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# “Pics, or it didn’t happen”: On Visual Evidence in the Age of Ubiquitous Photography

ADAM SCHRAG

*“Photography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is.”<sup>1</sup>*

## **Susan Sontag’s Instagram**

For better or worse, Susan Sontag never had an Instagram account. Yet, in a premonitory passage from her famous 1977 collection of essays, *On Photography*, she neatly encapsulates the digital photo-sharing economy of 2015:

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...Ultimately, having an experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form.<sup>2</sup>

This passage delivers an impressive admonishment of the Instagram era, especially given that she wrote it nearly four decades before Instagram was invented. The “aesthetic consumerism” that Sontag diagnoses in the late 1970s has since metastasized, due in part to the emergence of digital photography and the rise of internet culture, which has transformed and accelerated the means by which photographs are stored, processed, and transmitted. We live in an age of unprecedented photographic production. Today twice as many photos are taken per day than were taken per year in the 1930s. This year nearly a trillion pictures will be uploaded and shared on the web. More photographs will be taken in 2015 than were taken in all of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

In 1977 could Sontag have envisioned the extent to which we now need “to have reality confirmed and experience enhanced by photographs”? Could she have conceived of a world where 64% of American adults carry a high-quality,

web-connected camera with them at all times?<sup>4</sup> How would she respond to our new rituals and genuflections of scrolling, sharing, swiping, and liking? What would she say about an Insta-culture that seeks to extract from each present moment little fragments of micro-nostalgia? What would she say about the filters we apply to digital photographs in order to algorithmically dress them up as vintage photographs? What would have been her take on the selfie?

This essay begins with a passage from *On Photography*, not in order to praise Sontag's power of prognostication, but rather to highlight how the visual culture she astutely described forty years ago has since intensified. In other words, the passage reveals not how prophetic Sontag is, but rather how predictable the trajectory of our cultural image-addiction has been. Photographs are now even further embedded in the everyday information flows that constitute both new forms of mass data collection and new forms of social relations. We live in a culture of photographic overabundance situated within inextricable systems of social relations and social control. As Sontag observes, a capitalist society relies on the production of images for twin purposes: "as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers)."<sup>5</sup> Today it is more difficult than ever to disentangle the uses of photographs as means of spectacle, social networking, surveillance, and sousveillance.<sup>6</sup>

The insatiable cultural appetite for visual evidence fuels new combinations of surveillance and spectacle. The daily news cycle regularly satisfies our well-developed pictorial biases: a visual hook is required for a story to hold the public's attention—an iconographic element must undergird the narrative being told.<sup>7</sup> Our most important national and international conversations about violence, injustice, inequality, race, sexuality, and gender are generated and defined by images: Walter Scott; Tamir Rice; Eric Garner; Ray Rice; hacked private photos of celebrities; ISIS propaganda videos; the Boston Marathon Bombing; the Charleston shooting; the McKinney, Texas pool party; and so on. These images travel the circuits of surveillance, sousveillance, and spectacle: from cellphone cameras to social networks to news channels, from surveillance cameras to news channels to cell phones, from dashboard cameras to social networks to news channels. Authorities watch over the citizens, the citizens watch over the authorities, and the citizens watch each other. On the one hand, without such images, many of the events listed above would not enter into the larger political and civic discourse at the amplitude that they have. On the other

hand, such images potentially reduce complex, unfolding events into a visual shorthand—the images become blunt substitutes for more intricate understanding.<sup>8</sup> The risk, as Sontag observed, “is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember only the photographs.”<sup>9</sup>

What is *new* about all of this is not the over-privileging of images (after all, the human predilection toward visual things long predates our current digital moment), but rather it is the velocity and volume of images that our current media environment enables. Pictures are powerfully persuasive and thus necessary, but, problematically, they have become prerequisites for paying attention. Words alone prove to be inadequate, they fail to spark public interest. The privileging of pictures and devaluing of narratives is what troubles Sontag, particularly because it enables us to substitute visual evidence for deeper understanding, to mistake looking at pictures for knowing things. “The disconcerting ease with which photographs can be taken” and “the inevitable authority of the camera’s results,” she argues, “suggest a very tenuous relation to knowing.”<sup>10</sup>

