

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

Dudley Andrew

After the new wave had broken all along the cultural shore, you could see young people cavorting — or floundering—in the sea of cinema. I was one of those who floundered, yet nevertheless refused to swim back. Looking around desperately, I latched onto a brilliant buoy close at hand, Susan Sontag. She was virtually Truffaut's age, with an ear to prophets of the earlier generation, like Ingmar Bergman, who were still admonishing our culture and the art we cared about. I found her wherever I could: in the *Partisan Review*, *The Tulane Drama Review*, *Film Quarterly*, *Sight and Sound*, and *Tri-Quarterly* (where my own name appeared in print for the first time, there on the cover below hers, just as I had dreamed it might). Sontag muscled open a space where you could think and write about films that at first seemed to close off discussion. She gave us the directors—most famously Godard—that we made our own over the next decade. Going back to these studies, only her analysis of *Persona* still shimmers as a brilliant reading. Her other film essays don't pretend to be adequate to their objects and certainly don't try to possess them. Sontag wrote about and around Godard so as to feel at ease being in the same room as his images. Film Studies would soon enough institutionalize and discipline a discourse directly addressing modern cinema, but someone needed first to hollow out a volume where reflection about it could take place. Sontag did exactly that. And the fact that she never entered the discipline, that her articles, although canonical, never shaped a method, shows her more in tune with the spirit of the films than with that of the academy. Against interpretation, indeed! But for criticism.

Nearly a decade ago, when she penned her lugubrious “Decay of Cinema” piece for the *New York Times Magazine*, Sontag carefully distinguished between the decline of the artform and that of the culture that sustains it. Good movies there are aplenty (Truffaut said the same thing at the end of his life), but the feverish attention they once inspired has cooled. That attention can best be measured by reading the thermometer of criticism; what Sontag lamented was probably her own flagging investment in criticism and, more certainly, the yield of that investment in the wider culture. I have always taken the modern cinema to stretch from the end of WWII to the end of Viet Nam—1945 to 1975—believing it can be defined not only by the magnificent artworks of a litany of auteurs we love to name, but by the institutions that grew to showcase those works: film festivals, art theaters, ciné-clubs, film journals, and serious criticism. Naturally great critics pre-existed WWII, but their role simply supplemented a self-sustaining industry and belonged far more to the industry of journalism. Then came the complexity of modern films, each insisting on its distinctive originality. Critics suddenly played an essential role in the artistic economy, naming the films that needed to be seen and identifying the values one could discover in watching them. Sontag did this better than anyone else.

Her trick was to have located those values outside cinema, in Warhol's painting, in the theater of Brecht and Beckett, and in the essayistic, philosophical prose of proto-novelists like Leiris, and Cioran. She watched cinema with such figures in her head and so of course was attuned to distanciation, all-over style, fragmentation, askesis, and self-reflection. She also had the knack of

looking to cultural limits where interpretation might falter, as with pop art on one side and abstract art on the other. In cinema this came down to Godard and Bresson, whose very different styles she glorified as having been willed into existence. Their obtuseness gave her courage to try out new styles herself. And why not? Normal film criticism amounts to little more than the terminal redundancy in a system of rote repetition (a concept pitched to a producer, followed by a treatment, a screenplay, the découpage, then rehearsals, filming, and editing—each stage matching its predecessor). After this come the literal prints cloned from a master negative and sent out to theaters where the critic repeats in one form or another the original concept, a concept which, by the way, is seldom original at all, but rather a literary adaptation or a variant in a genre). Sontag, like the New Wave, wanted done with all that. She wanted originality, creativity, difficulty, and immediate pleasure, and she wanted all this at once. Her criticism, by turns sensual and abstract, followed the lead of someone like Alain Resnais, with comely surface texture and the structure of a rebus. The moral force of critical writing in the 1960s siphoned the moral pressure it proclaimed in the *mise-en-scène* of the most serious films of the day. Without criticism like Sontag's—yes, without her—modernist cinema would have been mere movies, perhaps the way things are today.

And what about today? In 1996 “The Decay of Cinema” should have been called the decay of film criticism, for *USA Today* had already led the trend, by now completely successful, to eliminate discursive film criticism altogether, replacing it with box office standings. In this era of market democracy why not let the people point to the films that need to be seen. Why not let the numbers speak without intermediation. Polls have taken over for political analysis. The same may as well apply to cinema. A number of fine critics still stay up nights worrying over their subjects and their words, but they know their role has changed. They are a cultural accoutrement, expendable in the postmodern cinema system. After all, most films, including arthouse fare, flaunt surface effects and eschew difficulty. Perhaps they fulfill the pleasure and promise of Camp that Sontag was the first to identify. The fact that she didn't bother to ask often after the health or character of the cinema of the 90s should make us wonder if, for a prophet like Sontag, the action hasn't moved elsewhere. In this case, are we better off following the cinema or shall we heave it over and follow Susan Sontag wherever she leads? There was a time when such a question would have been impossible, so interlinked was she with film. It's the decay of the moment that deserves lament, and it's

the memory of that moment and of that Sontag I shall ever hold out to whatever students care to listen to me.

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