

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

**John Locke**

There have been, and will continue to be, many comments about the full range of Susan Sontag's contributions. My comments are more narrowly focused.

## **REEL CHANGES:**

My first observation concerns something about *Duet for Cannibals* which I believe never would have occurred to Sontag. It is actually a part of the film, and it is not an interpretation so that much is OK. She may or may not have been part of the original decision about it, but her design of the images made it possible. This mysterious element is not a riddle but a reel change.

I saw her first film *Duet for Cannibals* (1969) at the old New Yorker cinema on Upper Broadway in New York City. It was probably 1969 or 1970 and may have actually been the original New York theatrical run of the film. At the time I was combining projecting for most of the New York University graduate Cinema Studies classes with fellowships to make my way through graduate school.

As a projectionist, I was aware of reel change marks. They are on the projected film, and I saw what was on the screen. Towards the end of Sontag's film, a spaced pair of reel change marks came along in their normal upper right corner position. The projectionist changed to the second projector, and immediately there was an image of a man's head in an upside down, close shot. As a projectionist, I knew what had happened. The film reel on this second projector had not been rewound and was being projected tails out. That produces an

upside down image, and I had seen that too many times working with non-professional projectionists. The projection of the film had thus been ruined for me.

This thinking took place in a moment of time, but it was a distinct and immediate impression. Then, suddenly, the camera began to move back to reveal that the man was actually standing on his head. So, following the cut at the reel change, there was a single shot starting with a close-up of an upside down head and moving back to show a man unexpectedly standing on his head. In any case, it was an interesting shot, but it was highly, wildly unlikely that it was positioned at a reel change for any particular reason, aesthetic or otherwise.

For me this experience of watching *Duet for Cannibals* has served as a reminder that there are reels of films being projected. Once films were segmented into 1000 foot reels, then there was a change to 2000 foot reels, and now the standard commercial projection is a continuous platter—one projector system, as we wait for digital projection to take over. Projected films have a texture, and the dirt and marks associated with reel changes are part of that texture. Susan Sontag's first film contains a reminder that reel changes actually could have been explored by filmmakers.

I am probably the only person in the world who remembers a particular reel change from a Susan Sontag film. Then again I may be the only person in the world who remembers a reel change from any film seen once more than 30 years ago. Before you say that reel changes are always aesthetically irrelevant, remember Hitchcock's *Rope*. A multitude of serious

writers have made wrong-headed claims about *Rope* because they failed to notice that it was segmented by the approximately 2000 foot lengths of the projection reels and that each projection reel ends and begins with a perfectly normal straight cut. *Rope* was designed around the length of its projection reels. Segmentation for projection is not without interest.

I have seen thousands of films. Most are forgotten, but *Duet for Cannibals* remains in my memory for a peripheral reason: the momentary experience of the placement of one shot. That may say something about the unexpected endurance of films.

#### APHORISMS:

I always direct students to read Sontag's 1964 essay "Against Interpretation." After the essay has been read, I then tell them that for a comprehensive treatment of interpretation, they need to read David Bordwell's work on the subject. Sontag's essay may not be the most rigorous discussion of interpretation, but it remains the best introduction to issues which need to be raised. It contains statements which should resonate in the reader's mind after the specific arguments have faded. The lasting importance of the essay may be found in these beautifully written statements:

"... the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities."<sup>1</sup>

"...interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone."<sup>2</sup>

"Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all."<sup>3</sup>

"The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means."<sup>4</sup>

"In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art."<sup>5</sup>

These read like aphorisms, and this now seems appropriate. To be able to read an essay and find a series of memorable statements is one of the ways that an essay can be judged to be successful. Philosophy has a long tradition of producing aphorisms, and I believe that Susan Sontag should have been pleased to have been part of this philosophical tradition.

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#### NOTES

**1** Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*. (New York: Delta, 1967), 7.

**2** Ibid., 8.

**3** Ibid., 14.

**4** Ibid., 14.

**5** Ibid., 14.

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