

## Introduction

Photographs turn the present into the past, make contingency into destiny. Whatever their degree of "realism," all photographs embody a "romantic" relation to reality.

I am thinking of how the poet Novalis defined Romanticism: to make the familiar appear strange, the marvelous appear commonplace. The camera's uncanny mechanical replication of persons and events performs a kind of magic, both creating and de-creating what is photographed. To take pictures is, simultaneously, to confer value and to render banal.

Photographs instigate, confirm, seal legends. Seen through photographs, people become icons of themselves. Photography converts the world itself into a department store or museum-without-walls in which every subject is depreciated into an article of consumption, promoted into an item for esthetic appreciation.

Photography also converts the whole world into a cemetery. Photographers, connoisseurs of beauty, are also — wittingly or unwittingly — the recording-angels of death. The photograph-as-photograph shows death. More than that, it shows the sex-appeal of death — another instance of the Surrealist "bad taste" that is the most

persistent motif of good taste in photography. The intrusion of still photographs in that remarkable sequence in Robert Siodmak's film *Menschen am Sonntag* (1928) is like the intrusion of death. One minute we see ordinary folk milling, laughing, grimacing, yearning. The next moment — as, one by one, they step before the street photographer's black box — we see them frozen, embalmed in a "still." The photographs shock, in the flow of the movie. It's as if these vivacious people were already dead, and their paper photographs were cupped behind glass and affixed to tombstones, as is common practice in the cemeteries of Mediterranean countries.

\* \* \*

"When one has a picture taken, the photographer says 'Perfect' Just as you are! That is death."

"Life is a movie. Death is a photograph."

I am quoting from my first novel, *The Benefactor* — from the conclusion of Professor Bulgarau's lecture. The novel was published in 1963, which is also the year I met Peter Hujar. And the premonitory link between my sensibility and his that is suggested by this passage was transmuted into some-

thing much more concrete around 1966, when he showed me the extraordinary photographs he had taken in the Catacombs at Palermo. Readers of *Death Kit* will recognize how intimately the oneiric landscape of the final scene of my second novel — which came out in 1967 — is related to those photographs, the last in the present book.

In the first part of this selection of Peter Hujar's work, fleshed and moist-eyed friends and acquaintances stand, sit, slouch, mostly lie — and are made to appear to meditate on their own mortality. Do meditate, whether they — I — he (for the photographer is among his subjects) acknowledge it or not. We no longer study the art of dying, a regular discipline and hygiene in older cultures; but all eyes, at rest, contain that knowledge. The body knows. And the camera shows, inexorably. The Palermo photographs — which precede these portraits in time — complete them, comment upon them. Peter Hujar knows that portraits in life are always, also, portraits in death. I am moved by the purity and delicacy of his intentions. If a free human being can afford to think of nothing less than death, then these *memento mori* can exorcise morbidity as effectively as they evoke its sweet poetry and its panic.

— Susan Sontag