



© Henri Cartier-Bresson. See Magnum credits.

On 28th December 2004, American novelist and cultural critic Susan Sontag died (www.susansontag.com/biography.htm). Her books include *Death Kit* (1967), *On Photography* (1977) and *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004).

In *On Photography*, Sontag relates how seeing photographs of Nazi concentration camps – a symbol of the collective failure to act in the face of monumental evil – changed her life: “Nothing I have seen... ever cut me as sharply. [I can] divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after... something is still crying.”

Sontag’s account acknowledges the classic film-based notion that photographs fix a particular moment in time and space. Paradoxically, her own thinking about photography, which to her credit she continued to revise, had a secondary effect of dismantling concepts such as Henri Cartier-Bresson’s ‘Decisive Moment’ into quaint nineteenth century artifacts.

The model of the Decisive Moment came from Cartier-Bresson’s split-second ability to anticipate Surrealistic ‘readymade’ scenes, encapsulating design, time and space, which let him structure his photographs before depressing the shutter button on his Leica.

Now that film-based photography has become an alternative process, it’s no longer necessary to anticipate Decisive Moments. The ease and speed of digital imaging permit those decisive moments that got away, or not initially recognised, to be resurrected.



About Rob

Rob is the author of a number of books on photography. He was the Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Center for Exploratory and Perceptual Art in New York. He now teaches the history of photography.

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■ *Lee Miller’s War*, edited by Antony Penrose, Thames & Hudson, £17.95, www.thamesandhudson.com

Rob Hirsch

On the Death of Susan Sontag

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Photographers are full of ‘fish that got away’ stories about those amazing pictures that escaped capture, but now we possess the means to recapture those scenes, whether they occurred in reality or in our imagination. However, this new found capacity can cause ethical dilemmas depending on context and audience expectations.

We expect photojournalists to abide by their established contract with the public and resist the urge to digitally improve upon the world, but the rest of us are free to play at being a deity and revise time and space as we see fit. We can take care of the normal photographic chores of colour balance, contrast and spotting, or place our head on a dream body, or eliminate a person we never liked from the frame.

For such reasons, if iconic images like Bresson’s photograph of a woman concentration camp prisoner recognising the Gestapo informer who betrayed her (Henri Cartier-Bresson: *The Man, the Image and the World*, Thames & Hudson, £48) or Lee

Miller’s concentration camp photographs (Lee Miller’s *War*, edited by Antony Penrose, Thames & Hudson, £17.95) were made today their veracity would be questioned.

A permanent negative is certainly no guarantee of faithfulness. We know the world by constructing patterns from the data filtered and interpreted by our individual senses, making every photograph a reflection of its maker. We instinctively recognise this and know camera images are fabrications and not literal accounts.

Today we’re in an era of infinite and dynamic digital moments, which are lively and ready to change. By declaring all photographic methods to be constructions, we grant unconditional acceptance that photographs possess an abstract, expressive and poetic nature formed by the maker. Awareness of the photo’s contemplative dimension can provide a path for understanding that releases more open and comprehensive meanings, acknowledging that within an image the eye sees a multitude of realities... ■