

# MISREADING FEUERBACH: SUSAN SONTAG, PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE IMAGE-WORLD

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## Abstract

Attention to Susan Sontag's (mis)reading of Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* reveals her agenda in *On Photography*: to depart from 'the new age of unbelief' and return to 'something like the primitive status of images' in which an image participates in the reality of the object depicted. For Sontag, photography has reduced the world to its image, yet it is photography that can get us back to 'reality'. Sontag's project is more similar to Feuerbach's than she allows. Like Feuerbach, Sontag argues that human beings have mistaken the copy for the thing itself and, as a result, have created a false division between the copy and the 'real,' devalued both the copy and the thing itself, and overlooked the profound ways images affect the world.

The other world is to be found, as usual, inside this one.<sup>1</sup>

A well-known proponent of photographic objectivity, the physician and Harvard Medical School professor Oliver Wendell Holmes believed photography was a process of visual representation that separated the form of objects from the physical objects themselves.<sup>2</sup> For Holmes, photography was a purely mechanical procedure that copied the world and in which human beings played no role. In 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph', published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1859, Holmes reminds his reader of Democritus of Abdera who believed that 'all bodies were continually throwing off certain images like themselves', which strike 'our bodily organs' and give rise to our sensations.<sup>3</sup> Epicurus and Lucretius then followed Democritus, writing about forms, or 'films', as if they were shed from the surfaces of solids 'as bark is shed by trees'.<sup>4</sup> These films are visible in mirrors, on the surface of a calm body of water, and 'by the consciousness behind the eye in the ordinary act of vision', but, Holmes notes, they have no real existence apart from their source, and they 'perish instantly when it is

withdrawn.<sup>5</sup> For Holmes, the genius of the daguerreotype is that it fixes ‘the most fleeting of our illusions’.<sup>6</sup> He writes, ‘The photograph has completed the triumph, by making a sheet of paper reflect images like a mirror and hold them as a picture.’<sup>7</sup> He calls this new invention ‘*the mirror with a memory*’.<sup>8</sup>

The notion that the photographed object gives off something that is then captured on paper is not so far off the mark in describing the actual process of reflecting light onto chemically sensitive surfaces by which images were first made. As Alan Trachtenberg describes, during the later 1820s, Joseph Nicéphore Niepce and his brother Claude used the camera obscura and sensitised paper to produce pictures for a lithography press they designed.<sup>9</sup> These early experiments produced ‘tonally inversed pictures’, what would now be called negatives. The process of turning negatives into positives was so time-consuming and the resulting images so poor, that Niepce searched for another image making technique. He discovered that a certain kind of bitumen (asphalt) that was usually soluble in lavender oil became insoluble when exposed to light. He covered a bitumen-sensitised pewter plate with a translucent engraving. He then exposed it to light, followed by a washing with lavender oil. The area exposed to light became insoluble, while the area hidden by the engraving’s lines was washed away. The picture was tonally reversed, but the plate could easily be etched to create a positive print.

At the same time, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre was also looking for a way to produce illusionistic images from reflected light.<sup>10</sup> A mutual acquaintance put Niepce in touch with Daguerre. They began a correspondence, sharing ideas about their image making attempts and eventually becoming partners. When Niepce died in 1833, his son Isidore took his place in the partnership. By 1837, Trachtenberg writes, Daguerre had perfected Niepce’s process to produce a highly detailed, positive picture of a corner of his studio. He considered it his own invention and labelled his pictures daguerreotypes. He made the images by polishing and cleaning the silver-coated side of a copper plate. He coated the plate with iodine to create a layer of iodide of silver. The plate was then placed in a camera obscura window before being exposed to a scene or landscape. After fifteen minutes, the blank plate was removed and hot mercury globules were formed over the surface. The plate was then washed with distilled water or soda, and a clear, detailed picture of the scene or landscape would appear. Daguerre writes, ‘The DAGUERREOTYPE is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature; on the contrary it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself.’<sup>11</sup>

