

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

Greg Taylor

For me (as doubtless for many others) the quintessential Sontag line, and a sign of her lasting importance as a film critic, is the conclusion of 1964's "Against Interpretation," where she says, simply, "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." How right she was: in fact we may need an erotics of art (and of film in particular) now more than ever. Like the other great film essayist of the period, Parker Tyler, Sontag possessed a profound sense of cinema's aesthetic nature, and artistic possibilities; if her early championing of a "new sensibility" of unified low/high pop culture may now make her seem like a postmodern prophet, we need to recall her insistence that she was not seeking a "renunciation of standards" so much as "a new, more open way of looking at the world and at things in the world, our world." This in the end was Sontag's mission of the 60s: a vanguard renewal of ways of seeing, and ways of feeling, among those who took culture seriously. And like Tyler, she was able to do her best work within a closing window of opportunity when journalistic essays were still allowed to be both rigorous and accessible, and film analysis had not yet been swept under the warm rug of academia. How much the better we are for it. Who would deny that her essays on Bresson, Godard, Bergman, and Resnais are among the most lucid to address these imposing figures? Or that her explorations of silence and style still offer us tantalizing—if largely unmapped—avenues for aesthetic exploration? It is a final testament to Sontag's importance that she didn't pretend to know all the answers. In truly respecting the complexities of works she faced, she knew it was hard enough to ask the right questions.

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