a disappearing world, but were also hired by those that expedited its disappearance. The realism of photography, according to Sontag, gives birth to the confusion as to what is real, a confusion which is a moral anaesthetic (in the long run), as well as a sensory stimulant (on a long and short term). With a fragile ethical content, photos are no longer touching. It is more provocative than the fact that the photo was taken in 1900, for instance. The only images that gained the status of ethical landmarks that kept their emotional charge are those from the Nazi concentration camps.

Susan Sontag's claim that photography is an act of non-intervention is frequently quoted, but the author brings additional comments and explanations on it in *On Photography*. Part of the horrors captured by photojournalism today, the author argues, such as those of a guerrilla troop stabbing with their bayonets a collaborator whose hands are tied to the back, come from the revelation that, in the situation in which the photographer has the choice between photographing and changing a life,

he might choose taking the photo. Thus, photography appears as a form of involvement, since the act of photographing implies condoning what goes on at the scene.

Susan Sontag also critiques the recording value of photographs, since she believes that their value as information is similar to that of fiction. Photography offers a perspective on the world that denies connections, continuity, records a slice of time and space, at the same time shrouding each moment in mystery. The knowledge gained through photography, Sontag adds, is accompanied by either a cynical or humanist sentimentalism at a reduced price, the simulacra of knowledge and wisdom. Sontag reminds us that people are maniacs of the photograph: they seek to transform experience into a way of seeing to the point that having an experience is the equivalent of photographing it, and the participation at a public event becomes more and more synonymous with its contemplation in the form of a photograph. I mainly resorted to Roland Barthes and Benjamin's theories, as well as John Berger's. Photos are artefacts and seem to have the status of found objects, unpremeditated objects of the world. They are clouds of fantasy and balls of information, Sontag writes. The fascination exerted by photography, Sontag shows, is a moment of mortality and represents an invitation to sentimentalism, since photos transform the past and modify moral distinctions, disarm historical judgements through the act of looking at the past. In the third chapter I paid special attention to the photography that represents suffering, especially war photography, through the prism of ethics and aesthetics. Sontag thinks there is an ethical obligation to acknowledge and remember human suffering and cruelty, even though these images can give the viewer a feeling of 'moral impropriety' (John Berger). Susan Sontag highlights the fact that the essential experience of modernity is to be a spectator of the calamities occurring in a different country, which are an unavoidable presence. Photographs also have the ability to record events that cannot be told or described. We are constantly surrounded by images when we have to remember something. Memory is based on stills; its basic unit is the single image. Photography is a quick means of understanding one thing and a compact way of memorizing it. Photography is like a quote, a saying or a proverb, Susan Sontag emphasises. Each of us can remember hundreds of photos, which we can recall at any given time.

We have argued that most of the texts (on photography) written by Susan Sontag have, as common grounds, war and suffering, with the former's ethic and aesthetic implications. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag wonders who we, the people these shocking photos are addressed to, are. Photos show the reality of war. They say that war divides, tears, stabs, eviscerates, dismembers, ruins. Perhaps one of the most important possibilities photography has is to record and capture the exact moment of death. Among the most reproduced photos are those taken on the battle field. The question that we tried to provide an answer to, including when we discussed about museums of memory, is whether or not photography brings us much too close to suffering people. Photographer witnesses, Susan Sontag writes, might believe that it is fairer from a moral point of view to render the spectacular less spectacular. Although she reconsidered many of her theories from *On Photography*, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* she continues to agree that the shock can become familiar, can be exhausted. At the same time, the notion of cruelty requires photographic proof, since photos illustrate and at the same time confirm, offer an irrefutable sample and help build – and revise – our image of a more distant past..

Photos offer the possibility to look at images from a distance, and this might seem wrong in the case of photos that depict atrocities. Sontag assures us, however, that there is nothing wrong with distancing oneself and looking. There were numerous debates surrounding whether or not one must discuss images that show suffering. Georges Didi-Huberman claimed, however, that we can no longer speak of the 'unsaid' and 'unimagined' in the case of war photos as we have the duty, as difficult as it might seem, despite of all of the risks taken, to know some of the reality of the war victims' experience.

Another frequently-found piece of information is that images freeze and anaesthetize. Suffering is one thing, living with the photographic images of suffering is another, Sontag writes. Images can corrupt so that they make us become much too familiar with atrocity, and the terrible become familiar, banal, distant. The more images we see, the more we want to see.

It is important to note that Susan Sontag does not believe there is such a thing as a collective memory, which she thinks is a contrived notion, a convention, such as collective guilt. She believes, though, in collective education. Memories die with

each particular person, they are individual. Ideologies create archives of representative images that contain common ideas and trigger predictable thoughts.

We also wrote, throughout the third chapter, of photography's possibility to convert the world into a store or a museum. Through the camera, people become clients or tourists of reality, while reality is understood as within reach. The emergence of photography in museums presents photography as a collection of simultaneous styles and intentions which, as different as they might be, are not perceived as contradictory.

In the last part of the paper we decided on a different, phenomenological approach since Susan Sontag stated she was influenced by the works of Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin. We focused on the play between absence and presence with some authors thinking that, in fact, this is what the magic of photography lies. To Roland Barthes, photography is a 'certificate of presence', while for Susan Sontag it is a pseudo-presence and a proof of absence. Like the Spectrum, photography occupies the place between presence and absence, between the lost and found, between something already dead, but still alive. Susan Sontag urges that we let photography haunt us. She also suggests that photography is a trace, an imprint, which, in their turn, are the sign of an absent presence, but also events in themselves, which can interfere, invade or ignore what is happening. Time is the succession of events that deserve to be photographed, while the images continued to exist even after the event has ended. In *The Photographic Message*, Barthes writes that during a traumatic experience the 'suspension of language' can occur, an obstruction of meaning, the photographic representation of the experience referring to a code of rhetoric that distances and sublimates their traumatic impact. Barthes tried to define a more intimate relationship between the individual body of the viewer and the trace of the past recording of an image.

Since we discussed the trace, we found it necessary, from a phenomenological perspective to speak of the singularity of photography, which is based on the relationship between the photographer and referent and does not affect the uniqueness of photography. We emphasized Kathrinei Yakavone's important theory that the technological, ontological and cultural-historical factors merely argue for the singularity of photography. With Walter Benjamin this refers with the

‘meeting’ between the self, the unique individual represented in the photographic portrait and the unique relationship between the viewer and the photographed person. We argued that, although it seems paradoxical, singularity is marked by repeatability, fostering a close connection to the aura and the punctum, for Benjamin and Barthes.

We yet again emphasize that we tried not to deviate too much from the topics that Susan Sontag approaches, especially in her two books *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others*. The ideas listed so far are those around which the entire thesis took shape.

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