

# Susan Sontag: the Search for an Aesthetics of Interpretation

DENIZE CORREA ARAUJO  
Universidade Tuiuti do Paraná



## Abstract

This study intends to investigate the nature of Susan Sontag's concept of criticism and the reception her proposal for an aesthetics of interpretation has had. Her call for an "erotics of art" dismisses hermeneutics to privilege a perceptual-emotional response. Her emphasis on form and avoidance of a "rooted" criticism seem to have "deterritorialized" (in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology) some critics. The suggestion of this essay is that Sontag's fragmentation is the very realm of postmodern exegesis, a kind of "stream of consciousness manqué," a post-Joycean or post-Woolfian technique which points out a new form in order to express a not-so-new content.

## Key words

erotics of art, rooted/rhizomatic criticism, deterritorialization.

## Resumo

Este estudo pretende investigar a natureza do conceito de crítica proposto por Susan Sontag e a reação que sua estética da interpretação provocou. Sua chamada para um "erotismo da arte" rejeita a hermenêutica para privilegiar uma resposta "perceptivo-emocional". Sua ênfase na forma e a rejeição de uma crítica "enraizada" parecem ter "deterritorializado" (usando a terminologia de Deleuze e Guattari) alguns críticos. A sugestão deste ensaio é que a fragmentação da autora é a verdadeira essência da exegese pós-moderna, uma espécie de "fluxo-de-consciência manqué", uma técnica pós-Joyceana ou pós-Woolfiana para ressaltar uma nova forma que venha a expressar um conteúdo não tão novo.

## Palavras-chave

erotismo artístico, crítica enraizada/rizomática, deterritorialização.

*'There is no such thing as a monogamous collector.  
Sight is a promiscuous sense. The avidg^e always  
wants more.*

The Volcano Lover

he statements above, taken from *The Volcano Lover* (1992), can well define the author, Susan Sontag, an avid writer who is well known as a critic and essayist, interested in photography, science-fiction, movies, happenings, fascist aesthetics, camp sensibility, and diseases, among other contemporary topics. Due to the diversity of her interests and the unsystematic nature of her work, Sontag does not really belong to any school and does not have followers (KENNEDY, 1990, p. 23). Among her many interests, Sontag has attempted to define an aesthetics of interpretation, which would not undermine or replace the work of art. When her essay "Against interpretation" was published, in 1964, the title misled many readers. The author is, in fact, against a certain kind of criticism, but as she herself points out: "I am not saying that works of art are ineffable, that they cannot be described or paraphrased. They can be. The question is how" ("AI", 1966, p. 12).<sup>1</sup> More concerned with style than with content, Sontag revives this old antithesis and questions whether the two concepts are really indissoluble. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nature of Sontag's concept of criticism and the reception her proposal for an aesthetics of interpretation has had. In Sontag, the emphasis on form over content and the concept of fragmentation should not be overlooked.

---

1. For the sake of easier reference, "AI" stands for the essay "Against interpretation", AI for the book of essays, and USS for the book *Under the sign of Saturn*.

Sontag, much as Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has to face the problem of "duplication." For her, criticism should not be a faithful restatement of the work of art in terms of content, but a way to "read" that allows the work of art to seduce, to express its power upon reason. Her call for "an erotics of art" ("AI", 1966, p. 14) was not repeated in other essays and this fact was used against her many times. However, a careful reading of her multiple references concerning the issue of criticism, proves that Sontag, following Benjamin's model, demystifies the "aura" of academic criticism to propose a kind of interpretation which can liberate art and rescue it from two other ways that are not ideal: "The old style of interpretation was insistent but respectful; it erected another meaning on top of the literal one. The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys" ("AI", 1966, p. 6).

Ultimately, Sontag has an aestheticized view of the world and implies that form should reveal content. She classifies high culture as basically moralistic, avant-garde as a struggle between moral and aesthetic passion, and camp as wholly aesthetic. The new sensibility she suggests is based on "synesthesias" such as perception, taste, sight, touch. Her idea of interpretation follows the approaches she uses for plots, which never have the usual linear inducements. She is against criticism which is "rooted" (as Deleuze and Guattari would call it)<sup>2</sup> and in search of "rhizomatic" criticism whose intention is not to dissect each component of the text but to apprehend what the text is in its totality.