Although the ‘instruments’ and processes of photography have changed, the legacy of the view of photographs as traces of the subjects that stood before the camera and as images made by machines without human intervention, remains.<sup>12</sup> This legacy runs throughout photography discourse and continues

to fuel the myth of indexicality, which is the (often mistaken) idea that photographs have a natural, even physical, relationship with their referents.<sup>13</sup> Even as many theorists of photography recognise that photographs, from the very beginning, have been doctored, fabricated, altered, falsified, and manipulated,<sup>14</sup> the ontology of the photograph as trace continues to shape how photographs are understood and viewed and how the relationship between reality and images is theorised: Walter Benjamin, for example, describes reality as ‘seared into the character of the picture’;<sup>15</sup> André Bazin calls the photograph a ‘decal or transfer’, writing that the photograph and the object itself share ‘a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint’;<sup>16</sup> Roland Barthes portrays the photograph as ‘literally an emanation of the referent’ that proves the subject of the photograph ‘has indeed existed’;<sup>17</sup> and the list of examples could go on and on. The supposed ‘objective nature of photography’—defined by Bazin as the result of the indexical status of photographs and the dominant role of a machine in making the image—confers on photography a ‘quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making’.<sup>18</sup> Bazin writes, ‘We are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*’, and then goes so far as to argue that the ‘re-presentation’ of the photographed object effects a ‘transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.’<sup>19</sup> In other words, the image *becomes the object*, freed from the limits of time and space that usually govern it.<sup>20</sup>

The belief that photographs both ‘capture’ and ‘free’ their subjects in ways other forms of images do not creates the sense that photographs, in Susan Sontag’s terms, ‘can be used as *memento mori*’.<sup>21</sup> In *Regarding the Suffering of Others* (2003), Sontag writes, ‘Ever since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death. Because an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens, photographs were superior to any painting as a memento of the vanished past and the dear departed.’<sup>22</sup> Photographs, she writes, function ‘as secular icons’, ‘objects of contemplation’ that ‘deepen one’s sense of reality’.<sup>23</sup> Although Sontag calls photographs *secular* icons, when photography theorists—including Sontag, as I will explore in this article—write about the relationship between photographs and death, they often appeal to religious language and metaphors to describe that relationship. For example, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes’s meditation on his mother’s death and on his own mortality, Barthes writes that photographs appeal to the ‘religious substance out of which I am molded’.<sup>24</sup> They function as an ‘experiential order of proof’, ‘the proof-according-to-St.-Thomas-seeking-to-touch-the-resurrected-Christ’.<sup>25</sup> They are like ‘icons which are kissed in the Greek churches without being seen’.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, Barthes compares looking at photographs to a kind of private meditation practiced by believers in the Middle Ages, what he calls

‘under-the-breath prayer’.<sup>27</sup> For Bazin, a ‘religious desire’ is at the center of photography: photographs soothe the ‘mummy complex’ at the origin of painting and sculpture, which is the desire to transcend death through the ‘continued existence of the corporeal body’.<sup>28</sup> Photographs, according to Bazin, make possible ‘the preservation of life by a representation of life’.<sup>29</sup> Photography theorists often appeal to theological language to describe photography’s ability to cross boundaries—to make the dead present, to allow viewers to ‘time travel’ and visit the past, to make visible what would otherwise remain invisible. This language emerges when they posit certain kinds of claims about photography that attempt to push beyond finite human experience. A special representational status—indexical, transcendent, revelatory—is reserved for photographs.

Given this context, it is no wonder that Susan Sontag engages Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1843) in her book *On Photography* (1977) when she wrestles with the relationship between images and reality, articulates her concern that images have *become* reality, and explores her desire to make reality itself significant again. Sontag’s and Feuerbach’s projects are similar: both examine ‘the implications of an activity by which members of industrialised society try to appropriate reality, but instead contribute to the alienation of their kind’.<sup>30</sup> In *The Essence of Christianity*, a philosophical and theological text filled with visual metaphors, that ‘activity’ is religion, and Feuerbach endeavours to combat this alienation by reuniting reality with itself—in particular *humanity* with itself—by refiguring the relationship between humanity and God.<sup>31</sup> Feuerbach reverses the view that human beings are the image of God; instead, God becomes humanity’s image.<sup>32</sup> The secret of theology for Feuerbach is anthropology: God is the projection of humankind’s objectified nature.<sup>33</sup> The I-Thou relationship is not between the human being and God, but rather between the individual human being and the human species. The ‘Thou’ of the ‘I-Thou’ relationship is ‘human nature externalised and reified’.<sup>34</sup> In religion, however, the distinction between the individual and the species is misapprehended as a distinction between the individual and God.<sup>35</sup> Feuerbach describes God like Bazin describes the photograph: ‘The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective.’<sup>36</sup> At some points in *The Essence of Christianity*, it is almost as if ‘God’ is like the ‘films’ described by Epicurus and Lucretius, shed from humans and projected onto a screen.

