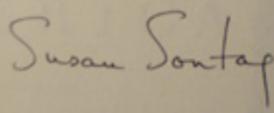




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Susan Sontag's Readers Respond, Remember, Re-read :: JEAN BRUCE



14 February 2005

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There are few aspects of modern film that Susan Sontag didn't address. She was well-known as a theorist, critic, director and writer and her words are deserving of attention from anyone who shares her passion for cinema. While I place myself in that category, I admit that I've been equally inspired by some of her less film-specific writings.

One of her best works is "Against Interpretation" (1963). It is a paper on art criticism that also provides an historical context for modern film analysis. In it, Sontag argues that content-based criticism doesn't tell us anything new about art. The reason, she says, is that content-based criticism has a long history of positioning art as a poor imitation of reality. It reduces the art to the interpretation of a critic-of-the-moment, whose interminable search for an explanation or meaning outside the work does no service to the work itself.

Sontag's main objection to "interpretation" is that the critic, or "interpreter," inherits the role of uncovering "what's behind" the illusion of art and therefore assumes superiority over the art and the befuddled masses who don't know what the "thing" means. Like the cleric to the illiterate masses of yesteryear, the interpreter can impose meaning on the art rather than extract ideas from it. Sontag is, in my eyes, against hegemony rather than interpretation, per se.

Sontag identifies how "interpretation" oppresses art's inherent creativity. From old Platonic and Aristotelian methods of dealing with art's mimetic function or affect or to grid-like hermeneutic approaches that continued to define art criticism into the late 50s, what is troubling about some renditions of criticism are their prescriptive elements. Such "interpretation" can be reductive when it is used to play connect-the-dots in order to track certain tendencies, such as the Oedipal trajectory of the so-called classical realist narrative of Hollywood cinema.

Sontag suggests that we focus more attention on reconnecting content and form. She defines form, in a footnote, as temporal and spatial, as well as contextual. Thus, given the nature of cinema, it is arguably the ideal site for practicing Sontag's descriptive version of analysis. She also wants us to see the sensuality of the film medium, rather than justify its existence, which doesn't happen when we confuse a film with a theory or reduce an aesthetic experience to a single element.

Sontag is implicitly returning to some very old ideas about the affect of art, perhaps the rhetoric and poetics of Longinus, especially as it relates to the immediacy of the cinematic experience. In fact, Sontag herself may seem old-fashioned to us now. Unlike Longinus, however, she is neither "afraid" of how the art will affect or trick us nor of what the cinema will reveal. Rather, her fear lies in what may be obscured when critics fail to describe adequately what is before them.

With this paper, Sontag, forever, set a tone for how academics have used "close analysis" in film. She espouses analysis that is faithful to the text, which is well worth retaining and reconsidering today. In retrospect, the central thesis of "Against Interpretation" provided the critical context for how film studies programs approached analysis in the mid-to-late 60s. As such, it belongs in the canon of critical film writing and should be required reading for every first year film student.

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