Contrary to the pedagogic use of criticism, Sontag claims that, in serving as intermediary between the text and the audience, criticism undermines the autonomy of the work and reduces its power. Disavowing academic and scientific theorizing - the "rooted tree" of Deleuze and Guattari - Sontag proposes their "rhizome" - a pluralistic perspective that opens up

---

2. Deleuze and Guattari oppose the terms "rooted" and "rhizomatic" to differentiate works of art that have fixed roots and follow rigid rules from works that have no hierarchy.

other ways of seeing. Contrary to the kind of criticism that institutionalizes fixed rules or roots, Sontag's cultural criticism opens up new territory of thought and is as concerned with experience of form as with forms as experiences (KENNEDY, 1990, p. 39).

Richard Lacayo, in his essay "Stand Aside, Sisyphus," believes that all Sontag's work "aims at defining a vaporous but crucial notion, the modern sensibility." In his view, Sontag combines a "metropolitan taste, omnivorous and hard to satisfy, with a transatlantic mind, drawn to European writers and filmmakers" (LACAYO, 1988, p.86). In her pluralistic international sense of reviewing literature, Sontag attacks Anglo-American writers for being philistines, and praises James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, who she considers the two greatest English prose writers of the twentieth century (GORDIMER *et al.*, 1992, p. 140).<sup>3</sup>

Her negative attitude towards American writers and critics provoked reactions and she was accused of trendiness and submissiveness to the European tradition. She was also misinterpreted when charged of equating "art with style" and "thought subordinate to sensuality" (LACAYO, 1988, p. 88). Bruce Bawer, in his essay "That Sontag Woman," accuses her of cultural elitism:

*Susan Sontag is the sort of cultural elitist for whom the term often seems primarily to designate not selfless devotion to certain valued things that exist apart from oneself but, rather, membership in a select class of people, an aristocracy of the mind. It sometimes seems as if Susan Sontag's chief priority as an essayist is not to clarify, persuade, or illuminate, but to demonstrate*

---

3. "On Literary Tradition: A Symposium" is an article about discussions of literary tradition held at George Mason University on April 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, 1992. The panelists were Nadine Gordimer, David Kalstone, James Merrill, William Matthews, Myra Sklarew, Susan Sontag, D.M. Thomas, and Edmund White.

*to the world that she is the highest of the highbrows,  
an intellectual's intellectual, a breed apart from lesser  
scribblers* (BAWER, 1992, p. 30).

It is interesting to observe that Sontag is also criticized for her interest in pop culture. "The pseudoaristocratic patrilineage of camp can hardly be overstated," says Andrew Ross, in his essay "Uses of Camp." He implies that Susan Sontag likes the "three most questionable categories of American cultural taste: schlock, kitsch and camp," and that none of the three are of Anglo origin, or of a fixed category (ROSS, 1988, p. 9).<sup>4</sup>

Bower's deeper criticism, however, is of Sontag's "dubious, pretentious, self-evident provocative-sounding assertions," which, Bawer complains, are never fully supported. He finds that what she herself said, that she doesn't have the patience to develop an argument from a to b to c, is an excuse for her essays' discontinuity (BAWER, 1992, p. 30). This discontinuity or the fragmentation which characterizes her text is exactly what is considered her best feature by some critics and what links her to Roland Barthes.

"For Sontag, fragmenting and playing with her critical discourse is a formal response to the limits of interpretation," says Kennedy. "For Susan and Barthes, the interruptions of causality and chronology, the hovering between silence and language, are means not only of defamiliarizing, but of fending off any easy appropriation of their thoughts" (KENNEDY, 1990, p. 37). Both Sontag and Barthes are concerned with the pleasure of the text. For Barthes, "the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural" (BARTHES, 1975, p. 31). For Sontag, art's sensual capabilities should

---

4. Ross explains the origin of the three words: schlock is from Yiddish (literally, "damaged goods" at a cheap price), kitsch is from German, meaning petty bourgeois, and camp, more obscurely from the French "se camper," has a long history of upper-class English usage (Ross, 1988, p. 9).

provoke a dynamic reaction and trigger a continuum of sensibilities which is, as for Barthes, a state of becoming, never a static thought.

