

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

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Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" taught me how to talk about movies. I occasionally teach a college course on the aesthetics of camp in film and literature. Many of my students, born two decades after Sontag's essay was published, in 1964, associate camp with kitsch, with irony, with derision. For them—and, I should add, for many filmgoers of all ages in New York City, where I live—appreciating a movie as camp means laughing at it. Yet "Notes on 'Camp'" encourages the reader to drop the defensive posture of spectatorial superiority. Sontag writes:

Camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation—not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. [...] Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn't sneer at someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures.

Appreciation—not judgment: this is crucial when learning how to respond to older films with acting styles that seem unfamiliar, strange, over-the-top. When my students watch Alla Nazimova's *Salome* from 1922 (for many it is the first silent film they have ever seen) they display admiration for—not mockery of—Nazimova's fantasia. Discussions of Joan Crawford's performance in *Johnny Guitar* are not chortle-filled dismissals but thoughtful analyses of, as Sontag describes it, "the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve."

"Camp is a *tender* feeling," Sontag emphasizes. Allowing oneself to feel tenderness when responding to decades-old cinema shows a certain kind of critical maturity. And so I shall remember tenderly my occasional

sightings of Sontag, a voracious cinephile her entire life, at various repertory movie houses in New York. I always wanted to thank her for her essay, for the ways it helped me think and write about film—for the ways she taught me to teach others how to appreciate, not judge.

Melissa Anderson is a freelance film writer living in New York City; she's a frequent contributor to "The Village Voice", "Time Out New York", and "The New York Sun". Her film writing has also appeared in "The New York Times", "Film Comment", "Cinema Scope", and "Cineaste". Additionally, longer film essays of her have appeared in "Studies in French Cinema", "Quarterly Review of Film and Video", and the book "Film and Literature: A Reader" (Blackwell, 2004). She occasionally teaches a course on the aesthetics of camp in film and literature at the New School for Social Research.