

Obsessed with an image

“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”

– Susan Sontag

September 11th, 2001 is an event where the image, the televised broadcast of the collisions and the hysteria created in the aftermath became a hundred times more important than the event itself. It provoked an immediate switch in what image the president desired for himself. It was an event that created bipartisan support for the invasion of Iraq, after a shoddy case for war in the UN. It created a fog of war, and the start of bush’s self-proclaimed “crusade”. What role did the image, the televised broadcasts of the events and the perception of a great national trauma have on the events that followed? These are questions that I will return to in this text, but first let us interpret the quote in light of late societal trends.

The excerpt from Susan Sontag’s “On photography” brings up the issue of the image, its production and relation to our lived experience. She relates it to a type of drug that sharpens contradictions and enhances reality. Indeed an image, a photograph, from its creation by the labour of some person is by nature infused with a final cause. There is afterthought and intention inherent in the nature of an image. Photography and all forms of human culture and art

have been stained by the conflicts of interest in human society, and are inherently political. That explains why we, in her view, have become image-junkies. It is more engaging to be confronted with a ready-made reality, than synthesizing reality yourself.

Living through images, constantly consuming content means that the fodder we give our brains throughout the day has already been processed multiple times over already, before being received by our brain. This is a concept that Jean Baudrillard touches on with his concepts of Simulacra and Simulation. Reality in modern industrial society becomes a copy of a copy of a copy. That results in the dilution of any sense of purpose, and the fluidity of reality, the washing away of life's greatest philosophical problems, like our relation to death and to ourselves. That is the world that Susan Sontag introduces us to with this quote, it is a hyperpolitical world, meaning a world where the individual takes part in changing society for his own satisfaction, and the advent of sporadic mass-movements, instead of long-lasting organizational activity, the reduction in the numbers of memberships for political organizations and the switch to alternative forms of changing society through social media.

The advent of social media does to society what Kant did to philosophy, what he called his Copernican revolution. It radically displaces the focus of human society from the outside world, and the relations between different agents in human society, to the individual and his or her consumption habits. This displacement is not based on ideology or morals, that simply follows, it is real because the individual is confronted with a new reality. Social media confronts individuals with user-generated content that reaches practically everyone.

Therefore, the individual's experience of content becomes the new political battlefield. The images demand to be taken into account, like a toddler screaming in a store for not getting the toy he wanted. They create the basic contradiction consumer and product. They create a struggle within capitalism, not against it. That might be one reason why it is so difficult to change society fundamentally to deal with climate change, even opposition to industrial society must occur on its premises, within it, consuming some niche product. That is the whole nature of a world-system. Total domination and controlled opposition.

The images of 9/11 live on to this day. September 11th was the day the world's coronated superpower was attacked and the world order no longer seemed to be written on stone tablets. To consume the image of 9/11 means being moved emotionally by a story that has been removed from reality long ago. It is like a Greek tragedy where the hero becomes the victim of life's unfortune. It is more literary than real. Images create a story, they are symbols of something, they are political and bear a final cause, like previously stated. To watch clips on YouTube about 9/11, seeing new angles that you haven't yet seen before, or perhaps seeing the rare video of the first tower being hit, captured by someone unsuspectingly recording the street, and just accidentally filming it, is content consumed. According to Sontag, engaging in "aesthetic consumerism" is like a drug, the goal being to get a high. To consume the image of 9/11 involves getting stimulated. That is the point.

Jean Baudrillard has written a book called "the spirit of terrorism" where he discusses with burlesque humor the 9/11 attacks, emphasizing their greater than life status. In it he claims that it was as if the towers committed suicide,

collapsing under their own weight, with the towers themselves in a way symbolically sympathizing with the terrorists. He sees the terrorist attacks as a natural cause of the proclaimed “end of history” and globalization. The end goal of modernity must create psychosis, because its goal is to put a label on everything, to be able to define it in relation to itself and in that project, it reaches higher than what is physically possible. It seeks to force people to abide by its logic, a logic that claims that they are culturally backward. The whole background of the attacks creates a frenzy, in which everyone is tacitly and unconsciously sympathizing with the terrorists.

During the great purges in Soviet Russia, being counterrevolutionary was seen as remnant past forms of society that could take residency in the present. This image of the past residing in the present created a hunt for class enemies and a paranoid state, that resorted to brutal repression of dissident voices. This fight against images was what drove Lenin to send out intellectuals of Soviet Russia in the “philosophy steamer” in 1922, indeed these were disruptive elements of society. This is a particular type of image, not a photograph but an imagination that bears resemblance to the essence of a photograph, being a still frame of the past. The past is always resurrected by the present, and a conception of the past cannot exist without being a figure of the present. This is important for understanding the nature of images, and we can use this conception of the picture to analyze Sontag’s quote from a new perspective. An image is always a caricature of something past, perhaps it is in its essence reactionary and distortive.

The production of the image within the bounds of consumer society involves competition against other images, other imaginations of the past. The most

culturally relevant, the most provocative and the most symbolically meaningful garner the most clicks and likes. While Sontag did not write explicitly about social media, seeing as “On Photography” was first published in 1973, the quote seems ever more relevant in 2025, precisely because of the advent of social media. The natural selection of content on platforms like Instagram and YouTube seemingly caters to the most banal passions of the human mind, and creates distractions from political reality. It creates hyperpolitical engagements with stories, instead of actually engaging with society outside of the digital world.

There does not seem to be any group in society that is capable of withstanding “the most irresistible forms of mental pollution”, to refer back to Sontag’s quote, therefore I am left to wonder who and what power can solve the problems of society in regards to for instance climate change. I firmly believe that the power of a good idea is a lackluster force, that must be aided by immediate rewards by some group of people for them to go out and make progressive change. The social media revolution atomizes society, and leaves people with worse prospects of doing that. They struggle within the images created for and within consumer society. That leaves no earthly power to lead the change we desperately need. Engagement with the image of a thing on social media, and the symbols that confront us there encourage mental engagement. In my opinion this is a passive form of engagement that stands powerless. These revelations leave me feeling pessimistic about the future.

Sources:

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