In "The Death of the Author," Barthes suggests the abolishing of the author, the critic, and the interpretation, "Everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered... the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced, writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning" (BARTHES, 1977, p. 147). The consequence, according to Patrick Parrinder, is to abandon "reading for meaning in favour of reading for pleasure" (PARRINDER, 1991, p. 62). As for Sontag, Parrinder believes that she argues that "criticism of modern art should revert to the tasks of formal analysis and surface description, to a recovery of the sensory immediacy of the works concerned," privileging evaluation over interpretation (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 63). Frank Kermode, in Parrinder's opinion, "recuperates and validates interpretation not only by conceding its necessary plurality, but by removing it from the sphere of cultural politics which Sontag invokes by her references to a cultural context" (*Idem, ibidem*). Kermode and Sontag, however, have a point in common: both redefine criticism as interpretation. In fact, in her essay "Against Interpretation," Sontag uses both terms interchangeably.

Another critic concerned with a definition for criticism is Lionel Trilling. For him, "the pleasure of criticism makes literature and its pleasure the more readily accessible." He believes that "the experience of the teacher proposes the possible experience of the student" (TRILLING, 1970, p. ix). While Barthes is interested in the reader's pleasure and Sontag in what the text is, not what it means, Trilling considers criticism a bridge between the text and the audience. What differs here is that, for Trilling, culture bring us "into accord with humanity" whereas for Sontag culture "should not be appealed to as a transcendental signified" (Kennedy, 1990, p. 26). She finds humanism an outmoded ideology.

Steven Connor mentions that poststructuralist critical theory "has the effect of focusing attention exclusively on matters of meaning, reading

and interpretation" (CONNOR, 1992, p. 52), having the work of Derrida as its main representative. Sontag's approach, however, differs from Derrida and Foucault. While the latter believes in transgression, Sontag sees no value in it. In relation to Derrida, Sontag refuses his idea of the "abyeme" where "no fixing of meaning is possible" (KENNEDY, 1990, p. 30).

Martin Green, in his essay "A New Sensibility?" compares Susan Sontag and Philip Rieff. He states that both "think that the art of the future will return to its essential function of releasing man's sensuality." Sontag identifies the dilemma of our culture – "the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability" (GREEN, 1966, p. 55), and "rejoices in the decline of conscience and the rise of aesthetic autonomy in the arts" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 56). But in her perspective, Art should not be assimilated into thought or, even worse, into Culture. She does not dismiss a reading of *Anna Karenina*, for instance, as an investigation of problems of love, marriage, and adultery, but she points out that "putting art to use" is trying to reduce it to a mere state of pedagogic or moral object. She again insists that the aesthetic sensibility is what Art is all about and how it should be evaluated. While Green criticizes Sontag's new ideas on interpretation based on aesthetic values, Robert Mazzocco praises Sontag's "ingenuous turns and twists" and her concern with a new, more open way of looking at the world and the things in the world (MAZZOCCO, 1966, p. 22). He defines Sontag's emphasis on form: "Miss Sontag thinks she is responding rightly and directly to a mood, while others are merely reacting to a clinical phrase." The point in discussion here is whether the tank patrolling the deserted street in *The Silence* was used as a phallic symbol by Bergman or not. A Freudian approach would certainly assert it, but this is the kind of interpretation Sontag tries to avoid because she believes it imposes meaning in an authoritative way. In this case, Mazzocco agrees with her, but he nonetheless criticizes her inconsistency: "in most of the essays (in "AI"), these distinctions between pure form and impure meaning are subject to around-the-clock alterations, some simply spidery, and some highly significant" (*Idem, ibidem*).



Mazzocco agrees with Sontag when she criticizes Ionesco's early plays because they are "about" meaninglessness: "In much of modern art one can no longer really speak of subject-matter.... Rather, the subject-matter is the technique" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 23). In fact, Sontag praises Samuel Beckett for "showing" the meaninglessness in an almost empty stage in *Waiting for Godot*, instead of "talking" about it. On the other hand, Sontag declared in an interview about her version of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo: "This is the anti-Beckett-as-director *Godot*..he [Beckett] got exactly what he wanted from the German actors but it's not the way I saw *Godot*. I wanted to direct it for all the emotions the play inspires in me, which are very passionate" (MUNK, 1993, p. 31 -6).<sup>5</sup> Judging from this attitude, Sontag may be said to have imposed her own reading to Beckett's play. The difference is that instead of using a well known approach (Marxist, Freudian, feminist), she uses her own "perceptual-emotional" response to the text. In this context, Sontag could be offending New Critics, whose major principle? are "the autonomy of the work of art, its resistance to paraphrase, its organic unity, its inevitably ironic use of language, and its welcoming of close reading" (MAKARYK, 1993, p. 120). She would be violating the work's resistance or the act of reading in the interpretation of texts. Interpretation is explained as "a subjective construction of knowledge" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 170) which seems to be the case in Sontag's own version of *Godot*.

