

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

Jerry White

During the six years that I taught “Fundamentals of Film” at the University of Alberta, I would always start with Susan Sontag. Students would read the “Melancholy Objects” chapter from her book *On Photography*, along with John Berger’s essay “Uses of Photography.”

Part of the reason for this was analytical. “Melancholy Objects” is great, because it so efficiently and completely complicates conventional understandings of photography’s claim to truth. Sontag wrote that “Photographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real. They are clouds of fantasy and pellets of information.” Learning to reconcile the clouds with the pellets is crucial for understanding cinematic aesthetics too, so I thought it was important to get students off on a Sontagian foot.

But a big part of the reason was rhetorical. “Fundamentals of Film” was constituted as an introduction to film theory; therefore, students read a lot of *really* badly written material. This is unavoidable; my purpose in that introductory class was to give students an introduction to the basics of film studies’ disciplinary literature, and the fact of the matter is that a lot of that literature is turgid and borderline-impenetrable. But Sontag helped show that it didn’t need to be that way. Her writing was just as sophisticated just as ambitious in terms of analytic scope, but it was pleasurable to read in a way that academic writing only rarely is. “Fascinating

Fascism,” a Sontag article that I now assign every year in the “Film History” class that I teach, is all about the relationship between form and ideology, a veritable obsession for the film theorists of the 70s. And yet, it is both far more eloquent than any of that material, and it convincingly holds that the stakes of these debates are very high indeed, a contention that film theory of the 1970s also seemed enamoured of, but rarely bothered to spell out in any rational way. How do Baudry or Dayan explain the ideological importance of form? Well, you see, if you could just realise that Hollywood films don’t really reveal absolutely everything, you might be motivated to... um.... overthrow capitalism or something; hey, it worked in May 1968, didn’t it (didn’t it?). How does Sontag explain the ideological importance of form? When an artist starts with Nazi propaganda, then moves on to the Olympics, then after a long absence moves on to images of African people that look like *National Geographic* on speed, and this progression feels natural and consistent, we must acknowledge that Nazi heritage and, since the content is so variable, contemplate the aesthetics’ connection to the greatest horrors of the 20th century. Which one of those formulations sounds more “historicised” or “engagé”?

It’s no small matter that Berger dedicates his essay “Uses of Photography” to Sontag. Both of them, despite their differing viewpoints, were part of a tradition of criticism that I very much want my students to be exposed to. Sontag, like Berger, was a renaissance intellectual, passionate about new forms (like cinema and photography) and rigorously engaged with tradition and history, in addition to being a novelist

and a filmmaker (although it must be said that Berger was a lot more successful than Sontag on this front).

Such intellectuals are, at the risk of sounding prematurely nostalgic— a dying breed; in the United States the tradition of the voracious intellectual speaking to a broad public is basically passing on. *The New York Review of Books* and the books pages of the *New Republic*— both old Sontag venues—remain stalwart-like, and *The Baffler* holds a great deal of promise indeed. But it is still difficult to get over the sense that there are no heirs to the much-fabled New York Intellectuals, nobody to carry the torch of Mary McCarthy or Robert Warshow. Sontag carried forward their tradition nobly; was there, in the United States, anyone else?

With Sontag's death, it's probably time to let go of the misty romanticism of the New York Intellectuals. But if I'm going to do that, I need to find someone who is as compelling a counterweight for academic criticism. As I try to introduce students to still-living currents of English-language, non-academic criticism, I feel like I've still got options from the Anglophone world; Berger, Salman Rushdie, A.S. Byatt, and even Young Turks like James Wood are all exemplars of the non-academic intellectual. But there is no American to fill that role of the exemplar, not anymore. Stanley Crouch jumps to mind momentarily, but he's just not in Sontag's league; Greil Marcus is a worthy contender as a critic, although he's not a novelist/filmmaker/director like Sontag was. Her death does not point to the end of the polymath public intellectual, any more than the death of Stan Brakhage meant the end of avant-garde film. But make no mistake; both deaths mark the end of American eras.

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