Sontag turns to Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* in the sixth essay of *On Photography*, ‘The Image-World’.<sup>37</sup> Sontag’s concern with the ‘real’ in *On Photography* is fundamentally an ethical concern—photography’s ability to make violence and suffering experienced by ‘others’ real—and it is to this issue that she will return (and turn critically against) in her later book about

photography, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003).<sup>38</sup> Sontag engages Feuerbach as part of her exploration of the complicated relationship between images and reality, and I argue in this article that she misreads him. Although Sontag uses Feuerbach as a theorist to think *against*, I contend that their projects are more alike than she allows. In *On Photography*, Sontag understands photography in a similar way to how Feuerbach understands theology in *The Essence of Christianity*: we have mistaken the copy for the thing itself, and, as a result, we have created a false division between the copy and the ‘real’, devalued both the copy and the thing itself, and overlooked the profound ways images can and do affect the world.

I think it is important to investigate Sontag’s criticism of Feuerbach for three key reasons. First, Sontag has a tendency to make arguments about photography in general rather than arguments about specific photographs in particular contexts, and this occasionally causes her to move too quickly past information that might trouble her position and, in some cases, to misread texts she uses to make her point. Ironically, some of the texts she misreads—like Feuerbach’s—if read more accurately, would often support what Sontag is claiming. Looking carefully at how she misreads these texts brings her own project into relief. Second, I do not think it is an accident that Sontag chooses to engage the work of a theologian to explore what she understands to be photography’s unique representational relationship with the subject of the photograph. Her choice of Feuerbach reveals something about how she understands photography and what she hopes photography might be able to accomplish. There is something ‘magical’ about photography for Sontag, and she thinks it might deliver us from ‘the new age of unbelief’, from the ‘process of desacralization’ in which image and reality are separated, and return us to ‘something like the primitive status of images’ in which ‘an image was taken to participate in the reality of the object depicted’.<sup>39</sup> Her project in *On Photography* seems, at times, to be a quasi-religious one, so it makes sense that she would appeal to a theologian. As I demonstrated earlier, she is not the only theorist of photography to make an appeal to theology. My analysis of Sontag’s use of Feuerbach is part of a larger project exploring how theological language functions in the work of several theorists of photography, and I think this is an area where scholars in religious studies and theology can make a contribution to visual studies, art history, and photography criticism.<sup>40</sup> Third, and most important for my purposes in this article, attention to Sontag’s (mis)interpretation of Feuerbach’s text uncovers something about how Sontag understands photography and its relation to ‘the real’, which might otherwise remain hidden. An examination of Sontag’s misreading of Feuerbach reveals her surprising agenda for photography in *On Photography*: to reinvest photographs with significance so that reality itself might become significant again. Like Feuerbach, Sontag argues that by reclaiming

our 'images', we might reclaim ourselves and, she hopes, our responsibility to one another. It is necessary to look carefully at how Sontag theorises photography given that so many theorists—in particular those exploring viewer responsibility in the face of images of violence—continue to engage her writings as resources to think with and against.<sup>41</sup>

In *On Photography*, Sontag writes, 'Photography has the unappealing reputation of being the more realistic, therefore facile, of the mimetic arts.'<sup>42</sup> She notes that the earliest photographers talked about the camera 'as if the camera were a copying machine'; they understood that people operate cameras, but believed it was the camera that sees.<sup>43</sup> The photographer was described as 'a scribe, not a poet', but then photographs began to be understood as evidence of what 'an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world'.<sup>44</sup> Cameras began to change how human beings see. While Sontag does not (usually) treat photographs as duplicates of reality, she recognises that they have functioned and been understood as such, and she examines the impact this understanding has had on the world. Sontag writes,

Insofar as photography does peel away the dry wrappers of habitual seeing, it creates another habit of seeing: both intense and cool, solicitous and detached; charmed by the insignificant detail, addicted to incongruity. But photographic seeing has to be constantly renewed with new shocks, whether of subject matter or technique, so as to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision. For, challenged by the revelations of photographers, seeing tends to accommodate to photographs.<sup>45</sup>

Even as Sontag is critical of the changes in seeing that have been induced by photographs, she clings to the notion that photographs can change how people see, and, as a result, she writes ambiguously about photography's relationship with the real. She debunks the myth of the photograph as unmediated copy, but it is the legacy of the photograph as a physical trace of the pictured subject that supports her view that photography is revelatory, that it discloses what viewers otherwise would not be able to see. It is fitting, then, that Sontag engages the work of a theologian with a critical relationship to theology. Both Sontag and Feuerbach are highly critical of the subject about which they write (W.J.T. Mitchell has suggested *On Photography* should have been titled 'Against Photography'),<sup>46</sup> but both recognise that there is something essential in their subjects that they wish to keep.

