

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

Carl Rollyson

“Fascinating Fascism” is a Sontag essay that I think will endure. She is at her provocative best, revising her view of Riefenstahl. Whereas her earlier comments emphasized that the form of Riefenstahl’s films made them art, her later remarks took the filmmaker to task for her content. Was Sontag contradicting herself? I suppose, though if one reads her essay “Against Interpretation” carefully, it is clear that she thought there were periods when critics ought to emphasize content over form. She was a polemical writer, who tended to swing away from the pieties of the moment, and to argue against herself. Sometimes this tendency was admirable; sometimes, I think, it was a sign of confusion. But the important point is that she knew how to start arguments. Her film criticism will always have heuristic value.

Carl Rollyson’s film criticism has appeared in “Magill’s Cinema Annual”, “Video Hound”, and is the co-author of “Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon” (Norton, W.W. & Co., 2000) and the author of “Reading Susan Sontag: A Critical Introduction to her Work” (Ivan R. Dee, 2002). He teaches classes in documentary film at Baruch College, The City University of New York.