

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

Robert Sklar

Back in the 60s, when I was auditioning for the rapidly obsolescing role of man of letters, I reviewed Susan Sontag's first two books of essays in liberal/left periodicals—*Against Interpretation* in *The Progressive* (April 1966) and *Styles of Radical Will* in *The Nation* (June 2, 1969). I've just reread those pieces, for the first time in well over 30 years, on the occasion of this comment; rather dispiritingly, their tone seems to be channeling the voice of Edmund Wilson. I mention them because, like many others in that era with literary and cultural history backgrounds, I was just then becoming interested in film criticism, and I wanted to see what I might have said about her film essays at the time. The answer is, not much, although I did praise her as a critic of films (*Against Interpretation*) and express admiration for her essay on Godard (*Styles of Radical Will*).

This is, I know, a symposium on Sontag's significance and influence, and on such occasions one should speak only in glowing and respectful terms. The truth of the matter, however, or at least one truth, is that as academic film studies emerged in the years following Sontag's first two non-fiction books, her film essays seemed to slip to the side of the dominant discourses, to appear increasingly belletristic, no less than my own jejune reviews of her. In later years the only one of her pieces that I chose to write about was "Fascinating Fascism" (published in 1974), and I took issue with her formulation that "*Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* are undoubtedly superb films (they may be two of the greatest documentaries ever made), but they are not really important in the history of cinema as an art form." Sontag, in my view, did not take sufficiently into account how ideology and propaganda compromise the

artistry of those works. Her hyperbolic overvaluation of these works as art relates to the contradictions in her writings about the relationship between politics and aesthetics, about which much has been said.

From those many years ago, what stands out in my memory of reading her film criticism for the first time is her essay from *Styles of Radical Will* on "Bergman's *Persona*." It was my first experience of film criticism with which I could simultaneously disagree and learn from; absorb her insights while also dissenting from them. It would take more than the space available here to analyze the forms of rhetoric and style on her part that permitted (perhaps encouraged) such a reading, but I have found few, if any, other critics who enable such productive disputation, rather than simply evoking agreement with, or rejection of, their views. In this sense her film criticism can't be said to have had much influence; but it has not lost its significance.

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