Sontag examines the 'surrealism' that 'lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise:' 'the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural

vision'.<sup>47</sup> Unlike paintings, photographs are created not only by a human being but also by a machine. Sontag writes,

Photography has powers that no other image-system has ever enjoyed because, unlike earlier ones, it is *not* dependent on an image maker . . . [T]he process itself remains an optical-chemical (or electronic) one, the workings of which are automatic, the machinery for which will inevitably be modified to provide still more detailed and, therefore, more useful maps of the real.<sup>48</sup>

Because photographs are created, in part, by machines, it is possible to cling to the illusion that the photographer plays almost no role in the creation of the image. Photographs don't seem 'deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist'.<sup>49</sup> They are a result of a 'loose cooperation (quasi-magical, quasi-accidental) between photographer and subject', mediated by 'an ever simpler and more automated machine'.<sup>50</sup> This 'tireless' machine can never be 'entirely wrong'.<sup>51</sup> Sontag writes, 'In the fairy tale of photography the magic box insures veracity and banishes error, compensates for inexperience and rewards innocence.'<sup>52</sup> Photographs seem to 'have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects'.<sup>53</sup> Photographs that appear to be less 'less doctored', 'less patently crafted', and 'more naïve', are often the photographs considered 'more authoritative'.<sup>54</sup>

Because of the role played by the camera in generating the image, photographs have been considered 'found objects,' 'unpremeditated slices of the world', rather than simply art.<sup>55</sup> Sontag writes, 'They trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real.'<sup>56</sup> While Sontag acknowledges that photographs have been changed, altered, retouched, and manipulated since their invention (and that everyone has always known this), she contends that the consequences of lying are more central to photography than to painting: if a painting is a fake, it falsifies the history of art, while a 'fake photograph (one which has been retouched or tampered with, or whose caption is false) falsifies reality'.<sup>57</sup> Even when photographs distort, their connection to the 'real'—the presumption that photographs prove that 'something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture'—remains.<sup>58</sup>

The essential role played by the machine (the camera) in photography creates an unusual relationship between the photographer and his or her art, and between the photograph and 'reality'. Sontag reveals that photographers use theological language to describe this special relationship. In Sontag's fifth essay, 'Photographic Evangelists', she documents the theological metaphors to which photographers appeal to describe what photography is, what it does, and their own role in that art. Here, Sontag traces a belief shared by some photographers that they are not simply copying reality, but revealing it, disclosing it, as if the world is something hidden waiting for the photographer to

appear, camera in hand, to make it visible. Photographers have described photography ‘as a heroic effort of attention, an ascetic discipline, a mystic receptivity to the world which requires that the photographer pass through a cloud of unknowing’.<sup>59</sup> She quotes Minor White’s description of the photographer: ‘the state of mind of the photographer while creating is a blank . . . when looking for pictures . . . The photographer projects himself into everything he sees, identifying himself with everything in order to know it and to feel it better.’<sup>60</sup> Sontag reports that French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson ‘likened himself to a Zen archer, who must *become* the target so as to be able to hit it; ‘thinking should be done beforehand and afterwards,’ he says, ‘never while actually taking a photograph’.<sup>61</sup> Ansel Adams described the camera ‘as an ‘instrument of love and revelation’.<sup>62</sup> Then, Sontag herself describes photography in theological language. Noting that photographs are more able to ‘usurp reality’ than other images because of their ontological status as ‘trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask’, and that a photograph is an ‘emanation . . . a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be’, Sontag presents her reader with a choice: would you rather have had Holbein the younger to have lived long enough to paint Shakespeare, or would you rather that the camera had been invented in time to photograph him?<sup>63</sup> Most people, she believes, would choose the photograph, and she uses a Christian image to explain why: ‘Having a photograph of Shakespeare would be like having a nail from the True Cross.’<sup>64</sup> It is not clear, however, whether Sontag would choose the relic, the painting, or something else altogether.

As I described in the beginning of this article, the supposed special representational status of photographs (as opposed to paintings or drawings) results from the legacy of attributing to photographs an ontological status as traces of the object or person that once stood before the camera. Throughout *On Photography*, Sontag wrestles with this view of photography. She is at times critical of it, disparaging the tendency to see images as more real than the world itself and arguing that the confusion between the image and the thing—mistaking the image for the thing and the thing for the image—has turned the world itself into an image. Sontag aims to correct this flawed understanding of photography, but she does so by depending on a version of the very claim she is criticising: the photograph as a trace of the real. Although it seems Sontag would like to leave behind the understanding of photograph as trace, ultimately it is the relationship between the photographed subject and the photograph that drives her project. In *On Photography*, Sontag critically analyses what she calls the ‘fairy tale’ of photography and yet she ends up participating in its logic.