“Pics, or it didn’t happen” is the credo of the social media era.<sup>11</sup> The phrase dots the comment boards of popular social networks and news sites as a riposte to any boastful or unlikely claim made on the internet. But more than a comment-board meme, it is prevailing attitude in social media. Visual evidence has become a basic requirement for life on the Internet. If one claims to have experienced something remarkable, but does not provide pictorial proof of it on a social networks, did it actually happen? As Rob Horning, the executive editor of *The New Inquiry*, observes, “the point of being on social media is to produce and amass evidence of being on social media.” The various pictures we post of our people, our pets, our travel, our food, our events, our moments, and, of course, our selfies, enter a tautological dimension of using social media to prove we exist on social media.<sup>12</sup> In many instances, the very act itself of taking and sharing photographs transforms a non-event into an event. A moment that otherwise might have been unremarkable is offered up for remarks. Eventually, like the passing moment it captured, the photograph too will be swiped on down the timelines of friends and acquaintances, perhaps garnering likes, retweets, hearts, and favs, giving the sharer of the photo the fleeting dopamine-inducing satisfaction of micro-celebrity-status in his or her social media universe.<sup>13</sup>

The “pics, or it didn’t happen” phenomenon extends beyond everyday life on social networks; it describes a general condition of visuality in the twenty-first century. After the Edward Snowden revelations, we are forced to reckon with a networked visual culture that easily enables the entangled activities of being watched over and watching over, of commodifying our selves and others through shared images, and of offering ourselves as images to be monetized and scrutinized within that vague, cumulus realm of “big data.”

Can Sontag help us sort through our current conditions of visuality? What can she teach us about our cultural addiction to visual evidence in the context of ubiquitous photography? Sontag was one of the most astute and elegant thinkers about photography, and so it is with some seriousness that I wonder if she would have an Instagram account if she were alive today. Her relationship to photography was complicated. Her writing about photographs was dialectical, always negotiating paradoxes. For her, photographs are both fascinating and boring, both reliable and unreliable, and they are arbiters of both truth and lies. Consider that one of the most significant relationships in her life was with famed photographer Annie Leibovitz. But also consider that none of her essays on photography ever included photographs. Perhaps her Instagram feed would be full of text-based, ekphrastic axioms, akin to the aphoristic artwork of Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger. In other words, maybe her feed would be a series of pithy, serious image macros and memes. Or maybe it would have been surprisingly intimate and domestic. Or maybe there would be no account at all, just a highly articulate essay deconstructing Instagram in the *Sunday Times*.

Revisiting Sontag’s writing about photography can help us investigate the concept of visual evidence in contemporary American culture. In particular, Sontag’s ambivalent relationship with photographs—the particular way she simultaneously embraces and rejects them—offers an empowering strategy of visual skepticism with which to navigate our current photographic deluge. She develops not a strategy of cynicism, but rather a way of framing photography that helps us frame our own looking. She turns ambivalence into a useful critical approach to visual culture.

However, before we begin to think with and through Sontag in the Instagram era—before we let her words haunt our looking—we first must address the transformation of photography from an old medium into a new medium, be-

cause ultimately, any current questions about visual evidence and photographic ubiquity are inseparable from the digitalization of photography.

### **Old New Media**

The theme of this issue of *Pacific Journal*, “New Media,” is a highly contested term. In some circles of media theory the term is considered outdated, a term of the early web, a concept of the dot-com 90s. It is a catchall concept that attempts to describe the convergence and computerization of cultural objects. Critics have pointed out the limitations of the term — it is too vague, too broad, and it dehistoricizes media by overlooking the ways that “old” media already behave like new media.<sup>14</sup> Yet, I think it is a useful concept to revisit in the current context of digital visibility and photography. Framing photographs as “new media” can help us theorize the ways that contemporary photographic practices intersect with new modes of surveillance and spectacle. In other words, the photograph is dead; long live the photograph.

Photographs can be viewed as “new media” in two ways. First, in a literal historical sense, photography has existed for about 180 years, making it a relatively young medium within the broader scope of communicative and locomotive innovation. Photography is approximately 40,000 years younger than prehistoric cave paintings, about 800 years younger than moveable type, and relatively the same age as telegraphy. Photography emerged between 1826 and 1839 when Nicéphore Niépce and, later, Louis Daguerre invented the photochemical processes of heliography and daguerreotypy respectively. Notably, in the same decade, Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace invented modern computing with the Analytical Engine (although it took computing much longer than photography to become a dominant culture force).<sup>15</sup> The advent of photography in the nineteenth century helped reorganize perception and revolutionize society and culture. In its ability to mechanically segment and spatialize unique increments of time, photography changed our relationship to time and visibility and thus transformed our way of seeing.

