

A Ménage à trois Gone Wrong Book Review of Sontag & Kael: Opposites Attract Me by Craig Seligman

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What do Susan Sontag and Pauline Kael have in common? They both wrote about film, they both lived and worked in New York in the 60s through to the 1990s, and oh yes, they are both women. For Craig Seligman, they also represented some kind of opposition, but ultimately the dialectical relationship that he sets up in this book has much more to do with his own agenda than with theirs. A journeyman film critic and journalist, Seligman got to know Kael quite well, and even sat by her beside in the last years of her life talking movies. Seligman has the utmost respect for Kael, whose hard-headedness and ability to “call them like she sees them” without catering to any kind of doctrine he tries desperately to emulate in his own writing. Unfortunately, he gets hopelessly bogged down in his attempts to write Sontag into the picture. Although he claims not to hate her, but in fact to “adore” her, “warts and all,” he can’t seem to get beyond a fairly superficial image.

Sontag is cool, if not supercool, the kind of lofty intellectual that “Kael refers to as inhuman.” But, Seligman immediately corrects himself: “In truth, Kael’s unfailing wisdom and her unfailing clarity of vision seem more inhuman. Sontag, for all her self-assurance and her maddening pride, has crashed through the world blindly, tripping and falling.” He acknowledges that both women deal in ideas, but he’s more interested in “what’s left over after their ideas,” a strategy that might work for Kael, but tends to belittle Sontag’s scholarship. He criticizes Sontag’s “self-righteousness,” her “harshness towards others,” her “snootiness” and “humourlessness,” and her refusal to embrace her bisexuality and fully out herself. As a gay man,

Seligman’s attraction to Kael and Sontag is more of a distorted form of identification. For him, to write like Sontag is to adopt a certain kind of messy ambivalence. Certainly Sontag is a writer who changed and altered her positions over time, tuned to the vicissitudes of shifts in the culture, usually in order to find the counter argument, to find the appropriate critique. Seligman fails to appreciate the subtleties of Sontag’s activism, preferring to dismiss some of her interventions on the question of taste as “twaddle.” As a portrait of Sontag, she comes out looking just a little smudged.

Neither Kael nor Sontag could be described as feminists in any activist sense of the term, and as Seligman notes, both were well embarked on their careers before the movement caught up with them. They might not have needed feminism, but they certainly didn’t take it for granted. Never shying away from addressing the sexual politics of the movies, Kael wrote more often from a specifically gendered point-of-view than did Sontag, who Seligman claims often wrote in a depersonalized neutered voice. After a fair job of summarizing their various statements on the feminist question, Seligman sums up by saying that neither woman had any tolerance for the pious platitude of 70s-era feminism. He quotes Sontag saying “Like all capital moral truths, feminism is a bit simple minded,” despite her contributions to the debate. She just wasn’t passionate about it. Kael, on the other hand, preferred the “naive politics” of a film like *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW*, because “her feelers for grassroots attitudes helped make her a master psychopathologist of American society.” In her review of the Bogdanovich film she remarks that the young girls are seen “only from the boy’s point of

view,” an admittedly prescient observation for 1971, if somewhat superficial.

Seligman has definitely done his homework, meticulously referring to obscure passages in the complete works of both Kael and Sontag. Towards the end of the book he even goes so far as to recall the exact times and places that he read his favourite books and essays over the course of his young and rambling life. These women seem to have been his closest female companions during his formative years, but that doesn't mean he has anything interesting to say about either one of them. On Sontag's novel *Death Kit*, for example, he says “it's surprisingly engaging for such a self-consciously modernist work. It even has flashes of humour... But I couldn't recommend it to a friend.” What kind of criticism is this? Early in the book he tries to get a handle on Sontag's theoretical orientation and critical agenda, but because of his preoccupation with Kael, he never gets very far. Where Sontag is oblique, Kael is direct; where Kael is polemical, Sontag is analytical. Her passion doesn't scorch; she always steps back; she could be “acute” on pop culture, but she wrote far too little about it.

One section of the book is devoted to Kael and Sontag's critics, or rather to Seligman defending his heroines from their critics, of which they had many. Sontag may have had to “eat more crow” than Kael over the years, but that's because she was a polemicist. Seligman argues somewhat convincingly that both women tended to take the blame for “the decline of culture” due to their lack of respect for the canons of high art and art cinema. He shows in some detail how thoroughly they enraged people, although rather than showing exactly how and why they championed popular culture, Seligman gets bogged down in the pettiest details of who misquoted who, and whose anti-intellectualism is the most annoying. One has to wonder by the end of this rehashing of diatribes whether there are any critics out there, besides Seligman himself, who actually appreciated and endorsed the work of these two women.

Despite their enormous differences in taste, in readers and in critical objectives, it's true that both Kael and Sontag pissed people off. But on such different levels! You have to wonder to what extent their orbits even overlapped. Kael annoyed the “young men of Movie” in 1963 with her famous “Circles and Squares” essay on the auteur theory, a theory that she describes as an “attempt by adult males to justify staying inside the small range of experience of their boyhood and

adolescence...” Sontag's bombshell was dropped on Feb. 6, 1982 at Town Hall in Manhattan, during a talk in which she denounced communism as a species of fascism. She intended it to be a critique of the left, but she badly misjudged her audience, who were looking for new strategies of left-wing solidarity in the face of the crisis in Poland. She seemed only to leave herself open to challenges of historical ignorance, and was accused of selling out the left altogether. Seligman defends her by saying that it was a very personal renunciation of cherished ideals, and “they probably didn't know how deeply she had dug herself in with Cuba and North Vietnam.” Seligman also relates how virulent was the response to her *New Yorker* editorial following the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. As the first prominent intellectual to advocate reason over passion, she gained the respect of many, although Seligman chooses to focus on her right-wing attackers.

Seligman admits that the scope and sweep of Sontag's literary output was significantly more vast than Kael's, who never deviated from her chosen medium of the cinema. Kael may have attempted to take the nation's pulse through its movie screens, but her diagnoses always seem rather reductive. Sontag looked to photography and AIDS, cancer and genocide, for her pronouncements on the state not only of the nation, but of the human race. Yes, both women took the cinema seriously and provided foundational texts for its serious study, but Seligman is no help in assessing what their contribution really was. Perhaps there is another book yet to be written about these two remarkable writers, maybe by a writer who can leave his own persona at the door and stop worrying who he likes better, and if, because he really likes Kael better, that makes him slightly stupid.

Who really cares how cool Sontag is? Who cares how smart Kael is? Towards the end of the book, Seligman suggests that it may be about writing and style, and he poses the question of whether criticism might be art, slyly pointing to his own stylized prose. But Seligman's writing is extremely frustrating, as he says nothing without immediately qualifying it or completely contradicting himself in the next paragraph—or changing the subject to Pauline Kael—and it is hardly a model for critical artistry. In the end, his book does make you appreciate how Kael and Sontag managed to carve out such prominent places in the world of cultural criticism. They understood popular culture and the movies so differently though, that it hardly seems fair to push them together simply because of their gender. They were by no means the first or only

women to write about film and popular culture; and yet their careers tended to coincide with the emergence of intellectuals as celebrities, and precisely because they were among the very few women who were not easily dismissed as “feminists,” they ranked fairly highly in that culture of celebrity. It will take another kind of study to assess their contributions within the context of arts journalism since the 1960s.

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