Sontag’s version of the fairy tale is her belief that photographs are revelatory. Whether photography has been claimed as ‘true expression’ or as ‘faithful recording’, there has been a presumption that photography is a ‘unique system

of disclosure: that it shows us reality as we had *not* seen it before'.<sup>65</sup> Sontag argues that photographers' fascination with photography's ability to reveal, to disclose reality, exposes something profound: the belief that reality is hidden, and, because it is hidden, it must be unveiled by the camera.<sup>66</sup> Sontag writes, 'Whatever the camera records is a disclosure—whether it is imperceptible, fleeting parts of movement, an order that natural vision is incapable of perceiving or a 'heightened reality' . . . or simply a way of seeing . . . Just to show something, anything, in the photographic view is to show that it is hidden.'<sup>67</sup> Sontag suggests that photography *creates* the sense that reality is hidden. When something is photographed, it becomes visible and implies that before the photograph, it was invisible. But invisible to whom? Sontag troubles this notion of hiddenness, asking key questions about why certain realities are hidden from others, or why we tell ourselves that they are hidden, and whether seeing a photograph of something actually makes that thing visible (and to what effect).<sup>68</sup> And yet, even as she argues that photography creates a false sense of hiddenness, she ultimately depends on its revelatory powers to make the invisible visible, to make the 'unreal' real.

In *On Photography's* sixth essay, 'The Image-World', Sontag uses Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* to explore this relationship between images and reality.<sup>69</sup> She opens 'The Image-World' with the claim that 'Reality has always been interpreted through the reports given by images; and philosophers since Plato have tried to loosen our dependence on images by evoking the standard of an image-free way of apprehending the real.'<sup>70</sup> Feuerbach, for Sontag, is one of these philosophers. She writes (quoting *The Essence of Christianity*),

Feuerbach observes about 'our era' that it 'prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being'—while being aware of doing just that. And his premonitory complaint has been transformed in the twentieth century into a widely agreed-on diagnosis: that a society becomes 'modern' when one of its chief activities is producing and consuming images, when images that have extraordinary powers to determine our demands upon reality and are themselves coveted substitutes for first hand experience become indispensable to the health of the economy, the stability of the polity, and the pursuit of private happiness. Feuerbach's words—he is writing a few years after the invention of the camera—seem, more specifically, a presentiment of the impact of photography.<sup>71</sup>

Sontag argues that Feuerbach, writing soon after the invention of the camera, predicts the situation in which we find ourselves—dependent on images, preferring the image to the thing, the copy to the real, appearance to reality. Sontag understands Feuerbach's contention that *theology* is *anthropology* to be an example of another historical moment in which human beings mistook the





Feuerbach's task is to return humanity to itself, and he uses religion to do so. He criticises the impoverishing function of religion as it has been conceived:

Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself. God is not what man is—man is not what God is. God is the infinite, man the finite being; God is the perfect, man imperfect; God eternal, man temporal; God almighty, man weak; God holy, man sinful. God and man are extremes: God is the absolutely positive, the sum of all realities; man the absolutely negative, comprehending all negations.<sup>90</sup>

He flips revelation on its head, insisting that 'Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge'.<sup>91</sup> For Feuerbach, the contents of 'divine revelation' are of 'human origin'.<sup>92</sup> They proceed from and are determined by human reason and human want. In revelation, Feuerbach argues, 'man goes out of himself, in order, by a circuitous path, to return to himself!'.<sup>93</sup> He writes, 'Whatever is God to man, that is his heart and soul; and conversely, God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man—religion the solemn unveiling of a man's hidden treasures, the revelation of his intimate thoughts, the open confession of his love-secrets.'<sup>94</sup> What is revealed in theology is not God's nature, but human nature. Religion, according to Feuerbach, 'can be nothing else than the consciousness which man has of his own—not finite and limited, but infinite nature'.<sup>95</sup> He insists he is not arguing that there is no God, no Trinity, no Word of God, but rather that theology has turned them into illusions, treating them as foreign from humanity, rather than as 'native mysteries, the mysteries of human nature'.<sup>96</sup>

A close reading of Feuerbach's text makes clear that Sontag is wrong to accuse him of subscribing to too strict a division between reality and image. In fact, it is this very division, this alienation that he criticises in *The Essence of Christianity*. Her misreading of Feuerbach, however, reveals her hopes for photography: that photography can be a counter-force to the 'increasingly secular history of painting when secularism is entirely triumphant'.<sup>97</sup> Photography, Sontag writes,

revives—in wholly secular terms—something like the primitive status of images. Our irrepressible feeling that the photographic process is something magical has a genuine basis. No one has taken an easel painting to be in any sense co-substantial with its subject; it only represents or refers. But a photograph is not only like its subject, a homage to the subject. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it.<sup>98</sup>