The second (more obvious) way photographs can be viewed as “new media” is, in the last forty years or so, they have transformed from a photochemical process of capturing light into a numerical process of encoding light. What Niepce and Daguerre invented has since been consumed by what Babbage and Lovelace invented—the photograph has become a computational object. This

second way of looking at photography as new media—its becoming digital—has attracted the most attention from theorists of photography. The most famous theorist of new media is Lev Manovich, who's landmark *Language of New Media* defines “new media” most simply as “the cultural objects which use digital computer technology for distribution and circulation.” According to Manovich, existing media become new media when they are translated into numerical data that is accessible through computers and subject to algorithmic manipulation.<sup>16</sup>

For Manovich, one of the most significant changes embedded in new media is the division of the world into two co-constitutive layers: the cultural layer (human readable) and the computational layer (machine readable). Take the digital photograph as an example: on the cultural layer, photographs are a form of visual representation that enter into dialog with other images and signs that are shared and looked at by humans. In this sense, digital photographs function like photographs always have, despite being materially different than analog photographs. But, on the computational layer, the digital photograph is a machine-readable file consisting of numerical codes that represent the color values of its pixels as well as other extra-visual metadata about when, where, and by what means the photograph was taken, its file size, file type, and so on. These computational dimensions, Manovich observes, “belong to the computer's own cosmogony rather than to human culture.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, a key characteristic of new media is the enmeshing of computational logic and cultural logic. These layers are not mutually exclusive. Most people are conscious of the cultural layer, but unconscious of the computational layer that enables contemporary forms of networked communication. Many of us remain blissfully illiterate when it comes to the algorithmic architectures that scaffold the messages we send to each other. We are surrounded with products by Apple, Facebook, Google, etc., which are animated by codes operating omnipresently and invisibly on the computational layer. These products define contemporary forms of communication. Culture is embodied in the way these forms are designed and coded, just as the algorithms and operations of the computational layer inform the experience of the cultural layer.

Despite the seemingly radical material changes photography has undergone through computerization, the same cultural questions that have always been asked of photographs—the set of ontological, epistemological, and ethical con-

cerns often aimed at photographs—remain the same. What kind of signs are photographs? What do they show us? How do they frame the world? How do they frame the viewer? What does it mean to look? We are often tempted to see new technological conditions as presenting inherently new and unprecedented problems, but, as Sontag helps remind us, fretting over the fate of an image-addicted society is not a new thing. In fact, one could go even further back and find messages from 1967, 1927, 1907, or even 1877 that warn us of the cultural perils of machine-reproducible images. One might even define the entirety of nineteenth and twentieth century modernity as an ongoing concern about role of images in society—more specifically, an ongoing concern about the social significance of the coinciding mechanization of labor and visibility.<sup>18</sup>

Here in the early twenty-first century, in an era of unprecedented photographic production, the concerns have not changed that much, but the conditions have. Under the new regime of digitality, old media have become new again: older forms of text, image, and sound have been baptized into computational forms.<sup>19</sup> Photographs are no longer pieces of the world, they are pieces of data. They are no longer transcriptions of light onto an emulsive surface, they are translations of light into digital quanta.

### **Sheltered Exposure**

Despite the fact that photographs are now comprised of a computational layer of code, to some degree, on the level of human perception, they remain, as the theorist Roland Barthes famously said, “a message without a code.”<sup>20</sup> What Barthes means is that, on the most primary level, a photograph is the record of an automatic process of capturing light. Whatever we see in a photograph is whatever was reflecting light in front of a camera at the time it recorded the light. Thus, photographs seem to embody the world more closely than other signs. Unlike language, for instance, the photograph does not rely on human decoding; it offers a seemingly unfettered view of a world. Of course, photographs do conform to all kinds of aesthetic conventions we consciously and unconsciously apply to the practices of taking photographs and looking at them. A photograph can be shaped by lens type, exposure, and by a variety of in-camera and post-production manipulations. And photographs are always immediately brought back into the world of human codes the moment we talk about them, interpret them, contextualize them, caption them, and place them back in the

world of discourse. Photographs are re-encoded into culture and computers in all kinds of ways, both automated and editorialized. Nonetheless, their power resides in the fact that on some level they are a message without a code. They are little slices of light and time that hold the past present to us.

