

Susan Sontag's Readers: Respond, Remember, Re-Read

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In the two decades before her death, Susan Sontag appeared to lose interest in the cinema, although she had briefly been a film maker herself. She seldom wrote about contemporary directors, and in one of her essays she went so far as to argue that the age of cinephilia had ended. The turning point in her career may have been *On Photography*, which manifests a great deal of ambivalence about photographic images, and which adopts a somewhat moralistic tone. (This was also about the time when Sontag began to define herself as a novelist rather than an essayist.) At any rate, the book on photography is in sharp contrast with her important early essays on movies in *Against Interpretation*. To borrow the Arnoldian terminology of her famous essay on camp, we might say that the late writing on photography is Hebraic, whereas the early writing on film is Hellenic. For me, Sontag was at her best in the latter mode, when she was writing about the cultural implications of the sensuous qualities of movies. Whether in her superb commentaries on Bergman and Godard or in her brilliant anatomy of the fascist aesthetic in Riefenstahl, she was both a gifted stylist and an intense intellectual pleasure. In retrospect, her essays on camp and on science fiction pictures are important signposts of cultural history—a kind of riposte to Clement Greenberg's austere modernism. Nevertheless, Sontag was also a modernist, and an extremely important writer on continental literature and theory. One of the major critics of the twentieth century, she will be read far into the future.

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