Sontag's project in *On Photography* is nostalgic. Citing E.H. Gombrich's idea that the further back you go in history, the 'less sharp is the distinction

between images and real things', she writes that 'in primitive societies, the thing and its image were simply two different, that is, physically distinct, manifestations of the same energy or spirit.'<sup>99</sup> She writes, 'The primitive notion of the efficacy of images presumes that images possess the qualities of real things, but our inclination is to attribute to real things the qualities of an image.'<sup>100</sup> Sontag wants photographs—objects with a unique relationship to the subjects they depict—to return us to a 'primitive' understanding of the relationship between images and reality. The power of photographic images comes from the fact that they are themselves material objects, what Sontag calls 'richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality—for turning *it* into a shadow'.<sup>101</sup> However, like Feuerbach, Sontag believes that the very thing that has turned the world into a shadow can also make the world real again.

Sontag tells her own version of photography's fairy tale: photography has reduced the world to its image, and yet it is photography itself that can get us back to 'reality'. Photography has created the sickness, and it is photography that offers the remedy. She understands photography in a similar way to how Feuerbach understands theology. For both thinkers, the cause of the problem can also be its solution. Photography (for Sontag) and theology (for Feuerbach) have been forces of alienation, but they can also be forces of participation; they can bring us close, and they can create distance.<sup>102</sup> For Feuerbach, religion is a projection of what belongs to the human species onto God; his task is to use religion to return what rightfully belongs to human beings. For Sontag, photography is a projection of the reality of the world onto an image; her task is to use photography to return our sense of what is real, to force viewers to claim the image as theirs, to recognise that what is 'out there' is actually what is right here. In *On Photography*, Sontag is interested in a photograph's ability 'to stimulate the moral impulse'.<sup>103</sup> She wants photography to be able to *cause* something—to stop violence, to effect change, to protect. To be able to do these things photography, for Sontag, must be revelatory. It must disclose a world most viewers would rather not see, but a world Sontag believes viewers have an obligation to see and to respond to ethically.

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- Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> The information that follows was taken from the preface written by Alan Trachtenberg to Joseph Nicéphore Niepce, 'Memoire on the Heliograph,' in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980).
- <sup>10</sup> The information that follows was taken from the preface written by Alan Trachtenberg to Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, 'Daguerreotype,' in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980).
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>12</sup> For a survey of the debates about what, if anything, is peculiarly 'photographic' about photography, see Joel and Neil Walsh, 'Allen Snyder, Photography, Vision and Representation'. *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1) (Autumn, 1975) pp. 143–169.
- <sup>13</sup> The term 'indexical' comes from the writings of C.S. Peirce who identifies three types of signs: symbols, icons and indexes. In *Camera Indica*, Christopher Pinney summarizes Peirce's understanding of 'indexical': Symbols are arbitrary and conventional; iconic signs have relationship of resemblance to their referents (painting, onomatopoeic sounds); and, 'Those signs are indexical which have some natural relationship of contiguity with their referent. Thus smoke is an index of fire; and photographs, as well as almost always being iconic, are also indexical. They are iconic because they resemble whatever was originally in front of the lens and they are indexical because it is the physical act of light bounced off an object through the lens and on to the filmic emulsion which leaves the trace and becomes the image' (Christopher Pinney, *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997], p. 20). Pinney writes, 'It was precisely photography's indexicality, and its superiority over other more equivocal signs, which gave it such importance in the colonial imagination' (*Ibid.*, p. 20).
- <sup>14</sup> Although digital images seem to introduce the possibility that photographs can be manipulated, the writings of postcolonial theorists like Malek Alloula and Christopher Pinney reveal that photographs have always been changed, manufactured and falsified)—(Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) and Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)). Nineteenth century 'spirit photography' is also an excellent illustration of this manipulation. (See, for example: Michael Kimmelman, 'Ghosts in the Lens, Tricks in the Darkroom'. *The New York Times* (30 September 2005), or Louis Kaplan, 'Where the Paranoid Meets the Paranormal: Speculations on Spirit Photography'. *Art Journal* 62(3) (Autumn, 2003) pp. 19–29). Part of what is interesting about the use of photography in colonialism and about 'spirit photography' is that it is the myth of indexicality that allowed falsified images to become 'proof—of the truth of the afterlife, of the possibility of communicating with the dead, of the need to 'save' the 'other.'
- <sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'A Short History of Photography'. *Screen* 13, (1972) p. 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Andre Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image'. *Film Quarterly* 13(4) (Summer, 1960) p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, 1st American ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp. 80, 82.