This ability to appear nearer to the world gives photographs their remarkable evidentiary power. They are unique signifiers because the relationship they have to what they signify is not arbitrary and abstract, but rather seemingly causal and connected. Photographs seem to expose the world—to show the world as it is—and in doing so, paradoxically, they shelter us from the world. “The *real unreality* of the photograph,” Barthes observes, is that photographs offer the “always stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are sheltered.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the influential Frankfurt School media theorist Walter Benjamin says that photography “opens up...the physiognomic aspects of the world of images, which reside in the smallest details, *clear and yet hidden* enough to have found shelter in day-dreams.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, another great critic associated with the Frankfurt School, Siegfried Kracauer, observes the dialectical way that photographs simultaneously present the world and withhold it:

The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning. This warehousing of nature promotes the confrontation of consciousness with nature. Just as consciousness finds itself confronting the unabashedly displayed mechanics of industrial society, it also faces, thanks to photographic technology, the reflection of the reality that has slipped away from it.<sup>23</sup>

Each of these statements, from Barthes, Benjamin, and Kracauer, reckons in some way with the codelessness of photographs, the unreal reality photographs present to the viewer. The capacity of photographs to “shelter” us from reality and to “warehouse nature” is the source of photography’s power to fascinate the viewer. Photographs offer irrefutable evidence of a world from which we are always withheld. When we place photographs within our narrative context, interpret them, and give them meaning—in other words, when we re-encode these codeless messages—it is our attempt to assimilate a past that cannot be retrieved but appears before us nonetheless.

Photographs have the power to condense otherwise amorphous and complex occurrences into a single collective image. This is both the brilliance and the problem with the photograph as a vehicle for understanding. They seem to offer irrefutable confirmation of events. They provide a tangible re-collection of something past. Yet, they rely completely on our framing of them in order to mean anything.

This is why we are so taken by photographs: they invite us to ignore the specific conditions of our own looking and treat the meaning of photograph as something inherent. Of course, in reality, photographs, like all signs, are produced and viewed under historically and culturally specific conditions. The meaning of a photograph is not held within the frame of photograph; it is held in the linguistic and ideological frames we bring to it. The context in which photos are looked at, and who is looking at them, shape their significance.

Sontag, too, like Barthes, Benjamin, and Kracauer, was well aware of the photograph’s paradoxical ability to produce a sheltering exposure: “Cameras are the antidote and the disease, a means of appropriating reality and a means of making it obsolete.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Re-Regarding Sontag**

Twenty-six years after the publication of *On Photography*, Sontag returned to the subject of photography in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. In it she re-examines, now in a post-9/11 context, her earlier views on photography, particularly exploring what it means to look at an other’s suffering in photographs. At the same time she was likely writing *Regarding the Pain of Others*, members of the American military police assigned to Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were staging for the camera the now-infamous tableaux of humiliation and torture. In fact, as we now know, detainees were being tortured and photographed at detention and interrogation sites around the globe as part of a systematic program of illegal rendition, indefinite detainment, and coercion.<sup>25</sup> The Abu Ghraib photographs, perhaps more than any other photographs in the last few decades, epitomize the “new media” characteristics of photography: the embeddedness of computational and cultural layers within a single frame and the erasure of boundaries between forms of surveillance, sousveillance, and spectacle. These photographs not only recorded atrocity, they were the atrocity. They contained both visual and extra-visual (metadata) evidence of criminal acts of torture,

acts that were often staged for the camera. The Abu Ghraib photographs are perhaps the most notorious pieces of visual evidence of the early twenty-first century. They have become symbols of the deceptions, missteps, and misdeeds committed in the name of the United States' War on Terror.

