Jean-Luc Godard once said, “Photography is truth. Cinema is 24 frames of truth per second.” But just as most cinema nowadays is an utter fabrication of the way people truly live, photographs can be very easily fabricated or misconstrued. As Sontag argues, there is one important thing missing in the act of photography: context. And as Sontag also points out, even if a surface reality is perfectly captured, does it reveal anything new?

I have a great deal of background in the study of film, and one thing I have found is that filmmakers tend to belong to one of two camps. Realists tend to believe that in capturing the world the way it looks, smells, and feels (like photographs) they are showing the audience something it hasn’t seen before. Most of us are too self-absorbed to see reality as it really is. At the other pole are Expressionists, who, like Sontag, believe that external appearances are full of irrelevancies and sometimes deceit. They want to discard the unessential and go deeper. Only then, they feel, will they discover some kind of truth.

There are theorists on both sides of the debate who firmly believe that the other is wrong. But if there is one thing that my long experience of watching films has taught me, it is that both sides can produce masterpieces. The realistic films of Jean Renoir and Vittorio de Sira have taught me what life is truly like for me and people around me—a careless struggle against forces we cannot control. They have also forced me to consider others as individuals in their own right and not just in terms of my involvement with them. I began to see more than one side to every view, and I became less judgmental. On the other hand, the world of Expressionistic directors like Stanley Kubrick and Terry Gilliam has led me to truth in two ways: by exaggerating and intensifying current trends, they have allowed me to see what might happen in the future and, if necessary, try to change it; and, by exaggerating and intensifying the mental state of a human being, they have taught me about my own psychology. When searching for something as subjective as truth, one cannot afford to be dogmatic as to how to find it.

What Sontag overlooks, then, is that it is often possible to place photographs in context (hence the whole art of photojournalism) and that, no matter what, photographs do something important by capturing and preserving appearances. Sontag does make a passing reference to this documentary function of photography, only to dismiss it. But how can we understand something if we don’t know what it is? Photography provides a basis for deeper contextual understanding, and it also does something else. When we look at a photograph, we are thrown back and forced to look at ourselves and others in a more objective light. Photography can also be Expressionistic, of course, which means it can be subjective, but Sontag also dismisses this photography as distortion of reality. That it is, but it is also a vehicle for personal expression of the photographer, who is also an artist.

Essentially, Sontag is making a sweeping generalization about an art form that she knows little about. She claims that documentary photography distorts “truth” and prevents understanding, while expressionistic photograph, which she ignores, is even a distortion of “reality,” and thus presumably an even greater distortion of truth and understanding. What Sontag does not understand is that there is more than one kind of truth, and there is more than one way to get at it. Photography is one of those ways; sure it distorts—but then, doesn’t everything? Especially words, Sontag’s chosen medium?