- <sup>18</sup> Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', pp. 7–8.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>20</sup> Bazin writes, 'The photographic image is the object itself, freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it' (*Ibid.*, p. 8.).
- <sup>21</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 119.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- <sup>24</sup> Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 82.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- <sup>28</sup> Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', p. 4.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- <sup>30</sup> Janet Fletcher, 'On Photography' (Book Review). *Library Journal* 102(19) (1 November 1977) p. 2250.
- <sup>31</sup> Feuerbach 'was for a time an enthusiastic Hegelian, but he became disenchanted with the tendency of speculative philosophy to 'reduce human existence to thought' (Stephen P. Thornton, 'Facing Up to Feuerbach'. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 39(2) (April, 2009) p. 104). In 'Facing up to Feuerbach,' Thornton notes that Marx and Engels praised Feuerbach in *The Holy Family*, writing that Feuerbach 'has discovered the secret of the 'system'' (*Ibid.*, p. 103). When *The Essence of Christianity* appeared, Engels wrote, 'No one can have an idea of the liberating influence of this book unless he himself experienced it. Enthusiasm was general: we were all for the moment 'Feuerbachians'' (Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach und der Ausgang de klassischen deutschen Philosophi*, Berline, 1886, pg. 12, quoted by Thornton in 'Facing up to Feuerbach,' p. 104).
- <sup>32</sup> Feuerbach intended the title of *The Essence of Christianity* to be 'Know Thyself' because he understood the essence of religion to be humanity's alienated self (James C. Livingston, *Modern*
- Christian Thought, Vol. I (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), p. 223.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 222–9. Like theorists who argue that photography is different from other forms of representation, Feuerbach argues that religion is different from other forms of consciousness. In humans' consciousness of empirical objects, we distinguish 'between the conscious subject and the object of which it is conscious,' but in religion, this distinction is impossible, according to Feuerbach, because 'self-consciousness and consciousness of the religious object are identical' (Thornton, 'Facing Up to Feuerbach', p. 109).
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- <sup>36</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 14.
- <sup>37</sup> First published as essays in *The New York Review of Books*, *On Photography* began as Susan Sontag's attempt to write about 'some of the problems, aesthetic and moral, posed by the omnipresence of photographed images'. Sontag notes in a brief preface to the paperback version of the text that the more she thought about 'what photographs are, the more complex and suggestive they became' (Sontag, *On Photography*, Preface). Six essays, followed by a brief anthology of quotations about photography dedicated to Walter Benjamin, comprise the text: 'In Plato's Cave,' 'America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly,' 'Melancholy Objects', 'The Heroism of Vision,' 'Photographic Evangels' and 'The Image-World'. In these essays, Sontag investigates what photography is, what photographers do and the role photographs play in the world. She pays critical attention to the multiple uses to which photographs can be put; to photography understood as both aesthetic and the instrumental; to capitalist society's requirement that culture be based on

images due to its need for 'vast amounts of entertainment' to 'stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race and sex'; to cameras' power to define reality as a spectacle and as an object of surveillance; to the role of images as producers of ideology; and to photographs' ability to shock and to anesthetize. In a world dominated by images, she writes, 'Social change is replaced by change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself' (*Ibid.*, pp. 176–9).

<sup>38</sup> Sontag's ethical concern is another similarity she shares with Feuerbach, although she does not acknowledge this similarity in *On Photography*. In 'Facing up to Feuerbach,' Stephen Thornton argues that a major, and often overlooked, element in Feuerbach's text is his 'account of the *normative* nature of the anthropomorphic attributes in terms of which God is conceived in religious thought' (Thornton, 'Facing Up to Feuerbach', p. 8). Feuerbach's projectionist project, Thornton argues, is to refigure the relationship between religion and morality. For Feuerbach, society's conception of God 'is a function of the moral value-system of the society concerned,' indicating that morality is logically prior to, and independent of religion. Thornton writes, 'The true atheist, then, for Feuerbach, is one who does not value the good for its own sake, but rather because he believes that it has been ordained by the projected and fictitious subject, God, for such a person must accept that, in logical consistency, he would have deemed any action good if it had been ordained by God. The genuine theist, on the other hand, is the man [sic] who values the good whether it has been ordained by God or not. Indeed, once this is recognized, the question: 'Has this action been ordained by God?' becomes totally superfluous, and the autonomy of morality is clearly established' (*Ibid.*, p. 114).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5.