Not surprisingly, in May 2004, a month after the Abu Ghraib photographs were leaked to the public, causing a level of public outrage that changed the face of the war in Iraq, Sontag wrote an essay in the *New York Times* entitled "*Regarding the Torture of Others*," a kind of addendum to *Regarding the Pain of Others*. It would be the last essay she would write before she died on December 28, 2004 from complications from cancer. In the essay, she wrestles with the fact that the Abu Ghraib photographs are simultaneously important public records of torture and inextricable components of the abuses they depict: "the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken."<sup>26</sup> More than ever before in her writing, she also explicitly addresses the digital nature of these photographs, framing them as a grotesque hybrid of a traditional war photography and a newer social media photography:

The pictures taken by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib...reflect a shift in the use made of pictures -- less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated, circulated... Where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers -- recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities -- and swapping images among themselves and e-mailing them around the globe.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the official and credentialed channels through which war is traditionally reported and broadcast, the Abu Ghraib photographs symbolize a new, seemingly non-hierarchical, individualized, social-media-based way of recording and broadcasting war. Sontag recognizes in the Abu Ghraib photographs the social media tendencies to self-surveil and self-document as part of a collective effort of surveillance and spectacle. "There is more and more recording of what people do, by themselves."<sup>29</sup>

Throughout her writing, Sontag wants photographs and the practice of photography to have ethical significance, yet she remains doubtful that such an

ethics is possible. For her, the very concept of atrocity, even before the events at Abu Ghraib, is bound up in photographs. Thanks in part to the human catastrophes of the twentieth century, the visual evidence photographs provide is embedded in the very concept of atrocity. From the Nazi death camps to the killing fields of Cambodia to the Rwandan genocide, the presence or absence of photographic evidence in a court of law and in the court of public opinion has a profound effect on whether or not crimes against humanity are acknowledged, remembered, or prosecuted. In *Frames of War*, a collection of essays examining how media help to enforce which lives are recognized as “grievable” and which are not, philosopher Judith Butler observes, in a chapter about Sontag, that “the photograph is built into the notion of atrocity.”<sup>30</sup> Photographs are not always reliable forms of evidence, yet they are necessary for the recognition of atrocity. If there are no photographs, there is no atrocity. Pics, or it didn’t happen.

Sontag argues in *On Photography* that photographic representations of suffering have become clichés and we, the viewing public, have become accustomed to and inoculated against faraway human tragedies. Our “capacity for ethical responsiveness had been diminished,” she says.<sup>31</sup> In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she is more ambivalent about the status of the photograph. On the one hand, photographs can and must represent human suffering. On the other hand, the need to shock keeps escalating in proportion with our visual fatigue and numbness. In other words, photographs have the capacity to show us suffering and injustice, but at the same time, they anesthetize us from acting in the face of evidence of suffering and injustice. For Sontag, the photograph is too limited; it can never deliver on its promise to make us understand. As Butler observes, Sontag “faulted images for not being writing.”<sup>32</sup> To see a photo depicting the suffering of a person from a distant place, is, in Sontag’s estimation, no way to comprehend that life, that suffering, that experience. Narrative can make us understand; photographs can only prick us momentarily, offering a fleeting affective response that actually shelters us from understanding. “Harrowing photographs... are not much help if the task is to understand,” she contends. “Narrative can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us”<sup>33</sup>

Judith Butler, however, takes issue with Sontag’s assertion that photographs do not offer an interpretation of the world prior to being assimilated back into

human discourse. Butler argues that being “haunted” by photographs, that having an affective response, is a response to the interpretation of the world that photographs offer. “It does not make sense to accept Sontag’s claim, made repeatedly throughout her writings,” Butler argues, “that the photograph cannot by itself offer an interpretation. She continues: “the photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation... It would not be quite right to reverse the formulation completely and say that the photograph interprets us ... And yet, photographs do act on us.”<sup>34</sup> Throughout her writing about photography, Sontag always maintains an explicit dichotomy that equates photography with mere sentimentality and writing with ethical understanding. Butler makes an astute criticism of Sontag’s devaluing of visual affect and over-valuing of linguistic understanding. Sontag does not always adequately confront the extent to which photographs “act on us,” the extent to which they frame us in relation to other lives and affective ways of knowing. Yet, one gets the implicit sense, particularly through Sontag’s ongoing struggle to reconcile herself to photographs (all the while being fascinated with them), that she did value the affective power of photographs, even as she outwardly expressed her wish to refuse it.