Stephen Koch, in his essay "On Susan Sontag," defines her as the "pragmatist of estheticism...probably the most interesting (certainly the most disputed) general critic of the arts now writing in America" (KOCH, 1966, p. 153). He places her method as derived from the phenomenological critique that descends from French neo-Hegelianism. In fact, Sontag, though may not go as far as to say that art expresses

---

5. Erika Munk interviewed Susan Sontag on August 19, 1993, in Sarajevo, following an afternoon performance of *Waiting for Godot*.

divine meanings, seems to agree with Hegel's idea that "art's peculiar feature consists in its ability to represent in sensuous form even the highest ideas, bringing them thus nearer to the character of natural phenomena, to the senses, and to feeling" (RICHTER, 1989, p. 346). Koch implies, however, that she cannot be compared to Barthes because the American literary world is not the French one. At this point, the issue may not be one of comparison but of influence, since it was Sontag who first "discovered" Barthes for the American public.

By attacking a cold exegesis of meaning and reductionism, Sontag is not stating anything new, complains Jack Behar, in his essay "Against the Self" (1966, p. 349). His argument is that art has always had the power to modify consciousness and to organize modes of sensibility, from Dante to the Beatles. He wonders whether Sontag's "new sensibility" isn't just a "catchword in search of its redeeming reality." He believes that Sontag praises the novel that celebrates the moral of the individual life, "hence her attraction to Artaud, to the literature of violence, insanity, nightmare, and the cool suicidal ego of Michel Leiris." By comparing Sontag to Marshall McLuhan (though much less daring) in her commitment to the Lawrentian project of the transcendence of the Ego, Behar criticizes Sontag's "weakness" and "naiveté" in proposing an art "that through a severe reduction of means gives us the inexplicably transparent" surfaces of life [*idem, ibidem*, p. 350].

In regard to Sontag's claim for the need of an aesthetic experience in replacement of the "effusion of interpretation," Louis D. Rubin Jr. counterposes his argument: "In what way does thinking necessarily impoverish one's experience? Lousy thinking does, to be sure; but so does unexamined, irresponsible feeling impoverish our experience." Rubin is concerned with what he calls Sontag's "built-in objection to the application of any thought whatever in the creative process" (RUBIN, 1975, p. 506). The example he gives is Sontag's complaint when rereading *Vanity Fair* and *Buddenbrooks*:

*I could not stand the omnipotent author showing me that's how life is, preaching about what life is, making me compassionate and tearful; [...] the confidential air of perfectly knowing his characters and leading me, the reader, to feel I knew them too...I no longer trust novels which fully satisfy my passion to understand (RUBIN, 1975, p. 506).*

Commenting upon the "overcooperative" author, Sontag is not necessarily implying that one has to stop thinking, but she would rather be taken by the narrative in a more sensorial way which is not so explanatory or melodramatic. Undoubtedly she offended many American critics and readers with her dismissal of authors who for a long time belong to the "canon." And more, with her avowal of the new sensibility provided by Camp.

Rubin goes much farther with his argument, though. He accuses Sontag of treason:

*(...) the desperate refusal of the educated human being to think, the resort to glittering subterfuge in order to justify mental and moral laziness. "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art"; could one possibly find a better example of the treason of the learned than such a sentence, using as it does the very vocabulary of learning in order to destroy it? Yet I would insist that, for all her dauntless talk, Susan Sontag is not really an exponent of pure feeling in the arts. Erotics aside, she is purveying ideas, not emotions. They are not always complex ideas, to be sure; but Susan is an intellectual all the way (RUBIN\*, 1975, p. 508).*