<sup>40</sup> In my dissertation, 'Just Looking: Theological Language, Ethics and Photographs of Violence', I analysed the theological language that emerges in the writings of three theorists of photography: Roland Barthes, John Berger and Susan Sontag. This language has been largely unexamined by critics, and it is my contention that analysing this language provides crucial insights about the ways photography has been understood, misunderstood, practiced and viewed. Theological language usually emerges when theorists make certain kinds of claims about photography in which they attempt to push beyond finite human experience. It appears when theorists wrestle with the relationship between photography and death, with the relationship between the viewer and the one photographed, and with ethical questions about what is required of viewers who look at photographs that show the suffering of others.

<sup>41</sup> For example: Judith Keilbach, 'Photographs, Symbolic Images and the Holocaust: on the (Im)Possibility of Depicting Historical Truth'. *History and Theory* 47 (May 2009) pp. 54–76; Stephanie Ross, 'What Photographs Can't Do'. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41 (1) (September, 1982) pp. 5–17; Sue Sorensen, 'Against Photography'. *Afterimage* 31 (6) (May/June 2004); Judith Butler, 'Photography, War, Outrage'. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 120 (3) (2005) pp. 822–827; Andrew J. Mitchell, 'Torture and Photography: Abu Ghraib'. *Radical Philosophy Review* 8 (1) (2005) pp. 1–27; Steven C. Caton, 'Coetzee, Agamben and the Passion of Abu Ghraib'. *American Anthropologist* 108 (1) (2006) pp. 114–23; Stephen Eisenman, *The Abu Ghraib Effect* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007); and Schuyler W. Henderson, 'Disregarding the Suffering of Others: Narrative, Comedy

and Torture'. *Literature and Medicine* 24(2) (Fall 2005) pp. 181–208.

<sup>42</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 51.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 87–8.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>46</sup> Sorensen, 'Against Photography'. In her review of *On Photography*, Janet Fletcher opens with a similar idea, calling the book 'Sontag's brilliantly if erratically argued case against photography' (Fletcher, 'On Photography' [Book Review] p. 2250).

<sup>47</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 52.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120–1.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> In 'The Heroism of Vision' in *On Photography*, Sontag investigates the moral work photography can do—or might not be able to do. She writes about 'Protected middle-class inhabitants of the more affluent corners of the world—those regions where most photographs are taken and consumed—[who] learn about the world's horrors mainly through the camera'. Photographs 'can and do distress', she writes, but their aestheticizing tendency means that 'the medium which conveys distress ends by neutralizing it' (*Ibid.*, p. 109). Cameras create sympathy, but they also create

distance and the sense that suffering is something that happens 'over there.' These are issues and concerns she will return to in *Regarding the Suffering of Others*.

<sup>69</sup> Feuerbach's writing in *The Essence of Christianity* is thick with visual metaphors. He describes his project in ocular terms: 'I do nothing more to religion—and to speculative philosophy and theology also—than open its eyes, or rather to turn its gaze from the internal towards the external, i.e. I change the object as it is in the imagination into the object as it is in reality' (Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p. xix). He calls religion 'the dream of the human mind', and calls on his reader to remember that even in dreams we find ourselves not 'in emptiness or in heaven but on earth, in the realm of reality' (*Ibid.*, p. xix).

<sup>70</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 153.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* Sontag quotes from the following passage in *The Essence of Christianity*: 'But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence, this change, inasmuch as it does away with illusion, is an absolute annihilation, or at least a reckless profanation; for in these days illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness. Religion has disappeared, and for it has been substituted, even among Protestants, the appearance of religion—the Church—in order at least that 'the faith' may be imparted to the ignorant and indiscriminating multitude' (Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p. xix).

<sup>72</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 155.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

- <sup>77</sup> For an introduction to Feuerbach's work and his response to critics' charges of 'atheism,' please see 'Chapter Nine: The Post-Hegelian Critique of Christianity in Germany' in Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, pp. 214–36.
- <sup>78</sup> Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, p. 5.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–4.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv.
- <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xviii.
- <sup>97</sup> Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 155.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- <sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.
- <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- <sup>102</sup> Sontag writes, 'Photography, which has so many narcissistic uses, is also a powerful instrument for depersonalizing our relation to the world; and the two uses are complementary. Like a pair of binoculars with no right or wrong end, the camera makes exotic things near, intimate; and familiar things small, abstract, strange, much farther away. It offers, in one easy, habit forming activity, both participation and alienation in our own lives and those of others—allowing us to participate, while confirming alienation' (*Ibid.*, p. 167).
- <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.