Sontag’s paradoxical relationship to photography is driven by such dialectical tensions—that photographs are necessary yet tell us very little, that they are both reliable and unreliable, that they are both clichéd and fascinating, that they purport to provide knowledge yet produce only vague (and powerful) sentiments. She acknowledges the importance of visual evidence: “an event known through photographs certainly becomes more real than it would have been if one had never seen the photographs.”<sup>35</sup> But, she also cautions us about being too infatuated by the reality the camera presents: “The camera’s rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses.”<sup>36</sup>

Sontag both respects and resents photography’s power, or more precisely, she resents our gullibility as consumers of photography. She resents the ease with which the viewer can treat photographs as self-evident, transparent windows onto reality, rather than as ideologically framed objects that circulate within historically and culturally specific contexts. She resents how easy it is to regard, and then (just as easily) disregard, what the photograph displays; how easy it is to project our own bourgeois sentimentality onto photographic representations of lives and situations we know nothing about. She resents that

we can look at suffering, feel something, yet remain untransformed by it, and that such a transaction could be so mundane and commonplace.

As we have seen, a persistent theme that spans both *On Photography* and *Regarding the Pain of Others* is an ambivalence toward the evidentiary function of photographs and thus a general skepticism about the kinds of “knowledge” and “understanding” photographs produce. “Photographs furnish evidence,” she observes. “Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we’re shown a photograph of it. ...A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened.”<sup>37</sup> Her skepticism is evident in equivocal phrasing like “seems proven” and “passes for...proof.” She is critical of the extent to which we allow ourselves to think that photographs show us some transparent reality. She questions again and again just what kind of understanding, if any, we gain from looking at photographs. What exactly do photographs show us? Can they produce understanding? Do photographs transform us? Do they move us to action? For Sontag, the answer to these questions is too often “no,” at least not to the extent that we think photographs do these things. She contends that language offers a far more reliable vehicle than photographs for producing deep understanding of other lives and experiences, and yet over and over again we readily fall for photographs, mistaking sentimentality for knowing. Sontag asserts that photographic knowledge can never be ethical or political knowledge. Rather, she writes, “the knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist.”<sup>38</sup>

Sontag invites us to refuse the seduction of photographs—to chip away at the epistemological privilege we grant them. This refusal is one approach to living within the inexhaustible and ever-expanding cloud of pictorial data. But we also need to extend Sontag’s concepts and think about the ways that digital photographs and the modes of their circulation change the message and cultural functions of photography. Rays of light are converted into data and swept away in the currents of networked life, forming new kinds of visual practices. We amass and warehouse more data than ever. The archive is being destroyed by its own apotheosis: if everything is archived, is anything archived? Has the photograph, in fact, been liberated from the job of archiving the world? Is it now a compact and impermanent message we exchange as a form of cultural capital? And what does it mean that there are innumerable images being produced that will never be seen by humans? True, archives have always been

receptacles for that which may never be looked at again, and, true, photographs have always been put away into shoeboxes and attics, lost from view. Still, we've entered in a moment where many images are produced that will never be seen by humans, but rather will be "seen" by other machines—images that will be algorithmically gazed upon as data rather than as reflections of the world gazed upon by humans.

How, then, do Sontag's warnings and critical concerns speak to our current conditions of visibility, where, in exchange for the ability to share pictures on the cultural layer, we voluntarily offer ourselves as commodified and surveillable datasets on a computational layer for corporations and governments to collect? First, we should not mistake Sontag's skepticism for cynicism. She does not reject photography, rather she resists its charms. Her problem does not lie in photographs, but rather in our encounter with them. Her skepticism, and thus her demand for a more intellectually honest (and ethical) engagement with a complex world, still offers a strategy for looking in age of photographic ubiquity. She enjoins us to consider the meaning and power of our own gazing: "One can feel obliged to look at photographs that record great cruelties and crimes. One should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show."<sup>39</sup>

In the Instagram era, we can supply an additional directive: One can feel obliged to take and share photographs that record great life events and everyday banalities. One should feel obliged to think about them as both computational and cultural objects, to think about what it means to share them and view them, and to think about our capacity to meaningfully encounter the world, and each other, through them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Meeker, "2014 Internet Trends," Kleiner, Perkins, Caufield, Byers, May 28, 2014, <http://www.kpcb.com/blog/2014-internet-trends>.

<sup>4</sup> Aaron Smith, "U.S. Smartphone Use in 2015," <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, 178.

<sup>6</sup> *Sousveillance* is a neologism, credited to the inventor and theorist Steve Mann, which describes the recording of an activity by participants using wearable or portable recording devices (such as a smartphone). It is a kind of inverse surveillance wherein citizens do the watching. The term contrasts the French *sur-* (above) with *sous-* (below).