Peter Brooks, on the other hand, attempts to portray Sontag at her best. He believes that she "wants to preserve the Dionysiac joy of a certain modern art - the revolutionary joy of Dada, for example, still alive to some extent - while she also feels drawn to the asceticism of form characteristic of much contemporary experimentation." She is against interpretation as "the revenge of the intellect upon art," the attempt of culture to "domesticate, digest and disarm that art which radically calls into question its own perceptions of the world" (BROOKS, 1966, p. 440). Brooks praises Sontag's "case studies for an aesthetic" - her critical views on Bresson, Sartre, Camus, Lévi-Strauss, Robbe-Grillet, Resnais, and others - but he points out that her theoretical essays - mainly "Against Interpretation" and "On Style" - fail in logic, language, and historical understanding "casting doubt" on Sontag's understanding of her critical models. He criticizes her limited range of theorists given as examples (mostly Marx, Freud, and Walt Whitman), and her underdeveloped (though good) argument concerning Anglo-American formalists' ability to deal with poetry but "less fertile" about the novel and the film, and unprepared to respond to European innovation in these genres (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 442). Brooks ultimately tries to explain what Sontag calls the "formal function of content." He believes she means that "we must perceive the internal structures, both organizing and significant, of a work of art," and he concludes by stating that Sontag admires criticism which "dissolves considerations of content into those of form" (*Idem, ibidem*).

The two most important points about Sontag's concept of interpretation – the emphasis on form and the avoidance of a "rooted" criticism – seem to have puzzled some critics. Alicia Ostriker assertively claims that "content" makes a difference and that Sontag's kind of criticism

*fails to understand that great artists may want to change our lives by changing our vision; that Socrates would not have been content for Alcibiades to follow*

*him around awestruck but still corrupt; that the only complete response to a work of art is to have one's life changed by it, to create or become another work of art, to see visions like Dante and Blake, or to become incredibly flexible, comprehensive, and compassionate like Shakespeare (OSTRIKER, 1966, p. 84).*

This is exactly what Sontag is trying to prevent, but it seems that her fragmented style, which is a positive aspect for some critics, makes it more difficult for people to grasp her points, especially because she does not seem to care whether she is presenting enough evidence to validate her statements. Another explanation for her lack of support is the reliance Sontag may have on readers' ability to perceive in all her texts the practice of her theories. The inability to understand her views can also be credited to some critics' own unwillingness to accept her proposal of a new perspective.

Susan Sontag can, in fact, "deterritorialize"<sup>6</sup> readers and critics. With her interests in many areas and her intense activity, she is not so concerned with being "overcooperative" ("AI", 1966, p. 8) nor is she worried about perpetuating the canon by providing a well-behaved analysis of well-behaved texts written by well-behaved writers. Her main concern is to develop a criticism in which

*form is no longer understood as either decoration, organization, seduction, justification of content or its quasi-mystical Platonic redemption, but as the means of apprehension that isolates states of feeling and*

---

6. "Deterritorialization" is a term coined by Deleuze and Guattari to refer to the process of "getting lost," by destabilizing familiar grounds. Presently the term is used to describe border writing, in the sense that these works do not follow Western rules and can therefore "deterritorialize" readers who are not familiar with this kind of structure.

*knowledge, promoting their specificity and  
undercutting their vulnerability to generalization*  
(KOCK, 1966, p. 156).

As regards her most controversial trilogy, "Against Interpretation," "On Style" and "Styles of Radical Will," she allows room for complaints, first because she uses the terms criticism and interpretation interchangeably. In fact, she does not differentiate the two terms, although she implies in what sense she is using them when she mentions that she is not criticizing interpretation in the "broadest sense, the sense in which Nietzsche (rightly) says, 'There are no facts, only interpretations.' By interpretation," she adds, "I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain 'rules' of interpretation" ("AI", p. 5). She may have adopted Heidegger's terminology. He has two words which are translated as interpretation: "Auslegung" and "Interpretation." "Auslegung" is used in a broad sense to define any activity in which something is interpreted "as" something, whereas "Interpretation" seems to apply to theoretical or systematic analyses, as in the exegesis of a text (HEIDEGGER, 1962, p. 1).

Another controversial point is her dismissal of hermeneutics, which functions as a shock therapy, a disavowal of centuries of criticism which has, according to Sontag, tried to impose meanings, to offer solutions, to create rules, to manipulate consciousness and to put art to the service of social, moral or political ideologies. Her refusal of the kind of rooted-tree criticism, the kind which is manichean or authoritative, has provoked a reaction from conservatives; her limitations in exposing radical views as Marxist or Freudian perspectives have encountered many barriers; her non-committal attitude has aroused negative comments on the reliability of her knowledge and taste. Moreover, her flexibility, in changing themes and subjects, has turned her qualities into handicaps, in some critics' views.

