

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

Adrian Martin

Deep Down

For reasons that are personal and obvious to me—but hard to explain to anybody else—avant-garde cinema sometimes coincides, in my mind, with an intimation of Apocalypse. And Susan Sontag has something to do with this association.

Let me give an example. The strangest film I have seen lately is Kerry Conran's *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004). Early on, long before the blue-screen folly of this special-effects enterprise wears out its welcome, there is a scene where Gwyneth Paltrow has a secret rendezvous with a snitching German scientist—in a movie theatre (Radio City Music Hall, in fact) that happens to be playing the classic *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

The good Doctor speaks in hushed tones of the “terrible things” he and his colleagues had been forced to do by a mad genius-scientist named Totenkopf (represented, spookily, by the digitised remains of Sir Larry Olivier). The rest of the film expends a great deal of energy in running away from this obvious allusion to Nazi medical experiments and the Holocaust.

For any fan of the Australian avant-garde, this Radio City scene is doubly disquieting. In a masterpiece of the short film form by Jackie Farkas, *The Illustrated Auschwitz* (1992), the audio recording of an Auschwitz survivor's testimony is juxtaposed, on the image track, with refilmed fragments of *The Wizard of Oz*. For most of the film, this association seems strained, a merely cute or even horribly tasteless exercise in free-

associative, second-degree surrealism. But when the survivor's account reaches its trembling conclusion, everything falls into place: on being released from the camps into freedom, this woman's first act was to immediately go and see Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*. And those famous, ringing words—“there's no place like home”—suddenly held a terrible meaning for that solitary, traumatised spectator who knew there would never again be any home for her like there once was.

What kind of film analysis (however briefly sketched or summarised here) is this? One that freely connects Hollywood blockbusters and experimental shorts in pursuit of a fleeting, transmutating thought, idea or motif—the kind of analysis that Susan Sontag once performed so radically and so well, especially in the 60s. And today, reflecting on Sontag's legacy as a writer and intellectual, I realise that this is a mode of analysis I am quite nostalgic over, as it is largely missing from the contemporary landscape.

These days, reflection on film has been divided in two—into *cultural studies* on the one hand, and *cinema studies* on the other. Each one lacks what the other can offer. While cultural studies goes on talking about social reflections, ideology, subculture, and so on, with precious little sense of the intricate materiality of texts, cinema studies has retreated into a neo-formalism, into an obsession with ‘great’ films and directors. But it was not always that way: critics from Parker Tyler and Raymond Durnat to Judith Williamson and Richard Dyer, from the 40s through to the 80s (and sometimes beyond), showed us the many supple ways that these

realms of culture and text could be interrelated.

In the mid 80s, the avant-garde and the Apocalypse again came mutually knocking at my door. A gifted young post-punk, Pop Art animator, Paul Fletcher, planned to make a meta-sci-fi piece called *Space Invaders*. He wished to do some theoretical reading in preparation, and asked for my recommendations and commentaries. I put him onto Sontag's essay "The Imagination of Disaster", in her 60s collection *Against Interpretation*—a piece essentially on science-fiction cinema, and its imagery of inter-galactic catastrophe. And it is a fascinating piece to re-read today, in this climate where very few people proceed in the way she once proceeded.

Sontag chases an idea—how art depicts disaster—through many, many film titles (and other artistic, literary, historical and philosophic references), including the trashiest and most obscure of SF films. Even a strange movie I saw as a child and have vainly sought ever since, the lofty, two-dollar *Invasion of the Humanoids*, is there! Finding masterpieces or great auteurs is not Sontag's agenda here; but covering the ground and intellectually working the territory certainly is.

Sontag breaks these films down structurally, compares their plots to mythic structures, ventures a few political observations (she dislikes their rhetoric of a 'good, just war', a chilling idea in 2005), and ends on what would become the quintessential gesture of ambivalence in modern cultural studies: such popular art, she reckons, offers at once a nightmare of anxiety and the fantasised hope of a future. It is still an illuminating idea—and one worth pursuing deep down into the cultural by-ways that Sontag clearly enjoyed travelling, with or without the alibi of Camp.

When I eventually saw the completed Super-8 epic *Space Invaders* in 1986, I was very taken with the fact that Sontag's essay was scarcely visible in it. Paul Fletcher had 'pulverised' the text, just as he had pulverised dozens of sci-fi films, mythologies and clichés, in order to mix up the material he needed for his work. In fact, perhaps no viewer but myself would have been aware that the filmmaker had even consulted Sontag's piece. This is exactly as it should be: art is not the illustration of theory, and movies (of every kind) routinely outrun the protocols of critical writing. Nonetheless, Sontag was there, dwelling and hovering in the 'deep structure' of this avant-garde film. Just as she has entered the deep structure of our culture, still holding out her shining example of a critical art.

Adrian Martin is the film critic for *The Age* (Melbourne, Australia). He is the author of *Phantasms* (1994), "Once Upon a Time in America" (1998), "The Mad Max Movies" (2003) and co-editor (with Jonathan Rosenbaum) of "Movie Mutations: The Changing Face of World Cinephilia" (2003). He is also the co-editor of the online film journal *Rouge*.