

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

E. Ann Kaplan

I never actually met Susan Sontag, in the sense of being introduced to her or shaking her hand. However, I often saw her on the New York streets around Greenwich Village and elsewhere, and one evening not long ago I actually sat back to back with her at Le Jardin Bistro—a small Soho restaurant my husband and I love. It was one of those moments when I wanted to approach her as we left, and say something about the importance of her work to me, or just “hello;” but I am so conscious that famous people need privacy that I restrained myself. I did not know that Sontag was seriously ill, so her passing came as a shock.

Reflecting on her contributions over the years, I realized once again the importance of the kind of intellectual Sontag was, and also that such figures are no longer emerging. The much vaunted (and now desired) “Public Intellectual” seems (at least in the United States) to belong to the recent past. Figures around the journal *Partisan Review* (where I interned while at Rutgers University) provide examples of these intellectuals from the pre-and post World War II eras. Sontag is the last of a couple of generations of such figures who did not necessarily belong to a university, but functioned as smart independent observers and cultural commentators.

A voracious reader and viewer of images, Sontag roamed culture like a prowler, sensing and then seizing on aspects of culture before they were formulated or fashionable. Her 1964 “Notes on Camp” is a perfect example of Sontag at her best: The essay prefigures Queer Studies and even postmodernism. Indeed, it would be interesting to juxtapose her essay with the

work of academics like Teresa de Lauretis and Fredric Jameson. Like Jameson’s 1988 “Postmodernism and Consumer Culture,” “Notes on Camp” shows vast knowledge of western cultures and concern with teasing out new kinds of thinking and experiencing. In the process, Sontag almost produces a sensibility that did not properly exist before.

But Sontag was not an academic at heart, even if academics found her essays provocative and useful places to work out from. Her 1974 essay, “Fascinating Fascism,” was certainly read in film classes in the early days of Film Studies, and is to be found in many film anthologies from the 70s. The impossible dilemma Sontag exposes in that essay about artist and film director Leni Riefenstahl, who made beautiful films for Hitler embodying his hateful fascist ideology, lead to years of debate. Sontag discusses the energies (including sex) behind beautiful propaganda on the left as well as the right, by the way, and provoked thinking about whether or not a film could be aesthetically pleasing and about violence and hate. The essay cut to the core of definitions of aesthetics, and again preceded by many years current heated debates about aesthetic form and the Holocaust.

With *On Photography*, Sontag was again ahead of later interest by media scholars. In that book as in others, Sontag’s apparent musings about a phenomenon in fact cut to the core of essential aspects. Her brilliant mind was evidently able to arrive at core issues through traveling along its own pathways, not relying on earlier research as such, but emerging from a life-long absorption in the voracious reading and looking already

noted. Important is her ability to trust her own moral, political and aesthetic responses in ways we find hard today, and not be afraid to include personal experiences as “evidence.” Sontag’s brief personal reflection in *On Photography* on her reaction to first seeing photographs of the concentration camps as a teenager stayed with me because it is so close to my own experiences in first encountering the holocaust via Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog*. But the insight was not just personal: it raised the crucial issue of vicarious trauma, and the life-long impact that such trauma can have on individuals.

Sontag’s last book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, follows up on issues broached in *On Photography* and raises important ethico-political questions that were useful for my trauma research. In her book, Sontag reminds us that film and TV images change how we see the world: the fact that we are “not totally transformed” by images of atrocity, says Sontag, “does not impugn the ethical value of an assault by image” (116). “Images,” she says, “have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching.” “There is nothing wrong,” she continues, “with standing back and thinking.”

Sontag continued up to the end to “stand back and think.” This position enabled her to address topics at the forefront of politics and culture. Her brilliant, creative mind kept working on crucial contemporary issues and their public importance. Above all, she kept on thinking. We will miss her ground-breaking insights.

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