Another point which can be criticized is her "pluralistic" perspective. It

seems that Sontag wants people to recognize the value of pop culture but she herself does not accept the value of "rooted" art, for instance. Her criteria to, again, discriminate and differentiate "good" and "bad" criticism are too subjective. Moreover, since she does not support her views, her arguments are not well accepted, especially among critics who are not open to new trends. Paradoxically, what she preaches in theory about pluralism - to accept and try to understand the value and coexistence of many styles - she hardly practises.

The critics' reactions to Sontag's proposal varied radically from very positive to very negative. Among the very negative, Gary Houston describes her as a "tendentious writer, to be imagined as a heroine of a Hollywood film of the 40's" (HOUSTON, 1970, p. 272), and Vernon Young goes to the extreme to say that Sontag is so narcissistic that she would criticize anything that did not conform to her way of evaluating things:

*She [Sontag] is a natural for periods of breakup, when manifestoes are as common as tea leaves [...] when artists sell their depleted expression as a new mode of perception; [...] she is preoccupied with the burden of language and the urge to "destroy it"; [...] every essay is a "ruse de guerre" [...] a strenuously argued attempt to hold an untenable position; [...] her repeated effort to impose herself as an apostle of the multiple point of view scarcely attains the stature of deception, for she is rarely able to play attention to an alternative point of view of any subject she takes up ... she wants others to extend their latitude in order to embrace the tiny sector of experience to which she is confined (YOUNG, 1969, p. 513-4).*

On the other hand, Leon S. Roudiez, in his essay "Against the

Ideological Grain" implies that Sontag, as well as Barthes, though likely to arise controversy, will be recognized as a great essayist. He believes that Sontag in her proposal for a new aesthetics, is striving for a moment "when one reaches a state of uncertainty, a balance between purity and substitution, when the critic can give a sense of the text as it is and can also communicate the ideas and emotions that it intimately provokes" (ROUDIEZ, 1983, p. 221). Regarding "Against Interpretation" and "Notes on Camp," Roudiez reveals his admiration: "It is indeed unusual to find a critic who, at the very outset of his or her career, was able, in two related but nevertheless separate domains, to capture the essence of a sensitivity and of a trend" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 222). He concludes by mentioning the fact that Sontag, being born in Arizona, educated at Chicago and Harvard, her life split between Paris and New York, became "both a spatial and intellectual wanderer" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 223).

Sohnya Sayres, in her book *Susan Sontag: the elegaic modernist*, studies in detail Sontag's essays and books. She believes the writer wants to "guard arts against the demand for utility and to preserve the art's ideal domain" (SAYRES, 1990, p. 81). She points out that "Against Interpretation" is a hallmark of the sixties, a controversial essay which revealed Sontag's nasty comments about some critics who are "like leeches," anxious to reveal the "hidden" meanings of their "prey." Sayres classifies Sontag's calls for the "transparent" work of art as New Criticism: "Criticism has become as much an act of creation as an act of criticism" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 83). What Sontag aims for is to "overcome the dichotomy between freedom of the aesthetic apprehension and the strictures of the moral." Sontag classifies some works as "exemplary," and criticizes American artists who tend to generalize ideas to engage in a social enterprise or who confuse moral with religion (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 85). Contrary to the work of art as a functional or purposeful element either in the social or the political realm, Sontag prefers to define art as a way "to make us see or comprehend something singular, not judge or generalize" ("AI", 1966, p. 29). Sayres



points out that Sontag does not value the artist's creative source, purpose or perspective; art is successful when intelligence rises out of and suppresses the brilliance of the work's conception. "The new sensibility sweeps past literary culture to mimic the sensory extension of modern technology" (SAYRES, 1990, p. 89).

In "Notes on 'Camp'," Sontag mentions that it is easier to capture the ideas of an epoch than the sensibility. She differentiates sensibility from ideas.

*Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They allow that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve... A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea ("AI", 1966, p. 276).*

According to Mary Ellmann, what Sontag rejects in the nineteenth-century convention is "its encroachment upon ideas, its involvement with those social, psychological, and moral judgments which she considers the property of the intellectual life" (ELLMANN, 1966, p. 61). On the other hand, she privileges works in which "words have given up as much as possible of their rational meanings to what is seen, gone as far as they can go as spectacle" (*Idem, ibidem*, p. 63).

Although many critics would not agree on Sontag's merits as a critic, her perspectives about art should be evaluated in relation to her way of seeing life. For her, criticism is a way of seeing art, a way of seeing life.

