

On Photography

In 1977, the American critic Susan Sontag published one of the most influential studies on photography, together with Walter Benjamin's *A Short History of Photography* and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Here is an extract from the first chapter of Sontag's study, *On Photography*.

The 'realistic' view of the world compatible with bureaucracy redefines knowledge—as techniques and information. Photographs are valued because they give information. They tell one what there is; they make an inventory. To spies, meteorologists, coroners, archaeologists, and other information professionals, their value is inestimable. But in the situations in



Five Cents Lodging, Bayard Street (1889)
by Jacob A. Riis.

which most people use photographs, their value as information is of the same order¹ as fiction. The information that photographs can give starts to seem very important at that moment in cultural history when everyone is thought to have a right to something called news. Photographs were seen as a way of giving information to people who do not take easily to² reading. The *Daily News* still calls itself 'New York's Picture Newspaper', its bid for populist identity. At the opposite end of the scale, *Le Monde*, a newspaper designed for skilled, well-informed readers, runs no photographs at all. The presumption is that, for such readers, a photograph could only illustrate the analysis contained in an article. (...)

The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque. It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery. Any photograph has multiple meanings; indeed, to see something in the form of a photograph is to encounter a potential object of fascination. The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: 'There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way.' Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from *not* accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted³ in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph. Of course, photographs fill in blanks in our mental pictures of the present and the past: for example, Jacob Riis' images of New York squalor in the

1 **order** : (here) quality.

2 **take... to** : begin or fall into the habit of.

3 **is rooted** : has origin.

■ 1880s are sharply instructive to those unaware that urban poverty in late nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian. Nevertheless, the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses. As Brecht points out, a photograph of the Krupp works ⁴ reveals virtually nothing about that organization. In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand.

4 **Krupp works** : centre for German rearmament in the 1930s.