- 7 Journalist and host of *On the Media* Brooke Gladstone discusses a prime example of visual bias at work is the Abu Ghraib prison scandal: “The Washington Post ran the first front-page story about the torture of detainees three months *before* the Iraq war began. Press accounts of torture appeared sporadically through 2003 into 2004. But it wasn’t until April 28, 2004, that anyone, even much of the media, noticed. Picture made us notice.” Brooke Gladstone and Josh Neufeld, *The Influencing Machine* (New York: Norton, 2011), 65.
- 8 In some cases, like the celebrity nude photos leak or the photos of abuse at Abu Ghraib, the photographs themselves are intertwined with the events they represent. In the case of the stolen celebrity photographs, the act of looking at the photographs reenacts the sexual assault of the initial nonconsensual theft and dissemination of those images. In the case of Abu Ghraib, what was done to the prisoners was often done *for the camera*. In each case, photographs serve as both evidence of a crime and, in fact, are part of the crime.
- 9 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: FSG, 2003), 89.
- 10 Sontag, *On Photography*, 115.
- 11 In the process of writing this essay, I have come across quite a few think pieces on the phrase “Pics, or it didn’t happen.” Two of the best are Colson Whitehead, “What We Don’t See,” *New York Times*, May 28, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/31/magazine/what-we-dont-see.html>, and Jacob Silverman, “‘Pics, or it didn’t happen’ – the Mantra of the Instagram Era,” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/feb/26/pics-or-it-didnt-happen-mantra-instagram-era-facebook-twitter>.
- 12 Rob Horning, “Affective Privacy and Surveillance,” *The New Inquiry*, April 30, 2013, <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/marginal-utility/affective-privacy-and-surveillance/>
- 13 It is worth noting that, in the history of photography, an important characteristic of the medium has been its archival function — photographs preserve the past. However, in the last few decades that archival function has diminished, which is epitomized by emerging photographic platforms such as Snapchat, where photographs serve a much more fleeting and impermanent communicative function.
- 14 For example, as the new media philosopher himself, Lev Manovich, observes, cinema, since its inception, has always engaged in the so-called “new media” practices of sampling, convergence, non-linearity, and discrete representation. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 52-55.
- 15 Thus, in a sense, Instagram — the holy union of network computing and photography — was invented in the 1830s; it just would not appear for another 175 years or so.
- 16 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 20.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 18 The visual theorist Jean-Luis Commoli articulates well this nineteenth century reorganization of perception: “The second half of the nineteenth century lives in a sort of frenzy of the visible. It is...the effect of the social multiplication of images...the whole world becomes invisible at the same time that becomes appropriatable...At the very same time that it is thus fascinated and gratified by the multiplicity of scope instruments which lay a thousand views beneath its gaze, the human eye loses its immemorial privilege; the mechanical eye of the photographic machine now sees in its place...The photograph stands as at once the triumph and the grave of the eye.” Commoli, “Machines of the Visible,” 1971, *The Cinematic Apparatus*, eds. Theresa De Lauretis and Stephen Heath (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 122-123.
- 19 This transformation of media falls under the larger concept of “convergence.” The concept is most fully developed by media theorist Henry Jenkins, who defines convergence as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries,

and the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes, depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about." Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 2-3.

- 20 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 17.
- 21 Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 44.
- 22 Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," 1931, *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island, 1981), 203.
- 23 Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (1963; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 62.
- 24 Sontag, *On Photography*, 179.
- 25 Thousands of photographs taken at interrogation and detention sites remain classified and unreleased. The official justification for withholding these images is fear that their content would inflame anti-US sentiment around the globe. In December 2014, a report on the CIA's detention and interrogation programs by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence shed much-needed light on the CIA's detainment and interrogation programs, but remained heavily redacted, particularly in regards to the photographic evidence.
- 26 Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *New York Times*, May 23, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/regarding-the-torture-of-others.html>.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 By using the phrase "seemingly non-hierarchical" I mean to indicate that fact that, while the men and women who took the photographs were made to appear as if they were a "few bad apples" who acted independently and whose behavior was an aberration, it is quite clear now that a hierarchy did exist and that use of snapshot-style photography was a common interrogation practice and that such abuses were systematic and global, not local and individualized.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009), 69.
- 31 Sontag, *On Photography*, 68.
- 32 Butler, *Frames of War*, 69.
- 33 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 89.
- 34 Butler, *Frames of War*, 67-68.
- 35 Sontag, *On Photography*, 20.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 38 Sontag, *On Photography*, 24.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 95.