She could be defined in the same way she defined Barthes in her essay "Remembering Barthes":

*Ever/thing he wrote was interesting - vivacious, rapid, dense, pointed. Most of his books are collections of essays...he wrote about every thing...he wanted to be, and was often, reduced by a subject...his temperamental dislike for the moralistic became more overt in recent years...he had an intense but businesslike concern that readers received a regular ration of pleasure. ...he enrolled the invention of sense in the search for pleasure...he was a great lover of life ("USS", p. 171).*

Moreover, in her introduction to *A Roland Barthes Reader*, Sontag praises Barthes for the same reasons she would probably want to be praised: his suspension of conventional evaluations (the difference between major and minor literature), his subversion of established classification (the separation of genres, the distinctions, among the arts), his "itineraries of topics rather than unified arguments," his exploration of the ludic, and "a distinctive modern stylistics (having Sterne and the German Romantics as prototypes) - the invention of anti-linear forms of narration: in fiction, the destruction of the 'story'; in nonfiction, the abandonment of linear argument" (SONTAG, 1981, p. xi-xv).

In Sontag's text, fragmentation is the very realm of postmodernist exegesis. Her "patchwork" narrative, in her play *Alice in Bed* and in her novels and essays are the embodiment of the new aesthetics she displays throughout her writings. As she points out, writers should not "talk about," they should "show" That she "deterritorializes" her readers and critics, there is no doubt. But who says she wants to do otherwise? Her avid mind does not want to explain everything, and in this respect her work is iconic,

reproducing the quick movement of thoughts in digressions and analogies. Hers could be considered a "stream of consciousness manqué," a post-Joycean or post-Woolfian technique which serves to point out a new form in order to express a not-so-new content. The work of the critic in relation to her text is really the true work of a collector. He has to put the pieces together, organize the puzzle, find loose bits. The task of the critic becomes even harder when considering that Susan Sontag is a very well read intellectual who alludes, refers, parodies, and evaluates what is called "high" as well as "low" culture. From Benjamin to Camp, from Duchamp to Artaud, nothing escapes her attentive mind. Her critics have to follow her. And, as in the case of Woody Allen, the excuse for the reader's lack of "schemata" is the complaint that Sontag, as well as Allen, does not reiterate her assumptions, does not provide enough support for her statements, assuming that she really wants to perpetuate this "status quo," this outmoded pattern based on reason rather than on sensorial perception. As she says in "One Culture and the New Sensibility": "The most interesting works of contemporary art are full of references to the history of the medium; so far as they comment on past art, they demand a knowledge of at least the recent past" ("AI", 1966, p. 295).

Tom Nairn is undoubtedly right when he suggests that Sontag "should be appreciated," following her own principles, "for what she is: a good interpreter of ideas in the arts, on a scene where there are so desperately few of them" (Nairn, 1967, p. 409). But Susan Sontag is a collector and, as she herself said: "the avid gaze always wants more." While critics are busy trying to review and interpret her work, she is elsewhere adding more glimpses to her collection.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

- SONTAG, Susan. 1966. *Against interpretation*. N.York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1969. *Styles of radical will*. N. York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1978. *Illness as metaphor*. N. York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (ed.). 1981. *A Roland Barthes reader*. N. York: Hill & Wang.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1980. *Under the sign of Saturn*. N. York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1982. *A Susan Sontag reader*. N. York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1987. *Pilgrimage* (autobiographical essay). *The New Yorker*. 21 Dec., p. 38-54.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. *The volcano lover*. N. York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. *Alice in Bed: a play in eight scenes*. N. York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

### Secondary Sources

- BARTHES, Roland. 1981. *A Roland Barthes reader*. Ed. with intro, by Susan Sontag. N. York: Hill & Wang.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1977. "The Death of the Author" *Image - Music - Text*. London: Fontana.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975. *The pleasure of the text*. N. York: Hill and Wong.
- BAWER, Bruce. 1992. That Sontag woman. *The new criterion*. 11:1 (Sept. 92), p. 30-37

