

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

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Stage Beauty deals with the transition in English theater history that occurred in 1660, when legislation declared that female roles would no longer be performed by boy actors and mandated that they be taken by actresses instead. The film thus addresses conceptions of gender, sexuality and performance that, though historical, remain relevant today. Perhaps the film's most significant moment happens when Edward Kynaston, the last of the great boy actors, asks actor-manager Thomas Betterton, if Margaret Harris, his former dresser who has usurped his roles, is any good on the stage. Betterton wisely responds that Kynaston is the last of his kind and Harris the first of hers. He implies that Kynaston is at the apex of an entire tradition of training in an art form suddenly rendered obsolete, while novelty exempts Harris's performances from such criteria. Susan Sontag combined being the last and the first; by understanding that her intellectual career occurred on the cusp of the shift from print to screen modes of publicity, we can better appreciate her achievements.

When Sontag went to Sarajevo in 1993, she directed a production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Exerting her political commitments in the name of culture, she went, in other words, primarily as a literary figure. Her mode of political engagement was based on an older, print-based, model of the intellectual, one familiar from the days of the *Partisan Review*, where in 1963 she had initially published "Notes on 'Camp'", her springboard into the public eye. Accounts of the public intellectual usually adhere to a print-based model of the intellectual: that is, they take print to be the primary medium of intellectual expression,

an expression underwritten by print's purported independence from the market. Indeed, Sontag was the last of the breed whose print orientation permitted a double commitment both to cultural élitism (traditional standards, avant-gardism, and a celebration of High Modernism) and to left politics.

Recent critiques of Sontag's political engagements as a writer-intellectual by Bruce Robbins, Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock, vent a fair amount of hostility towards her without registering the source of their disappointment in the fact that this position is no longer sustainable in the media age.¹ Edward Said would seem to have recognized this when he placed Sontag in the company of the men Russell Jacoby dubbed "the last intellectuals," all a decade or more older than her, including Philip Rahv, Alfred Kazin, Irving Howe, Daniel Bell, William Barrett and Lionel Trilling.²

But Sontag was also the first to make a case for the intellectual legitimacy of pop culture, particularly screen culture. Although the shift from print to screen modes of publicity is usually understood as a rift with few, if any, continuities between the media and the screen, especially television, is frequently blamed for the demise of intellectual debate in our own day, Sontag bridged print and screen modes of publicity. She brokered the arrival of French theory and film in New York. She celebrated camp, sensibility, and theorizing from the perspective of her personal likes and dislikes, especially in *Against Interpretation*, her first collection, though her magisterial style went a long way to disguise the personal when it proposed style itself as the key to meaning. She wrote and directed her own films that,

like her novels, will probably remain secondary to her achievements as an essayist. And she did all this as an American woman, under the sign of glamour.

In a recent review of Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, by all accounts a groundbreaking new book that describes how Paris became the capital of this world republic, William Deresiewicz wonders why American culture and the American intelligentsia have become so closed off from the rest of the world. Susan Sontag, he observes, acted as a bridge to Europe. She was able to link old and new worlds, in part, by occupying the position of last and first. Last *or* first: in *Stage Beauty*'s ultimately heterosexualizing narrative, each alternative is problematically incomplete without the other. Last *and* first: Sontag's occupation of both positions at once is her signal achievement.

As Deresiewicz concludes, no one has taken Sontag's place; under the Bushes' regime of the new world order, the implication is no one could.³ But perhaps no one could also because of the ways Sontag occupied that place. Whereas the double orientation of last and first should make moot the demand that she announce her sexual preferences in her work, when lastness does not evoke nostalgia and firstness does not exempt evaluation it also becomes possible to see that Sontag's inimitable style performs a singularity of last and first which points mainly to itself. As a result, her career does less to suggest the continuities across media than their differences.

"Gender, Theatre and the Origin of Criticism from Dryden to Manley" (Cambridge University Press, 2002). "How to be an Intellectual in the Age of Television: The Lessons of Gore Vidal" will be published by Duke University Press in the Fall of 2005.

NOTES

1 Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York: New York University Press, 1999) ch.1 and Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock, *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon* (New York: Norton, 2000).

2 Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (New York: Random House 1994) 70.

3 William Deresiewicz, "The Literary World System," *The Nation* Jan. 3, 2005, 21-23.

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