- BEHAR, Jack. 1966. Against the self. *Hudson review*. 19:2 (Summer 1966), p. 347-52.
- BELLAMY, Joe David. 1974. Susan Sontag. *The new fiction: interviews with innovative american writers*. Urbana: UIP, p. 113-29.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. 1969 The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. *Illuminations*. N. Y: Schocken Books, p. 240-262.
- BRADBURY, Malcolm, and PALMER, David, (eds.). *Contemporary criticism*. London: Butter & Tanner LTD.
- BROOKS, Peter. 1966. Parti Pris. *Partisan Review*, 33 (Summer 1966), p. 439-43.
- CHACE, William M. 1980. *Lionel Trilling: criticism and politics*. Stanford: Stanford UP
- CONNOR, Steven. 1992. *Theory and cultural value*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- COPELAND, Roger. 1981 The Habits of Consciousness. *Commonweal* 108. (13 Feb. 1981), p. 83-87
- DELEUZE, Gilles, and GUATTARI, Felix. 1987. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: UMP
- ELLMANN, Mary. 1966. The sensational Susan Sontag. *Atlantic monthly*. 218:3 (Sept. 1966), p. 59-63.
- GORDIMER, Nadine, et al. 1992. On literary tradition: symposium. *Shenandoah*. 33:3, p. 3-46.
- GREEN, Martin. 1966. A New Sensibility? *Cambridge quarterly* 2 (Winter 1966-67), p. 55-65.
- HEIDEGGER, Martin. 1962. *Being and time*. N.Y: Harper & Brothers.
- HENRICKSEN, Bruce (ed.). *Murray Krieger and contemporary critical theory*. NY: Columbia UP
- HIRSCH, Jr., Eric Donald. 1976. *The aims of interpretation*. Chicago: UCP
- HOUSTON, Gary. 1970. Susan Sontag. *Michigan quarterly review*. 9:4 (Fall 1970), p. 272-75.
- KELLNER, Douglas. 1989. *Jean Baudrillard: from marxism to postmodernism and beyond*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- KENNEDY, Liam. 1990. Precocious archaeology: Susan Sontag and the criticism of culture. *Journal of American studies*. 24:1 (Apr. 1990), p. 23-39.
- KOCH, Stephen. 1966. On Susan Sontag. *TriQuarterly*. 7 (Fall 1966), p. 152-60.
- KRUPNICK, Mark. 1985. *Lionel Trilling and the fate of cultural criticism*. Evanston: NUP.
- LACAYO, Richard. 1998. Stand Aside, Sisyphus. *Time*. (Oct.2,1998), p. 86-88.
- MAKARYK, Irena R. (ed.). 1993. *Encyclopedia of contemporary literary theory*. Toronto: UTP.
- Mazzocco, Robert. 1966. Swingtime. *New York Review of Books* (9 June 1966): 22-24.
- MUNK, Erika. 1993. Only the possible. An interview with Susan Sontag. *Theater* 24:3 (Summer-Fall 1993), p. 31-36.
- NAIRN, Tom. 1967. The New Sensibility. *New Statesman*. (24 March 1967), p. 408-9.
- OSTRIKER, Alicia. 1966. Anti-Critic. *Commentary*. 41:66 (June 1966), p. 83-84.
- PARRINDER, Patrick. 1991. Secular surrogates: Frank Kermode and the idea of the critic. *Addressing Frank Kermode*. Urbana: UIP, p. 58-74.
- RICHTER, David. H. (ed.). 1989. *The critical traditions*. NY: St. Martin's Press.
- ROSS, Andrew. 1988. Uses of camp. *Yale journal of criticism*. 2:1 (Fall 88).
- ROUDIEZ, Leon S. 1983. Susan Sontag: against the ideological grain. *World literature today*. 57 (Spring 1983), p. 219-23.
- RUBIN, Louis D. Jr. 1975. Susan Sontag and the camp followers. *Sewanee Review*, 82:3 (Summer 1975), p. 503-510.
- RYLANCE, Rich. 1994. *Roland Barthes*. NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- SAYRES, Sohnya. 1990. *Susan Sontag: the elegaic modernist*. NY: Routledge.
- SHAW, Peter, and LIPSET, Seymour Martin. 1981. Two afterthoughts on Susan Sontag. *Encounter*. 58:6 (June-July 1981), p. 38-42.

TANNER, Stephen L. 1988. *Lionel Trilling*. Boston; Twayne Publ.

TRILLING, Lionel (ed.). 1970. *Literary criticism: an introductory reader*. NY;  
Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

WIMSATT, William Kurtz. 1957 *Literary criticism*. NY: Randon House, Inc.

YOUNG, Vernon. 1969. Socialist camp: a style of radical wistfulness. *Hudson  
Review 3* (Autumn 1969), p. 513-20.